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“FOR PEACE AND CIVIC RIGHTEOUSNESS”: BLANCHE ARMWOOD AND THE
STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM AND RACIAL EQUALITY IN TAMPA, FLORIDA,

1890-1939

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the most important people in my life, my soul mate Jim Hess, my sisters, Marsha and Mahshid Alishahi, and my parents, Linda Farr and Mehdi Alishahi. I would not have been able to complete this study without their love, support, and encouragement. Thank you.

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“For Peace and Civic Righteousness”: Blanche Armwood and the Struggle for Freedom
and Racial Equality in Tampa, Florida, 1890-1939

Michele Alishahi

ABSTRACT

Blanche Armwood was a remarkable black woman activist, from Tampa, Florida, who devoted her life to improving the political, social, and economic status of blacks in the Jim Crow South. Local historians have kept Armwood’s legacy alive by describing her achievements and by emphasizing her dedication to the African-American population during one of the most racist periods in American history. In their efforts to understand Armwood’s career, scholars depend upon race as the primary category of analysis and focus mainly on the external forces that defined Armwood’s world. They argue that she became resigned to her lot in life as a black woman, and consequently chose to accommodate rather than challenge the Southern racial system. This thesis offers an alternative interpretation of Armwood’s activism. It argues that Blanche Armwood rejected the white supremacist ideology of the Jim Crow South and insisted on equal opportunity and political equality for all African-Americans. This study examines how social variables such as race, gender, and class intersected in her life, shaping her worldview and leadership style. It explores how Armwood’s experiences as a southern, middle-class, black woman affected her racial ideology.

Armwood left behind a powerful legacy of resistance against the second-class status that white America imposed on blacks during the nadir in African-American history. She contested the white South's perception of African-American women. In a world that associated them with Mammy and Jezebel stereotypes, Armwood insisted that African-American women deserved the same respect that society accorded white women. Armwood fought for political equality, demanding that black women should have the right to vote and participate in the civic process as women and as African-Americans. In addition, she believed that the federal government had a responsibility to protect all its citizens and that every American was entitled to equal treatment before the law. Finally, Armwood's racial uplift work revealed her faith in the cornerstone of the American creed, its promise of equal opportunity. She provided some blacks with the chance to move away from poverty and illiteracy to become respectable middle-class Americans.

Introduction

On October 16, 1939, forty-nine-year-old Blanche Armwood unexpectedly died while on a speaking tour in the northeast. Within days, she was buried at L'Unione Italiana Cemetery in her hometown of Tampa, Florida. Her epitaph reads simply, "resting."¹ Anyone familiar with Armwood's story would appreciate the appropriateness of the inscription. Blanche Armwood was an extraordinary woman who devoted most of her life to the African-American freedom struggle. She worked tirelessly, fighting to improve the social, political, and economic status of black Americans in the Jim Crow South. Armwood's long list of accomplishments is impressive. A brief overview of her activities and achievements reveals that, although she died at a young age, Armwood had certainly earned the right to rest after a lifetime of service to the black community.

Blanche Armwood's remarkable life began on January 23, 1890 when she was born into a well-established, middle-class, black family in Tampa, Florida. The youngest of five children, Blanche grew up in a loving home with parents who provided her with the best education possible for a black female in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century South. Rather than registering their daughter at one of Tampa's poor, segregated, black public schools, Levin and Maggie Armwood enrolled her in St. Peter Claver's Catholic School where, in 1902, she completed her studies. That same year Blanche also passed the Florida State Uniform Teachers Examination. Since Tampa did not have a

¹ Mary Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood (1890-1939)," *The Sunland Tribune*, 13 (November 1989), 42, 43.

black high school, the Armwoods then sent twelve-year-old Blanche to Spelman Seminary (later Spelman College) in Atlanta, Georgia. Four years later, in 1906, she graduated from the English-Latin course with honors and planned to attend college. However, because of her father's poor health, Blanche returned to Tampa instead; that fall she started teaching in the city's black public school system.²

Armwood's public career began in 1914 when the Tampa Gas Company, in conjunction with the Hillsborough County Board of Education and the Colored Ministers Alliance, hired her to organize an industrial arts school that would specialize in domestic science. The Tampa School of Household Arts trained black women and girls to use modern appliances and techniques that would enable them to properly perform their duties as domestic servants. Under the direction of the former teacher, the school was an enormous success. In its first year of operation, over two hundred women received certificates of completion. From there, Armwood went on to set up similar institutions in Roanoke, Virginia; Rock Hill, South Carolina; Athens, Georgia; and New Orleans, Louisiana.³ In 1922, she returned to Tampa and became the first Executive Secretary of the Tampa Urban League, a social welfare organization designed to help African-Americans adjust to urban life. Under Armwood's leadership, the TUL provided the city's black inhabitants with some of the institutions and services that it lacked as a result of segregation. The organization, for example, was instrumental in setting up the Booker T. Washington Branch of the Tampa Chapter of the American Red Cross and the Helping

² Keith Halderman, "Blanche Armwood of Tampa and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation," *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, 74 (Winter 1996), 287; John R. Durham, "Blanche Armwood: The Early Years," MA Thesis, University of South Florida, 1988, pp. 13, 14, 24.

³ Halderman, "Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation," pp. 292, 293, 296; Leland Hawes, "One Person Who Made a Difference," *Tampa Tribune*, February 26, 1983.

Hand Day Nursery and Kindergarten.⁴ In 1922, the Hillsborough County School Board appointed Armwood the first Supervisor of Negro Schools as well. During her eight-year tenure, she secured five new school buildings, increased black teachers' salaries, and extended the school year for black students from six to nine months. The highlight of her term came in 1926 when Booker T. Washington High School opened its doors to African-American youths in Tampa. Four years later, it became the first accredited black high school in the county.⁵

Aside from the leadership positions she held in Tampa, Armwood was heavily involved in two major African-American organizations. She was chair of the Home Economics Department for the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) and State Organizer of the Louisiana Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Armwood also participated in the suffrage movement, the anti-lynching crusades, and the 1920 presidential election as a national campaign speaker for the Republican Party.⁶ However important these accomplishments were, for Armwood they were not enough. She eventually decided to move her career in a new direction. In 1934, Armwood enrolled in Howard Law School as a special student, and graduated, four years later, with her juris doctorate degree. The first black woman from Florida to earn a law degree, Armwood considered practicing law before the Florida Supreme Court. Unfortunately, her dream was never realized, for she became ill and

⁴ Halderman, "Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation," p. 301.

⁵ Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood," pp. 41, 42.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40; Doris Weatherford, *A History of Women in Tampa* (Tampa: Athena Society, 1991), p. 79.

unexpectedly died in October 1939, while on a speaking tour in Medford, Massachusetts, presumably from phlebitis and exhaustion.⁷

Armwood's memory lives on long after her death. Over the years, many local writers, historians, and organizations have included her as a vital part of the history of Tampa and Florida. They have kept her legacy alive by recounting her various achievements and by emphasizing her devotion to the black population during one of the most racist periods in American history.⁸ In the mid-1980's, the city of Tampa officially demonstrated its appreciation for Armwood's work. In October 1984, the United States Congressman from Tampa, Michael Bilirakis, paid tribute to Armwood before the House of Representatives. That same year, the Blanche Armwood Comprehensive High School opened in Seffner, Florida.⁹ Nearly half a century after her death, Armwood finally received the public recognition that she deserved as a key figure in the history of Tampa and the development of its African-American community.

Despite all that has been written about Armwood and her accomplishments, several important questions remain unanswered. Blanche Armwood's story spans the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an era that most historians view as the lowest point in American race relations.¹⁰ Yet to understand the world Armwood inhabited, one

⁷ Lottie Montgomery Clark, "Negro Women Leaders of Florida," MA Thesis, Florida State University, 1942, p. 68; Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood," pp. 42, 43.

⁸ For additional material on Armwood see also Maxine Jones, "No Longer Denied: Black Women in Florida 1920-1950," in *The African-American Heritage of Florida*, eds. David R Colburn and Jane L. Landers (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1995); Rowena Ferrell Brady, *Things Remembered: An Album of African-Americans in Tampa* (Tampa: Tampa University Press, 1997); Maxine D. Jones and Kevin M. McCarthy, *African-Americans in Florida* (Sarasota: Pineapple Press, 1993).

⁹ Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood," p. 43.

¹⁰ For an in-depth analysis of the impact of racism on the lives of black Southerners during the Jim Crow era see Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Knopf, 1998).

must look back to the events of her parents' generation. Levin and Maggie Armwood came of age during Reconstruction, a twelve-year interval from 1865 to 1877 that historian Eric Foner defines as a period when white Americans were forced to come to terms with the emancipation of four million slaves.¹¹ It was an era of social, political, and economic turmoil as the federal government, led by the Radical Republicans, oversaw the reorganization of Southern society to include African-Americans as citizens, rather than property. For the first generation of black Americans who experienced freedom, Reconstruction was a time of great hope and possibility. The passage of the thirteenth (1865), fourteenth (1868), and fifteenth (1870) amendments to the Constitution forever banned slavery and granted African-Americans U. S. citizenship and male suffrage rights. Reconstruction officially ended in Florida in 1877 when white Democrats regained control of the state government.¹²

Born in 1890, Blanche Armwood was part of the first generation of black Americans who had never encountered slavery. Nevertheless, she also grew up during an age that Rayford Logan refers to as the “nadir” in American race relations.¹³ The conventional narrative of late nineteenth and early twentieth century Southern history has been primarily about elite white men and their efforts to exclude African-American men

¹¹ Eric, Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. xix-xxvii.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 564-601; John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African-Americans* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 2000); Pam Iorio, “Colorless Primaries: Tampa's White Municipal Party,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, 79 (Winter 2001), 300; Robert P. Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes in the New South: Tampa, 1882-1936* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), p. 14.

¹³ Rayford W. Logan, *The Negro in America Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877-1901* (New York: Dial Press, 1954); Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro: From Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Collier Books, 1965).

from the political process. It is a story that focuses on the white supremacist ideology of a racist South and the terribly oppressive environment that resulted for black people as the “white man’s” Democratic Party sought a variety of means, including violence, to strip them of their newly acquired rights as American citizens. The traditional storyline culminates at the turn of the century in the legalization of Jim Crow and the disfranchisement of black men.¹⁴ By 1900, white Southerners succeeded in relegating most African-Americans to a second-class status by denying them the right to vote or to hold public office, legally segregating them from the white population, confining them to menial forms of employment, and terrorizing them with violence.¹⁵ Until more recent scholarship provided a more nuanced account, the dominant narrative recounted the story of a “Solid South” ruled by elite white male Democrats for nearly a hundred years, from the end of Reconstruction to the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Examining Armwood’s achievements within the context of this complex world, one cannot help but wonder, what kind of a black leader was she during this period? What was Armwood’s racial philosophy; and how did her experiences as a middle-class, black woman shape the strategies she used in her efforts to combat the inferior conditions that black Americans faced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century South?

¹⁴ Although more recent works have moved beyond the traditional storyline of race relations in the Jim Crow South, many earlier publications adopted such an approach. See, for example, Theodore Brantner Wilson, *The Black Codes of the South* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1965); J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restrictions and the Establishment of the One Party South, 1880-1910* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974); Nancy Weiss, *The National Urban League* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); Thomas, E. Harris, *Analysis of the Clash Over the Issues Between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois* (New York: Garland Pub., 1993); Durham, “Armwood: The Early Years”; Gary Mormino and Anthony P. Pizzo, *Tampa: The Treasure City* (Tulsa, Okla.: Continental Heritage Press, 1983); Gary R. Mormino and George E. Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1985* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

Finally, how do we assess her role historically as a leader? Did Armwood make a significant contribution to the African-American struggle for equality; and if so, what legacy did she leave behind for future generations who carried on the battle for freedom and justice?

In their attempts to examine race relations in the Jim Crow South, historians have created two distinct images of African-Americans. Those who take a more conservative path depict black Americans as passive, powerless victims of a repressive white society that treated them as second-class citizens.¹⁶ Gary R. Mormino and Anthony Pizzo adopt such an approach in their investigation of early Tampa history. When dealing with the city's African-American population, Mormino and Pizzo concentrate primarily on the racial oppressiveness of the period, portraying black Americans as helpless pawns to larger forces that were beyond their control. *Tampa, The Treasure City* is told from the standpoint of the elite business and political leaders of the city. African-Americans, when mentioned at all, are seen from this perspective. By focusing on their victimization, Mormino and Pizzo imply that race relations in Tampa were fixed and people's racial attitudes static.¹⁷

Scholars who explore black leadership and activism in the age of Jim Crow represent African-Americans in a different light. They reveal that the deteriorating circumstances in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not mean that all

¹⁵ Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*.

¹⁶ See, for example, Wilson, *The Black Codes of the South*; Mormino and Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City*; Pam Iorio, "Colorless Primaries: Tampa's White Municipal Party," pp. 297-318.

¹⁷ Gary R. Mormino and Anthony P. Pizzo, *Tampa: The Treasure City* (Tulsa: Continental Heritage Press, 1983).

black people accepted the subordinate role forced upon them by a racist society.

Historians Canter Brown, Jr. and Nancy Hewitt describe African-Americans in Tampa as active agents who resisted white efforts to strip them of their rights.¹⁸ While they never deny the repressive nature of white supremacy and its impact on the lives of black Americans, Brown and Hewitt show that the “Solid South” did not come easily, nor was it preordained or as “solid” as one may think. Scholarly focus on African-American agency offers a history of Tampa from the black perspective that reveals the fluidity of race relations from one generation to another.

When assessing Armwood’s achievements, one must undertake the balancing act of portraying African-Americans as either passive victims or active agents. While it is important to understand the brutal world that Armwood lived in as an African-American, it is just as significant to realize that blacks fought hard to survive in such an environment. Historians who explore black empowerment also need to decide whose definition of agency they will use in their examinations. Social variables including gender, class, region of birth, and level of education shaped African-American life. Although all blacks in the Jim Crow era faced racial oppression, a college educated, middle-class African-American male from the northeast did not encounter racism in the

¹⁸ Canter Brown, Jr., *African-Americans on the Tampa Bay Frontier* (Tampa: Tampa Bay History Center, 1997). Historian Nancy Hewitt’s study on women’s activism in Tampa includes white and Latin women as well as black women and offers a gendered perspective of the city’s early history. Nancy A. Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort: Women’s Activism in Tampa, 1880’s to 1920’s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Others scholars have stressed black agency as well. See, for example, Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution*; Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). See also, Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*; Adam Fairclough, *Teaching Equality: Black Schools in the Age of Jim Crow* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001); Jesse Thomas Moore, Jr., *A Search for Equality: The National Urban League, 1910-1961* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981); Nancy J. Weiss, *The National Urban League*; Robin D. G. Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *The Journal of American History*, 80 (June 1993), 75-112.

same manner as a poor, illiterate black woman who worked as a domestic servant in the deep South. Social variables influenced how African-Americans responded to discrimination as well. Rather than rely upon race as the sole category of analysis in understanding black resistance, one must examine how gender, class, and other variables affected black attempts to fight against racism.

Those historians, who saw race as the primary factor in determining black life, adopted a narrow interpretation of African-American activism. This approach is particularly evident in earlier studies that relied upon the accommodation versus protest dichotomy as the model for explaining black agency.¹⁹ It was based on the turn of the century debate between two leading African-American male leaders, Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, on the most appropriate method for achieving racial equality. Washington was the leading spokesperson for a conservative ideology that stressed “education, uplift, and gradualism.”²⁰ Believing that economic progress was essential for advancement, Washington emphasized the importance of industrial education for blacks, claiming that African-Americans had to gain a solid foothold in the economy before they had a legitimate right to seek political equality. To the delight of many white people, he also disavowed black desire for social equality. Washington downplayed these issues by arguing that blacks needed to earn their own way in the white man’s world first. He maintained that African-Americans had to work within the

¹⁹ See, for example, Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1971); Nancy Weiss, *The National Urban League*. Although recent studies have moved away from the accommodation versus protest paradigm, a number still ignore black women and their activism. See, for example, Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*; Fairclough, *Teaching Equality*; Brown, *African-Americans on the Tampa Bay Frontier*.

Southern system to achieve equality gradually. Because he recommended a conciliatory attitude towards whites, Washington became known as an accommodationist to racial discrimination.²¹

W. E. B. Du Bois, on the other hand, endorsed a more liberal, albeit elitist, philosophy. He argued that, although vocational training was essential for the masses, the African-American population needed a small group of college-educated men and women who would work for the betterment of the entire race. Referring to them as the “Talented Tenth,” Du Bois contended that these leaders would challenge the racial status quo, demanding immediate political and social equality for all black Americans. While he too stressed the value of economic progress, Du Bois believed that African-Americans had to fight against the second-class status forced upon them, mainly through the legislative and judicial system. Unlike Washington, Du Bois asserted that the key to advancement was protest, not accommodation.²²

Although historians Louis Harlan and Elliot Rudwick demonstrate that Washington and Du Bois’s strategies were far more complex than their ideologies indicate, the accommodation versus protest paradigm took on a life of its own.²³

²⁰ Ronald C. White, *Liberty and Justice for All: Racial Reform and the Social Gospel, 1877-1925* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), p. 13.

²¹ For an in-depth analysis of the debate between Washington and Du Bois see Thomas E. Harris, *Analysis of the Clash Over the Issues Between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), pp. 46-60.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Louis R. Harlan, “Booker T. Washington and the Politics of Accommodation,” in *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century*, eds. John Hope Franklin and August Meier (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Elliot Rudwick, “W. E. B. Du Bois: Protagonist of the Afro-American Protest,” in *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century*, eds. John Hope Franklin and August Meier (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

Numerous scholars have used it to understand African-American resistance.²⁴ For example, Keith Halderman's analysis of Blanche Armwood argues that she "was consistent in her efforts to gain the maximum interracial teamwork possible" in her dealings with government, business, political parties, and social welfare agencies.²⁵ Basing his study on the debate between Washington and Du Bois, he claims that Armwood's strategy of interracial cooperation illustrates how her career reflected the conciliatory approach advocated by Washington.²⁶ Since he believes that Armwood endorsed a more conservative racial philosophy, Halderman distinguishes between her attempts to uplift the race and civil rights agitation. Even though he acknowledges that she succeeded in improving the quality of life for some blacks in Tampa, Halderman maintains "that people like Blanche Armwood gave up what was already lost. Whether a more militant approach would have advanced the race faster is impossible to say." However, in the end, he defends Armwood by stating that "to denigrate her accomplishments because she reasoned and cajoled is unfair."²⁷

Lottie Montgomery Clark paints a very different image of Armwood in a sociological study on the leadership qualities of several prominent black women activists from Florida. Clark argues that Armwood "was born a rebel." In contrast to Halderman, she claims that Armwood rebelled against "all the conditions under which her race lived in the South." She simply refused to "accept the inferior status assigned to the Southern

²⁴ See earlier studies such as Harris, *Analysis of the Clash*; Weiss, *The National Urban League*; Mays, *Born to Rebel*.

²⁵ Halderman, "Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation," pp. 288, 289.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

Negro.” Clark insists that Armwood spent her life fighting for social opportunities, political rights, and economic advantages for all African-Americans.²⁸ The conflicting interpretations of Armwood’s leadership illustrate the influence that the Washington-Du Bois argument has had on scholars’ analysis of her accomplishments. While Clark did not specifically refer to the debate, its influence is evident in her study. Clark and Halderman took the stance that Armwood had to be either a follower of Washington’s or Du Bois’s racial ideology.

The Washington-Du Bois debate shapes John Durham’s understanding of Armwood’s early years as well. In his investigation of her childhood and career up until 1922, Durham argues that Armwood’s

perspectives and formulas for the progress of her race follow, for the most part, those of Washington. Her focus on industrial education, hard work, Christian values and primary education as paths for the progress of blacks in America are the same paths Washington advocated.²⁹

Durham portrays Armwood as a Washington clone, repeatedly drawing parallels between the two leaders, and illustrating their similarities. Although he succeeds in showing how some of Armwood’s actions reflected her accommodationist leanings, Durham, like Halderman, does not explore the contradictory character of her approach to racial uplift. Neither scholar explains why this supposedly female version of Booker T. Washington took part in activities that more closely paralleled Du Bois’s protest ideology. They do not investigate how Armwood could be a member of the NAACP, an organization set up by Du Bois to legally challenge racial discrimination; nor do they realize the political and

²⁸ Clark, “Negro Women Leaders of Florida,” p. 63; Historian Maxine D. Jones also portrays Armwood as a rebel in her analysis of black women in Florida. See Jones, “No Longer Denied: Black Women in Florida 1920-1950,” pp. 240-267.

²⁹ Durham, “Blanche Armwood: The Early Years,” p. iv.

social ramifications of her involvement in the suffrage movement and the anti-lynching crusade. Her participation in both campaigns brought out the rebel in Armwood.

The incomplete interpretations of Armwood's career demonstrate the limitations of the Washington-Du Bois controversy in assessing her contributions to the African-American struggle for equality. First, Halderman and Durham present the two racial philosophies as polar opposites, placing Armwood within the more conservative camp, while Clark labeled her a rebel. The three scholars allow no room for the possibility that Armwood maneuvered between accommodation and protest, depending upon the situation and the issues at stake.

Secondly, Halderman and Durham use the paradigm as a static model. Neither scholar considers the possibility that black resistance is fluid, constantly shifting over time. In Armwood's case, her twenty-five year public career evolved in many directions. The Blanche Armwood whom the Tampa Gas Company hired in 1914 was a different person from the woman who entered Howard Law School twenty years later. While she remained dedicated to racial justice, Armwood's views on how best to serve the African-American community changed during the two decades in response to larger social and political transformations. Rather than explore the likelihood that Armwood's thinking shifted overtime, Halderman and Durham simply portray her as an accommodationist.

Finally, the most important obstacle that prevents these scholars from understanding the contradictory character of Armwood's philosophy is their exclusive focus on race. For men like Washington and Du Bois, racism was the key factor in fighting for equality, as each sought the best means to combat racial persecution. However, gender is an important social variable in understanding the lives of black men

and women, a fact that the accommodation versus protest paradigm fails to consider. Although Halderman and Durham briefly mention the dual handicaps Armwood faced as an African-American woman, neither scholar attempts to examine how gender shaped her experiences in ways that differed from African-American men or from white women. Nor do they analyze how gender influenced her approach to racial uplift. The race-centered paradigm forces Halderman and Durham to define Armwood's actions in terms of a monolithic fight against racism.³⁰

In recent years, historians have challenged the conventional narrative of African-American history. They have broadened our understanding of the age of Jim Crow and of black activism by exploring the gender and class components of the African-American freedom struggle.³¹ A number of historians have studied the lives of black women activists from the Jim Crow era. Scholars such as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Stephanie Shaw, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, and Deborah Gray White include women as historical actors in the story of black empowerment.³² They demonstrate that African-

³⁰ Historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues that African-American history has put a great deal of emphasis on race as the key factor in the struggle against oppression. As a result, such a focus creates the impression that the black community was monolithic. It gives the appearance that there were no distinctions or conflicts between blacks based on gender or class. See Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-Americans Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 17 (Winter 1992), 251-274.

³¹ For example, historian Jane Dailey decentralizes the universal black man in her analysis of race and politics in postemancipation Virginia. By investigating the importance of masculinity in defining citizenship in nineteenth century America, she reveals that African-American men demanded full equality as male citizens, regardless of race. They wanted to assume the responsibilities and enjoy the freedoms that society granted to white men. Dailey illustrates that gender was an important social variable that influenced how black men saw themselves. By examining their masculinity, she also shows that gender differences existed between black men and women. Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

³² Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 2; Stephanie Shaw, *What A Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*; Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy A Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).

American women, not only experienced racism differently from black men, but they also responded to it in distinctive ways. The scholars reveal that black women's resistance took unique forms that merged racial uplift, social welfare activism, and civil rights agitation.³³

Scholars have examined the class component of black women's agency as well. Higginbotham, Shaw, Gilmore, and White illustrate the importance of respectability for middle-class African-American women who were denied the status and reverence afforded to elite white women. They argue that middle-class black women shared with their white counterparts a common belief that women held an elevated status in society and bonds of racial and gender discrimination with their poor, uneducated, black sisters. Middle-class African-American women's connections to both social arenas influenced their strategies in fighting against racism and sexism. As Higginbotham maintains, they sought to uplift the race and gain the respect of white America. Higginbotham also points out that respectability was attainable for many working-class women who accepted mainstream ideals.³⁴ However, historian Tera Hunter reveals, in her analysis of domestic servants in Atlanta, Georgia, that not all African-American women held similar views. She shows many working-class African-American women adopted tactics to survive in a harsh environment that were often at odds with the values of the dominant society and with those of middle-class blacks.³⁵

³³ See, for example, Linda Gordon, "Black and White Visions of Welfare: Women's Welfare Activism, 1890-1945," *The Journal of American History*, 78 (September 1991), 559-590.

³⁴ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, pp. 12, 14, 204, 205.

³⁵ Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

The new works on African-American women's history reveal that one must explore how race, gender, and class intersect in people's lives in order to appreciate the complexities of black resistance. This thesis seeks to do the same for Blanche Armwood. By moving away from the Washington-DuBois debate, it will offer an alternative understanding of her career. This study will argue that Blanche Armwood was a black, middle-class activist who devoted her life to the African-American freedom struggle. She repudiated the white supremacist ideology of the Jim Crow South and insisted on equal opportunity for all African-Americans. Armwood believed in the ideals of freedom and justice and wanted white America to live up to its noble principles and treat African-Americans fairly. As a middle-class black woman activist, Armwood adopted an approach to racial uplift that cannot be easily understood within the accommodation-protest paradigm. Indeed, she made use of both strategies throughout the course of her career. Rather than confine her to the accommodationist or the protest sphere, this study examines how the interconnectedness of race, gender, and class shaped her worldview and her leadership. It investigates how her experiences as a southern, middle-class, black woman influenced her racial philosophy.

This thesis also will analyze how Armwood's gender and class affected the variety of tactics she utilized to combat the inferior status of blacks in early twentieth-century America. Armwood's strategies consisted of both conservative and radical elements that reflected her racial ideology.³⁶ Like many black women activists of her generation, Armwood had two major goals in mind as she fought for equality: she tried to uplift the race and gain the respect of white America. The dual objectives emerged from

³⁶ Higginbotham draws attention to this kind of strategy among black women. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, p. 15.

the tensions Armwood tried to balance as a middle-class African-American woman who believed in the mainstream American ideal notion of womanhood, while sharing bonds of racial and gender discrimination with poor black women. Armwood realized that despite her family's upward mobility, racism would always be a factor that confined successful African-Americans like herself to a second-class citizenship and united her with her less fortunate sisters. As a result, Armwood felt that middle-class African-Americans had a responsibility to educate the masses about mainstream values in the hope of raising the entire race. On the other hand, she demanded that white America live up to its ideals of freedom and justice for all. This is where the conservative and radical aspects of her philosophy converged. Given her place within the social structure, Armwood justified the need for a school of household arts to teach black women behavior that middle-class America defined as appropriate, and at the same time, she petitioned the government to pass a bill that would make lynching a federal crime. Armwood expected blacks to improve themselves and make the race worthy of equality, while simultaneously insisting that the dominant society grant those who demonstrated their willingness to work hard and live a respectable life first-class citizenship.³⁷

Armwood's racial ideology was gender and class based. She believed in the manners and morals of mainstream America, especially its ideal notion of womanhood. Like many people of her generation, Armwood felt that women held a revered place in society, for as wives and mothers they had the power to shape the minds, souls, and morals of the next generation of Americans. She also adhered to the essentialist view that

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-18. I am indebted to Higginbotham for helping me to better understand how middle-class black women's class and gender affected their strategies for racial uplift. See also Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting*

females possessed innate qualities, like nurturance, that made them better suited than men address the various social problems of the day. Armwood came of age during the “woman’s era,” a forty-year period in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before the woman suffrage amendment was passed in 1920, when many upper and middle-class white and black women carved out a place for themselves in the public arena through voluntary organizations. The clubwomen used their influences as women, or as historian Anastasia Sims argues, the power of their femininity, to expand and legitimize their roles outside of the home.³⁸ Armwood felt that black women, given their moral superiority and their important roles as wives and mothers, were especially qualified to take the lead in uplifting the race, whether in the home or through community work.

Upper and middle-class black and white women shared a common belief that women held an elevated status in society and made use of the same sort of voluntary organizations to increase their involvement in the public arena. However, in the Jim Crow South, white supremacists understood femininity in racial terms, excluding African-American women from their definition of womanhood. Most white Southerners associated black women with Jezebel and Mammy stereotypes. They looked down upon African-American womanhood viewing it as the polar opposite of white womanhood.

the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth-Century (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

³⁸ For more information on the “woman’s era” see Anastasia Sims, *The Power of Femininity in the New South: Women’s Organizations and Politics in North Carolina, 1880-1930* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1997); White, *Too Heavy A Load*; Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: W. Morrow, 1984).

Consequently, while elite white women used their influence as women to justify their expanding roles in the public arena, African-American women first had to convince whites that they too were ladies who deserved the same respect that society accorded their white counterparts. Middle-class black women fought hard to gain the right to utilize their power of femininity. Defending black womanhood became a means to challenge the South's racial system.³⁹

Armwood realized that all black women had to behave in a respectable manner in order to refute the South's derogatory stereotypes. She understood that white Southerners did not differentiate between black women and that, despite her success as an activist and her elite status within the black community, she still shared a common bond of racial and gender discrimination with working-class black women. While Armwood spent a great deal of time trying to distinguish herself from the masses, she also tried to persuade working-class African-American women to adopt white, middle-class standards of feminine behavior. Armwood encouraged the thousands of poor, uneducated, black women who migrated to Tampa to conduct themselves in a dignified manner. She did not want them to live up to the Jezebel and Mammy stereotypes of African-American women that reinforced white notion of black female inferiority. And of course, given her class leanings, Armwood felt that only those who adhered to the values of the dominant society and who had proven their worthiness deserved the respect of white America.⁴⁰

Despite the conservative tone of Armwood's efforts to uplift the race, her actions had important racial implications. First, her accommodating stance had a radical potential

³⁹ Sims, *The Power of Femininity*, pp. 38, 39, 52, 53.

⁴⁰ For an analysis of gender and class conflicts within the black community see White, *Too Heavy A Load*.

for the very idea of encouraging the masses to adopt white middle-class manners and morals undermined the logic of white supremacy. As Edward Wheeler argues:

Accommodation, which of course had a submissive tone, also had a subversive quality. On the one hand, uplift meant accommodation and surrender to the concepts, principles, and ideals of the dominant society. On the other, uplift was a denial of what white society meant by accommodation, for it spoke of a possibility to move beyond the limits prescribed by the dominant society.⁴¹

Armwood's insistence on respectability provided African-American women with an alternative image that differed significantly from the negative stereotypes of black women that permeated throughout mainstream society. Respectability offered them, according to Higginbotham, a chance to define themselves outside the "parameters of prevailing racist discourses" and it allowed them to contest the degrading manner in which most Americans viewed black women.⁴² Secondly, Armwood's attempts at racial uplift, which historian Linda Gordon argues black women did not separate from social welfare work or civil rights efforts, helped African-Americans find everyday ways of challenging the racial status quo.⁴³ Armwood utilized her roles as Executive Secretary of the TUL and as Supervisor of Negro Schools to instruct the masses of black Americans who migrated to Tampa how to survive in a racist society. Black efforts to create stable families, attain a solid education, and maintain steady employment illustrate their refusal to accept the lowly status that white America assigned to them.⁴⁴ Finally, Armwood's social welfare activities provide a glimpse into her efforts to use her gender and class as

⁴¹ Edward L. Wheeler, *Uplifting the Race: The Black Minister in the New South, 1865-1902* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1986), p. xvii.

⁴² Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, p. 192.

⁴³ Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 132-135, see also Gordon, "Black and White Visions of Welfare."

tools to combat racism. As the disfranchisement of black men removed many of them from the political arena, middle-class black women, like Armwood, took on a greater role in the public sphere, especially as local governments began to provide social services. Using their womanhood as a “nonpolitical guise . . . [that] helped them remain invisible as they worked toward political ends,” African-American women became what Gilmore refers to as racial diplomats, non-threatening figures who oftentimes persuaded state and city leaders to endorse and even assist blacks in their attempts to improve themselves.⁴⁵ In this way, Armwood maneuvered within a hostile environment and gained the support of various groups of people.

Armwood’s involvement in the woman suffrage movement and the anti-lynching crusades reflect the DuBois belief in black political participation and demonstrate the radical aspect of her approach to race relations. Her participation in such activities illustrates her faith in the American system, a factor that played a key role in shaping her racial philosophy. Armwood believed in the rhetoric that all people were equal before the law and that the federal government had a responsibility to protect its citizens, regardless of race or gender. Through her actions, she insisted that America live up to its noble principles.⁴⁶ Armwood’s commitment to the suffrage movement and the anti-lynching campaign also explains her decision to become a lawyer. Her enrollment at Howard Law School marked a turning point in Armwood’s career as she moved away

⁴⁴ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, pp. 17, 18; See also Robin Kelley’s pathbreaking article where he argues that a whole range of daily activities constituted a kind of daily resistance against white supremacy in the Jim Crow South. Robin D, G, Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem.’”

⁴⁵ Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, pp. 147-149.

⁴⁶ For more information on black women’s participation in the women’s suffrage movement, see Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, *African-American Women in the Struggle For the Vote, 1850-1920* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998).

from an emphasis on racial uplift and focused more on the legal fight against racism. Unfortunately, Armwood died in 1939, a year after she completed her juris doctorate degree. Her sudden death leaves us wondering what she might have accomplished had she lived long enough to practice law. Given her pioneering nature, she may well have been one of the NAACP lawyers of the 1940's and 1950's who challenged segregation, culminating in the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*. Although we will never know what Armwood would have gone on to do, her decision to become an attorney was a significant shift in her activism, once again underlying the fluidity of African-American resistance.

In the end, the historical significance of Armwood's accomplishments lies in the fact that she played a vital part in establishing the forces that led to the modern Civil Rights Movement. Although Armwood lived in an era known as the "nadir" in American race relations, she was a part of a generation of men and women who challenged racial oppression in their own local communities. In their attempts to continue the struggle against racism, black activists of the 1950's and 1960's relied upon the resources and institutions built by these earlier generations. They also inherited a legacy of resistance against the inferior status imposed on blacks. In her own way, Blanche Armwood contributed greatly in helping to advance the race towards equality and freedom in American society.

Chapter One

“Ever in Word and Deed”: External and Internal Forces in Armwood’s Early Years

As significant as the studies on Armwood have been in preserving her legacy for future generations, they create a one-dimensional portrait of Armwood that focuses primarily on her list of accomplishments. Beginning with her completion of studies at St. Peter Claver’s Catholic School in 1902 and ending with her graduation from Howard Law School in 1938, the brief biographies continuously recount the same facts about her life, albeit with slight variations. They imply that Armwood’s story consists of one major achievement after another. The local historians who have examined Armwood’s career portray her as a superwoman who stoically and with relentless energy tried to improve the living and working conditions of African-Americans in the Jim Crow South. Consequently, today Armwood is remembered for her impressive resume. She appears as a larger-than-life figure in the history of Tampa who succeeded despite the obstacles that black women faced in the early twentieth-century South.⁴⁷

One major reason why Armwood’s public persona has taken on super heroic proportions is that very little is known about the private person behind the image.

⁴⁷ Caitlin Crowell discusses the portrayal of many black women activists, like Mary McLeod Bethune, as super heroic figures. She argues that it is necessary to explore the personal support networks in these women’s lives to better understand where they found the emotional strength to accomplish so much during the Jim Crow era. Caitlin Crowell, ““The Mingling of Congenial Souls’: Mary McLeod Bethune and the Friendship Networks of Black Women Activists in the Jim Crow Era,” M. A. Thesis, University of South Florida, 2000.

Scholars who are interested in analyzing Armwood's life are limited in the sources available to them. Articles in newspapers and magazines, business letters, pamphlets, and programs offer details that deal mainly with her work as an activist, yet they do not tell much about her personal life. Armwood compounded the problem for she left behind few personal letters or journals that might have revealed more about her private life. Because she was a black woman in the Jim Crow South, Armwood practiced what historian Darlene Clark Hine calls the art of dissemblance. Living in a world that stereotyped and degraded African-American women, it was necessary for Armwood to maintain a certain image in dealing with the white community. Her role as a representative and a leader forced her to be cautious in how she presented herself. Armwood let people see only what she wanted them to know about her. As far as she was concerned, the public and private Armwood were one and the same.⁴⁸ Unfortunately, the lack of personal information has made it difficult to know the woman behind the myth.

The manner in which historians' depict Armwood has influenced how the larger public perceives her as well. Many of the scholars who have examined Armwood's career utilize a conceptual framework that emphasizes the oppressive nature of the Jim Crow South and stresses the significance of the accommodation versus protest debate as the paradigm to be used in interpreting her activities. As a result, on the one hand, they perpetuate the picture of Armwood as a heroic figure who accomplished so much amidst a white society that denied blacks their rights as American citizens. At the same time,

⁴⁸ Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," in *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1994), pp. 37-47; Deborah Gray White also discusses black women's attempts to keep their personal life private from the public. See White, *Too Heavy A Load*, pp. 87, 88.

they claim that racism had such a profound effect on the lives of African-Americans in the early twentieth-century that black leaders, like Armwood, gave up the fight for equality. The historians imply that as important as her work was in helping to improve the living and working conditions of blacks, she had abandoned the struggle for civil rights.⁴⁹

Such an assessment of Armwood's career raises two important points that must be taken into consideration in any analysis of her activities. First, assuming that external factors in Armwood's life, specifically racial and sexual oppression, were so powerful that she gave up battling against them, it still fails to explain why she devoted her time to helping others. Similarly, this assessment also obscures Armwood's ability to develop a strong, confident perception of her place in society. Blanche Armwood would never have become the extraordinary black woman activist that she was if she felt that all hope was gone or if she did not believe in her capabilities as a leader.

Armwood's own writings contradict the assumptions that many scholars have made about her work. One particular poem that Armwood wrote offers a glimpse into her thinking. In May 1906, sixteen-year old, Blanche Armwood completed her four years of study at Spelman Seminary, graduating *summa cum laude* from the High School English-Latin Course. The youngest in her class, Blanche had excelled in her schoolwork and looked forward to attending college. Excited about the future and

⁴⁹ Halderman, "Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation"; Durham, "Blanche Armwood: The Early Years"; Unlike Durham and Halderman, Hawes, Burke, and Clark do not explicitly argue that Blanche Armwood gave up fighting for justice and freedom. However, they do work within the same conceptual framework as the other two scholars. Hawes, "One Person Who Made a Difference," *Tampa Tribune*, February 26, 1983; Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood"; Clark, "Negro Women Leaders of Florida."

appreciative of her parents' sacrifices in helping her to attain her education, Blanche wrote a poem called "Gratitude" to Levin and Maggie Armwood, thanking them for their love and support. The budding poet wrote:

O welcome thou wistful day in May
For whose coming I was wont to Pray.
The bay I've crossed 'neath clouded sky
Now ocean outstretches with billows high.

But what has cheered as the sun's bright ray,
While I've trod, oft in tears, my weary way?
'Twas the encouraging word of parents true
Who prompted their lassie to dare and to do.

To the throne of the Father their prayers have ascended,
In earnest appeals daily their voices have blended:
"God help our child tho' trial storms lower,
To trust wholly in Thee and Thy mighty power."

For my uplift they many a sacrifice have made,
With days of toil and anguish the price have paid.
They have labored thus far with determined will,
And are faithfully doing their duty still.

And now shall all their labor be lost?
Their cares as if on the breakers toss'd?
Shall she world's wealth of gold never repay
The care thou bestowest upon her alway,
But to grow and develop into true womanhood
Will be her recompense for all they good.

Relying in God and His great might,
She'll defeat the wrong, defend the right.
Trying ever in word and in deed
To help mankind and those in need.

May He, who has guided thee thus far
Lead thee thro' life a shining star,
May health and happiness thy paths attend
To cheer thee onward till the journey's end.

When good old age shall thy temples adorn
And farewell is bidden to life's bright morn.
May you not reflect upon her life's scorn
But rejoice that she to thee a child was born.⁵⁰

Although composed by a teenage girl, who had yet to reach adulthood, Blanche's poem provides a clue to understanding the private person behind the public persona that

⁵⁰ Durham, "Blanche Armwood: The Early Years," pp. 14-16.

would become familiar to many in the years to come. Her writing that came from “a thankful, loving heart” speaks volumes about the type of person she was in everyday life.⁵¹ It shows that she did not see herself as disadvantaged, burdened, or helpless, as one might expect of someone who became overwhelmed by the racism and sexism of early twentieth-century America. Armwood’s poem demonstrates that she perceived herself as part of the advantaged and empowered in black society. Young Blanche had obtained an education, something that was highly valued by most African-Americans as a means of racial uplift and upward mobility, especially after three centuries of slavery. Levin and Maggie had seen to it that their daughter had opportunities that most black women never had, since the vast majority spent their lives as domestic servants or agricultural workers, enduring harsh working conditions and sexual exploitation. Blanche was indeed grateful for her parents’ assistance in getting through school because she realized how valuable a high school diploma would be in a society that provided few viable economic choices for African-American women. Her poem reflects her deep appreciation for their hard work in helping her secure an education. Blanche knew her parents’ love, support, and sacrifices had made it all possible.⁵²

“Gratitude” underlines another aspect of Armwood’s life that is often overlooked in many of the studies done on her achievements. The poem shows that internal forces defined Blanche’s world as well as external factors.⁵³ It illustrates that her parents were

⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 6.

⁵² Historian Stephanie Shaw discusses the importance of black professional women’s perception of their place in black society and how they did not see themselves as the disadvantaged. Shaw, *What A Woman Ought to Be and to Do*, pp. x, xi, xii.

⁵³ *Ibid.* Shaw maintains that exploring the internal factors in black women activists’ lives allows one to better understand how they saw themselves and their role in society.

key figures who molded their young daughter into the woman she grew up to be. Levin and Maggie Armwood were born during the days of slavery and knew firsthand the many hardships that Blanche would have to deal with as a black woman in a racist and sexist society. They provided her with the means to achieve in such an environment. Levin and Maggie motivated their daughter to be the best person she could be for they wanted Blanche to acquire confidence and a positive self-image at a time when white mainstream culture degraded African-American females.

Despite the power of external forces in the lives of black women in the Jim Crow South, inner factors in Armwood's life, like her family, friends, and teachers, set the foundation that enabled her not only to survive in an oppressive society, but to succeed as well. Exploring the internal forces that shaped Armwood's worldview makes it easier to understand the woman behind the public persona. By emphasizing her subjective experience in a racist and sexist society and shifting the focus from the victimization of black women we learn what they "could and did do" as well as "what they could not do."⁵⁴ Although she lived in the Jim Crow South, Armwood never resigned herself to the oppressiveness of the world she inhabited, nor did she relinquish the struggle for freedom and equality. In the process, Armwood saw herself as a leader within the black community who had a responsibility to help those in need.

As an African-American woman in the Jim Crow South, Blanche Armwood lived in a segregated society. However, as one historian points out, she belonged to only one-half of it.⁵⁵ Armwood was a member of Tampa's small, black, middle-class. Her family

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xii.

had deep roots in Hillsborough County. Unlike the thousands of African-Americans who migrated to the area in the 1910's and 1920's, her relatives had been pioneers who helped settle southwest Florida during its frontier days. Blanche's maternal grandparents were in Tampa in the period immediately following the Civil War. Adam Holloman, Blanche's grandfather was a freeman and a prosperous citrus farmer who spent his entire life in Hillsborough County. He lawfully married his wife, Cynthia, on July 21, 1866, six months after the Florida legislature passed an act that legalized the marriages of recently emancipated African-Americans. Adam and Cynthia Holloman had lived together for several years, prior to receiving their marriage certificate, and already had at least one child, Blanche's mother, Margaret Holloman, who was born in 1862.⁵⁶

Blanche's paternal grandfather, Levin Armwood, Sr., traced his lineage back to Roger Armwood, a freeman who arrived in Virginia from England in 1635. Levin Armwood, Sr. was born a slave in North Carolina in 1817. Nearly half a century later, in 1866, he moved his family by wagon train from Georgia to Hillsborough County and homesteaded in the Seffner area, a community on the outskirts of Tampa. Levin Armwood, Sr., settled in southwest Florida because he believed that the region, with its abundance of land and labor shortage, provided freedpeople possibilities for advancement that did not exist in other areas of the South that had been ravaged by the Civil War. His son and namesake, Levin Armwood, Jr., Blanche's father, was born a slave in Thomas County, Georgia in 1855. Eleven years old at the time his family migrated to

⁵⁶ Unidentified document, *Armwood Family Papers*, Special Collections, University of South Florida, Box 1, File 2, 17; Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood," p. 38.

Hillsborough County, he experienced his newly acquired freedom growing up on the Florida frontier.⁵⁷

Levin Armwood, Jr., and Margaret Holloman married in November 1878. Soon thereafter, they left the family homestead in Seffner and relocated to Tampa, believing that the town would provide them with more opportunities. The young couple set up a warm, loving, and cultured home. They had five children over the next twelve years, three of whom made it to adulthood. Margaret gave birth to Walter Adam in July 1879, Idella in August 1880, and Blanche Mae in January 1890. Levin and Margaret Armwood resided in an area of Florida that underwent an amazing transformation by the time their youngest daughter, Blanche, was born in 1890. During these years, Levin Armwood, Jr., made a name for himself in Tampa's white and black communities. He became a citrus grower, the first black policeman in Tampa in the late 1870's, a supervisor of county roads, and deputy sheriff in 1895. Margaret Armwood raised their five children and established a reputation as a skillful dressmaker.⁵⁸

Tampa was established in 1824 as a trading center alongside Fort Brooke, a military post set up near Tampa Bay. In the decades before the Civil War, southwest Florida was the last true frontier in the eastern United States. After the defeat of the local Indians in the Second Seminole War (1835-1842), southerners from northern Florida and Georgia migrated to the region, transporting with them the institution of slavery. Between 1840 and 1860, Hillsborough County grew from 452 residents to 2,981 people of which one third were enslaved and a few were free African-Americans. During this

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*; Brown, *African-Americans on the Tampa Bay Frontier*, p. 47; Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort*, p. 27.

time, Hillsborough County consisted of all or portions of modern day Hillsborough, Pinellas, Hardee, Polk, Highlands, Charlotte, DeSoto, Manatee, and Sarasota Counties. Hernando, Pasco, and Citrus Counties were also part of this enormous territory until Hernando County was established in 1843. In 1850, the small village of Tampa had a population of 441 inhabitants, including 179 slaves. Five years later, Tampa was incorporated into a city and made the county seat of Hillsborough County. Through the Civil War period and into the Reconstruction and the Redemption eras, southwest Florida remained a frontier and Tampa continued to be an isolated town in the middle of nowhere whose population actually fell from 885 people in 1861 to 720 in 1880.⁵⁹

Bringing with them the institution of slavery, many homesteaders set up large sugar plantations with over eighty slaves, thirty miles south of Tampa along the Manatee River. By 1850, more than half of the 660 enslaved African-Americans in the area lived on plantations with at least twenty slaves. Despite efforts to transplant the plantation system to the region, however, cattle ranching became the leading industry in Hillsborough County. Men such as Captain James McKay, a Scottish immigrant, pioneered the export of livestock to Cuba, using ships that left the port in Tampa to reach the Spanish colony. Tampa soon dominated the cattle industry and became the commercial center of southwest Florida. The business of raising and selling cows did not

⁵⁸ “Mrs. Blanche Armwood-Beatty,” unidentified article, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 2, File 23; Clark, “Negro Women Leaders of Florida,” p. 64; Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort*, p. 27; Halderman, “Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation,” pp. 288, 290, 297, 301.

⁵⁹ Robert P. Ingalls, “Lynching and Establishment Violence in Tampa, 1858-1935,” *The Journal of Southern History*, 53 (November 1987), 615; Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes in the New South: Tampa, 1882-1936* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1988), pp. 5, 10, 13; Mormino and Pizzo, *Tampa: The Treasure City*, p. 60; Mormino and Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City*, pp. 44-50; Brown, *African-Americans on the Tampa Bay Frontier*, pp. 5, 46.

depend upon slavery, yet the average cowman owned at least one slave and many of Hillsborough County's leading families had slaves in 1860. Although the typical Tampa resident did not possess slaves, many of the city's top merchants and professionals were slaveowners.⁶⁰ As historian Gary Mormino and Anthony Pizzo maintain, slaveholding symbolized financial security and social acceptance for upwardly mobile Tampans.⁶¹ Most enslaved African-Americans in Tampa worked within the household as domestic servants, in skilled crafts, such as carpentry, or as scouts for the army. Through their labor, they helped build the city.⁶²

The Reconstruction era represented an important period for African-Americans in southwest Florida. After centuries of slavery, they made their first significant showing in the world of politics, holding a handful of appointed positions within the region. The 1868 revision of Florida's constitution granted black men the right to vote and allowed the governor to appoint most state and county officials. From 1868 to 1877, Republican governors selected five black men to serve on the Hillsborough County Commission, including Cyprus Charles (1868-1871), Mills Holloman, Blanche's great-grandfather, (1868-1872), Robert Johns (1871-1873), John Thomas (1871-1873), and Adam Holloman, Blanche's grandfather, (1873-1877). In 1868-1869, a black man, Frederick D. Newberry, served as acting justice of the peace as well.⁶³

⁶⁰ Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes in the New South*, p. 10; Mormino and Pizzo, *Tampa: The Treasure City*, p. 60.

⁶¹ Mormino and Pizzo, *Tampa: The Treasure City*, p. 60

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Brown, *African-Americans on the Tampa Bay Frontier*, p. 57; Rowena Ferrell Brady, *Things Remembered: An Album of African-Americans in Tampa* (Tampa: University of Tampa Press, 1997), pp. 10, 11, 17.

The political status of African-Americans did not deteriorate immediately after the official end of Reconstruction. Although the white, conservative Democratic Party regained control of state politics in 1877, it did not completely dominate the political terrain. According to historian J. Morgan Kousser, Florida spawned one of the most successful Independent movements in the South in the 1880's, despite Democratic violence, harassment, fraud, and disfranchisement. However, once in control, Democratic leaders used their power to weaken black influence through registration, poll tax, eight-box, and secret ballot laws.⁶⁴ In 1884, Edward A. Perry, a former Confederate general from Pensacola, was elected governor by only 4,200 votes, and yet during his administration, Democrats sponsored the rewriting of Florida's constitution, limiting the rights of African-Americans and mandating racially segregated schools. Over the next several years, Democratic leaders passed other "Jim Crow" laws that legalized racial segregation in public areas. In 1902, the Florida Democratic Party also took the additional step of confining its membership to whites only. Since most whites were Democrats, the exclusion of African-American men was meant to create a one-party state where white Southerners could ignore black suffrage. Although African-American men

⁶⁴ According to historian J. Morgan Kousser, Florida adopted the eight-box laws in 1889. He explains that under the eight-box laws, ballots for president, congressman, state senator, governor, and other elected officers were separated. Voters were supposed to place their ballots in the proper boxes. If the ballots were distributed incorrectly, they were not counted. To prevent a literate voter from arranging the tickets for an uneducated person, the boxes were regularly moved around. Illiterates had the option of asking the election judges to read the names on the boxes, but since election officials were selected by the Democratic governor, it is unlikely that Republicans got much help in voting. Since 39 percent of Florida's residents were classed as illiterates in 1900, the effect of these de facto literacy tests was considerable. Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics*, p. 50.

could still participate in the general election (as long as they met the restrictions set up by the state), a candidate's victory in the Democratic primaries guaranteed him office.⁶⁵

In Tampa, the status of African-Americans did not change dramatically after Reconstruction. Once conservative Democrats won political power over the state, Tampa's white elites did not feel threatened by the town's black inhabitants. The scarcity of labor and the few blacks in the area led many white political and business leaders to take a paternalistic attitude toward black Americans. Confined to their own area on the outskirts of Tampa, called "the Scrub," the African-American community was small and stable.⁶⁶ In an 1877 editorial, Dr. John Perry Wall, a councilman, former mayor, and editor of Tampa's *Sunland Tribune*, explained that the city's blacks were "remarkably intelligent, and honest, and possess but few of the lazy vagabond class."⁶⁷ During this time, African-Americans held a number of skilled jobs, owned several businesses, and organized their own social institutions.⁶⁸ Men, like Levin Armwood, Jr., though rare, managed to establish themselves and attain important positions in Hillsborough County.

By the mid-1880's, with the advent of the railroads and the cigar industry, Tampa was transformed from a remote Southern village into a major metropolitan center. The increase in Tampa's citizenry, from 720 inhabitants in 1880 to over 100,000 by 1930, reflects the enormous expansion the city experienced during these years.⁶⁹ In contrast to

⁶⁵ Brown, *African-Americans on the Tampa Bay Frontier*, p. 66; Iorio, "Colorless Primaries," pp. 297-304; Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics*, pp. 92, 94.

⁶⁶ Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes in the New South*, p. 26.

⁶⁷ Tampa *Sunland Tribune*, May 26, 1877; Ingalls, "Lynching and Establishment Violence in Tampa," p. 618.

⁶⁸ Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes in the New South*, p. 26.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27; Mormino and Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City*, pp. 44-50.

her parents, who came of age on the Florida frontier, Blanche Armwood grew up in an environment that changed dramatically over the course of her lifetime. Levin and Margaret Armwood lived in a biracial society, like most areas of the South that consisted of native-born black and whites. However, their daughter was born at a time when Tampa was beginning to develop into a triracial city that had a large number of foreign-born blacks and whites who moved to the area as the cigar industry became a major business within the region. In 1890, Tampa had 5,532 residents, of whom 45 percent were native-born whites, 26 percent were foreign-born whites, namely Italian, Spanish, and Cuban cigar makers, and 26 percent were Afro-Cubans and native-born blacks. Four decades later, the city boasted a population of 101,161 people. The proportion of immigrants and blacks in Tampa in 1930 had decreased to 14 percent and 21 percent respectively.⁷⁰

The arrival of thousands of African-Americans to Tampa, beginning in the 1890's and continuing well into the 1920's, worried many local whites, who saw blacks, particularly African-American men, as a social threat, instead of an economic necessity. Throughout the early twentieth-century, leading white citizens in Tampa took steps to ensure their position at the top of the social hierarchy.⁷¹ In 1908, for example, a group of men led by Donald Brenham McKay, the grandson of one of the city's first white pioneers, Captain James McKay, organized the White Municipal Party. They intended to

⁷⁰ Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes in the New South*, p. 27; Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort*, p. 37.

⁷¹ Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes in the New South*, pp. 27, 28.

eliminate the impact of the black vote by setting up a white primary for the election of city officials.⁷²

Tampa's phenomenal growth between 1880 and 1930 led to many ethnic, racial, and class conflicts between various groups of people who made the city their home. The overriding theme in Tampa's history, during these years, has been the tensions and struggles between native-born, elite, white business and political leaders who tried to hold on to their power in an ever-changing society and those who threatened the status quo, including immigrants and African-Americans.⁷³ Over the years, many scholars have explored Tampa's past from different perspectives. Historian Robert Ingalls, for example, investigates the efforts of the ruling class to protect its interest through vigilantism, while historians Gary Mormino and George Pozzetta examine the dynamics of immigrant life in Ybor City. Together, they reveal the important roles that elite whites and foreign-born cigar makers played in shaping Tampa's identity.⁷⁴

The African-American community that Blanche Armwood belonged to has received much attention as well. However, the black population in Tampa has traditionally been characterized as passive victims of a repressive society, rather than as agents who actively participated in defining their own world. Many of the earlier studies of Tampa's transformation place blacks at the very bottom of the city's social hierarchy, below the Italian, Spanish, and Cuban cigar makers whose status was bolstered by the fact that blacks were the most oppressed group in the area. Consequently, most accounts

⁷² Iorio, "Colorless Primaries," pp. 297-304.

⁷³ Mormino and Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City*, p. 49.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*; Ingalls, "Lynching and Establishment Violence in Tampa"; Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes in the New South*, pp. 613-644.

of Tampa's amazing development from a small town to a major urban area place the black community on the periphery of a much larger story. African-Americans make a handful of appearances at certain points in the narrative, yet they are largely left behind in the wake of all the modern advances taking place in the city. The prevailing storyline emphasizes the awful living and working conditions of blacks in the Jim Crow South, while simultaneously implying that their experiences and contributions were not as important as those of the ruling class or the immigrants in shaping Tampa's history during its formative years.⁷⁵

In *The Immigrant World of Ybor City*, historians Gary Mormino and George Pozzetta summarize the conventional interpretation of the overall status of blacks in Tampa during this period. They maintain that

by the early years of the twentieth century, white Tampanians determined the position of blacks in the local society. Segregated into well-defined residential zones, circumscribed by vigorous Jim Crow laws, and effectively excluded from politics and many jobs, blacks faced an uncertain future. So solidly stuck were they on the lowest rung of the occupational, economic, and social ladder that the point of entry for incoming immigrants was moved upward.⁷⁶

Mormino and Pozzetta's argument reveals the white-centered understanding of black life that focuses on the objective reality of racism in the South. They stress the external forces in society, like Jim Crow laws, disfranchisement, and lynching that confined blacks to a second-class status. African-Americans are portrayed as powerless victims of a repressive racist environment, where they are acted upon by larger forces that are out of

⁷⁵ Many of the older books on Tampa's history take this approach. Ingalls, "Lynching and Establishment Violence in Tampa"; Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes in the New South*; Mormino and Pizzo, *Tampa: The Treasure City*; Mormino and Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City*.

⁷⁶ Mormino and Pozzetta, *The Immigrant World of Ybor City*, p. 59.

their control. As Mormino and Pozzetta illustrate, whites are seen as defining the world that blacks inhabited in Tampa.

While there is no disputing the inferior condition of African-Americans in the Jim Crow South, scholars, in recent years, have offered a more nuanced perspective of blacks in Tampa that stresses their agency during this period of increasing racism. Rowena Ferrell Brady, a lifelong resident of Tampa, organized a pictorial history of the city's African-American population in the early twentieth-century. She reveals that, although blacks held the lowest rung of the economic ladder in Tampa, a strong and vibrant community existed within the larger black population that "enjoyed sufficient income and social standing to sponsor educational, cultural, social, and religious institutions, and traditions."⁷⁷ Brady illustrates through her pictures that the relatively small group of middle-class African-Americans in Tampa set up organizations like the Afro-American Civic League, the NAACP, the Tampa Urban League, the Clara Frye Hospital, the Harlam Academy, and the Helping Hand Day Nursery.⁷⁸ Historians Canter Brown, Jr., and Nancy Hewitt also examine the black middle-class world in Tampa. They show that black men and women worked hard to keep their rights as Americans citizens, not only during the Reconstruction era, but also throughout the Jim Crow period.⁷⁹ Through their organizations and activism, middle-class African-Americans oftentimes had the potential to threaten the power base of elite whites in Tampa. They forced the city's leading

⁷⁷ Brady, *Things Remembered*. p. 18.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ For a detailed examination of the black middle-class in Tampa see Brown, *African-Americans on the Tampa Bay Frontier* and Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort*.

business and political leaders to take actions to assure their control over Tampa, as illustrated by the development of the White Municipal Party in 1908.⁸⁰

Many of the more recent studies on Tampa's black population have shown that the African-American community was not monolithic. Gender and class differences existed among black people, just as they did within white Tampa. Although they shared a common bond of racial oppression and segregation laws that confined them to the same areas of the city, African-Americans experienced and reacted to racism in various ways. In Blanche Armwood's case, she was among the elite in Tampa's black community. By the time Blanche was born, the Hollomans and the Armwoods had established themselves as respected leaders who had contributed to the development of southwest Florida. They belonged to a select group of blacks that were several steps above the masses of poor African-Americans in Tampa.⁸¹

Class distinctions and divisions existed in the black world where Blanche grew up, yet they were very complex. The Armwood family was certainly much better off financially, in comparison to the thousands of the propertyless, uneducated, and, sometimes jobless blacks who came to Tampa in the 1910's and 1920's. Despite their elite standing as middle-class blacks, the Armwoods still faced discrimination. Blanche's older brother, Walter, for example, was an architect, but he could not find employment suitable for his talents in Tampa and he eventually opened the Gem Drug Store with his

⁸⁰ Hewitt, "In Pursuit of Power: The Political Economy of Women's Activism in Twentieth-Century Tampa," in *Visible Women: New Essays on American Activism*, eds. Nancy A. Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsock (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 209.

⁸¹ Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort*, p. 152.

father in 1913.⁸² In a racist society where white people either excluded blacks from most professional fields or paid them far less than whites for similar work, the adoption of mainstream manners and values represented the means by which many African-Americans distinguished themselves from the masses. Adherence to white, middle-class standards of respectability and morality played a key role in determining one's social status, allowing working-class women, like laundresses and domestic servants, to attain respectability within the black community as well.⁸³ Even though class divisions existed among African-Americans in Tampa, relations between the elite and the masses blurred at times. As Hewitt maintains in her analysis, some of Tampa's most prominent black families had a member who was a laundress or a domestic servant, while occasionally someone from a poor family became a teacher or a nurse. Blanche's older sister, Idella, married a laborer, James Street.⁸⁴

As a part of Tampa's black elite, Blanche had advantages that most African-Americans did not have, especially those who arrived later on. When Maggie Holloman and Levin Armwood, Jr., married in November 1878, they committed themselves to the lifelong goal of providing their children with opportunities that would enable them to live the American dream as free citizens. Maggie and Levin were a part of the last generation of black Americans who had experienced human bondage. They came of age at a time when African-Americans were trying to learn how to live as autonomous people after centuries of slavery. As the eldest child in each of their families, neither Maggie nor Levin had been given the chance to complete their formal education. After their

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 151; Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, p. 205.

⁸³ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, p. 205.

marriage, the young couple intended to give their offspring everything they missed out on while growing up, particularly the possibility of attending school.⁸⁵

At a time when white society treated African-Americans like second-class citizens, Maggie and Levin raised their children to be respectable, middle-class Americans. They believed that the adoption of mainstream values and morals demonstrated to white people that the Armwoods had moved away from the inferior status associated with slavery. It also distinguished the family from the thousands of poor, illiterate blacks who arrived in Tampa in the early twentieth-century. The manner in which the Armwoods presented themselves reveals the importance they placed on respectability. In Rowena Ferrell Brady's pictorial history of blacks in Tampa, the few photographs of the Armwood family, taken at the turn of the century, show how far they had come from slavery in only a generation. One picture, taken in 1895, depicts Levin and Maggie Armwood as a well-dressed and honest looking couple along with four of their children. Another photograph pictured the entire Armwood clan lined up in front of the old family homestead of Oak Cottage in 1912. The men and women in the snapshot also give the impression of respectability. They stand tall and proudly, in their best clothes, as if attempting to disprove the notion that they were somehow less than white Tampanians. The dignified image of the clan stands in stark contrast to the small number of photos that Brady presented of the masses of blacks who migrated to Tampa in the

⁸⁴ Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort*, p. 152.

⁸⁵ "Mrs. Blanche Armwood-Beatty," unidentified article, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 2, File 23; Durham, "Blanche Armwood: The Early Years," pp. 13, 14; Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood," p. 38; Clark, "Negro Women Leaders of Florida," p. 64.

1910's and 1920's, pictured with their worn out clothes and dilapidated homes in the background.⁸⁶

Blanche's schooling reinforced the values that her parents' had instilled. Although they were Protestant, Levin and Maggie enrolled their youngest daughter at St. Peter Claver's Catholic School, a private educational institution that opened in 1894, because they believed that she would receive a far better education than at one of Tampa's poorly funded, run-down, black public schools.⁸⁷ They then sent young Blanche to Spelman Seminary, an all-female black private school in Atlanta, Georgia that was designed to create "real intellectual women."⁸⁸ Spelman Seminary was established in 1881 as the Atlanta Female Baptist Seminary and renamed three years later in honor of the Spelman family who were longtime activists in the anti-slavery movement. The institution originally functioned as an elementary and secondary school specifically for black women and girls. By the mid-1890's, Spelman began offering college preparatory courses and in 1901 granted its first baccalaureate degrees. In 1924, the school officially changed its name to Spelman College. Three years later, it discontinued its elementary school and focused primarily on higher education.⁸⁹

Armwood loved her time at Spelman Seminary. She made lifelong friends that she kept in touch with for years to come, many of whom also became involved in efforts to uplift the race. Armwood was devoted to Spelman Seminary as well. After she graduated in 1906 she remained in contact with its presidents, first Harriet Giles, then

⁸⁶ Brady, *Things Remembered*, pp. 27, 50, 73.

⁸⁷ Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort*, p. 87.

⁸⁸ Shaw, *What A Woman Ought to Be and to Do*, p. 25.

⁸⁹ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, pp. 31-33; *Spelman College* web page, link on "College History."

Lucy Hale Tapley. Armwood wrote to them periodically, during her years of activism, seeking their advice, making donations to the school, recruiting recent graduates for her projects, and updating them on her attempts to improve the conditions of blacks in the South. She believed in Spelman's philosophy of developing female leaders for the race and was very proud of her alma mater.⁹⁰

Blanche Armwood developed her ideas about black female leadership during her years at Spelman. Building upon many of the lessons set forth by Armwood's parents, the faculty at Spelman stressed the significance of embracing white, middle-class culture and values, especially its ideology of womanhood, as a means of countering racist and sexist stereotypes of black women. They instilled in Armwood an understanding that she was a part of, what historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham calls, the Female Talented Tenth.⁹¹ Spelman taught Armwood that no matter how hard she tried to live her life according to the standards set up by white America, racism would always be a factor that would link her with the masses of African-Americans. Although respectability was important in challenging dominant views of blacks, white people would never recognize her as an equal, as long as most African-Americans reinforced the lowly images of blacks in American culture. Armwood believed that her responsibility as a member of the elite was to instruct poor, illiterate African-Americans about white, middle-class morals and manners in the hope of raising the entire race above the negative perceptions that whites had of African-Americans, particularly of black women. The motto of Armwood's

⁹⁰ In the years after she graduated from Spelman Seminary, Blanche wrote many letters to the president of the school. Her correspondence dates between December 1911 and April 1938. *Blanche Armwood Washington File, Deceased Alumnus Files*, Box 20, Spelman College Archives, Atlanta Georgia.

⁹¹ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, pp. 19-45.

graduating class, “Lifting as We Climb,” demonstrates that Spelman prepared her to be a leader, someone who had a duty to work towards uplifting the race. It also underlines the class differences among blacks. Armwood learned that she had to help the masses in order to raise the status of all blacks in American society.⁹²

Spelman also reinforced the notion that women had a significant part to play in black leadership. A private educational institution for black women and girls, Spelman developed a philosophy centered around the idea that women had a legitimate right and an obligation to be leaders in the African-American freedom struggle. The school taught its female students that their moral superiority over men and the important roles they would one day take on as wives and mothers made them especially qualified to be in the forefront of uplifting the race. Armwood believed that her femininity justified her inclusion in W. E. B. Du Bois’s vision of a Talented Tenth who would work for the betterment of the entire race.⁹³

The poem that Armwood wrote to her parents in 1906 reveals her strong sense of duty and commitment. In “Gratitude,” Armwood made a promise to “defeat the wrong, defend the right [and] help . . . those in need.”⁹⁴ She was determined to honor her pledge and graduated from Spelman with the strong conviction that she had a social responsibility to assist those in the black community who were less fortunate.

Armwood’s family had made many sacrifices over the years to ensure that she had the

⁹² [Blanche Armwood], “Letter to Miss Florence Reed, President of Spelman College, April, 10, 1937,” *Blanche Armwood Washington File*.

⁹³ Armwood’s private letters and her public writings reflect her views about the special role women played as leaders in the black community. See her Spelman letters and two articles that she wrote called “Sphere of Helpfulness,” and “Shall the American Woman Adopt Late Paris Models,” *Blanche Armwood Washington File; Armwood Family Papers*, Box 2, File 18.

⁹⁴ Durham, “Armwood: The Early Years,” p. 16.

opportunity to get an education. Now she would repay their hard work, kindness, and generosity by dedicating her life to ameliorating the living and working conditions of blacks in the Jim Crow South.

Although Armwood's plans for the future changed the summer after she graduated from Spelman Seminary, she kept her promise to Levin and Maggie Armwood. Armwood postponed her dream to attend college and, at the last minute, took the Florida teacher's examination, obtained a first-grade certificate, and began working in Tampa's public schools.⁹⁵ In a 1937 letter to Florence Reed, the President of Spelman College, she explains her decision:

. . . I sacrificed the ambition to go on to college at that time in order to give my physically disabled parents an opportunity to pay off their mortgage indebtedness on their home and income properties and thus allow my father to retire from his Civil Service employment and remain at home with my crippled mother who needed someone always at hand.⁹⁶

For the next seven years, Armwood moved her way up from the primary grades to high school. She dedicated her time and energy to her students. In January 1914, Armwood completed a questionnaire for Spelman Seminary about what she had done to uplift the race since she leaving in 1906. She explained that she had labored hard to do her part in helping the black community. During her seven and half years as a teacher in Tampa, she "inspired pupils with class pride, encouraging them to adorn their classrooms . . . [and] made many successful efforts to secure facilities and equipment from School Board, etc." She also "taught higher branches than the curriculum offered and encouraged many to go to higher institutions of learning." When asked what kind of religious and social work

⁹⁵ "Mrs. Blanche Armwood-Beatty," unidentified article, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 2, File 23.

⁹⁶ [Armwood], "Letter to Miss Florence Reed, President of Spelman College, April 10, 1937," *Blanche Armwood Washington File*.

she had rendered, Armwood answered that she had participated in a variety of church related activities. She also founded and presided over the Woman's Improvement Circle of Tampa and served as State Organizer of the Florida Federation of Colored Women's Clubs.⁹⁷

Even after her whirlwind love affair and marriage to Daniel Webster Perkins, an attorney, in November 1913, she remained active in community affairs.⁹⁸ At the time that Armwood filled out the questionnaire, she had resigned from her post as principal of the College Hill School in Tampa, and had moved with her new husband to his hometown of Knoxville, Tennessee. Armwood was excited about her new role as a housekeeper in their "neat, comfortable home." However, she also looked forward to serving Knoxville's African-American population. Aside from joining the Baptist Church where Daniel was a deacon and a Sunday school teacher, Armwood hoped to work with the Women's Club of Tennessee, for she believed that "there is so much to be done thro' that medium."⁹⁹

Long before Armwood received public recognition for her many accomplishments, she was already serving the African-American community in one capacity or another, whether in Tampa or in Knoxville. Her older siblings also led very successful lives, although they never became as well known as Armwood. Walter and Idella Armwood attended Tampa's black public schools and in the 1890's enrolled at

⁹⁷ "Spelman Questionnaire, January 19, 1914," *Blanche Armwood Washington File*.

⁹⁸ Blanche Armwood married three times. She always kept her maiden name, though, preferring to be called Blanche Armwood Perkins, then later on, Blanche Armwood Beatty and Blanche Armwood Washington. To cause less confusion, this thesis will use her family name.

⁹⁹ [Blanche Armwood], "Letter to Miss Tapley, President of Spelman Seminary, January 19, 1914," *Blanche Armwood Washington File*.

Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College in Tallahassee, Florida's only public institution of higher learning for blacks. Walter Armwood held several notable positions during his life, including principal of Brewer Normal School in South Carolina, professor at Bethune-Cookman College, and Florida's supervisor for the U. S. Bureau of Negro Economics during World War I. Idella Armwood Street became a licensed businesswoman and a home economics teacher, and she participated in black women's clubs and community activities, including the Woman's Improvement Club, an organization set up by her younger sister, Blanche, for black middle-class and professional women.¹⁰⁰

All three of Maggie and Levin's children took advantage of the opportunities that their parents' provided for them. They were a part of the first generations who were born after emancipation. This is key to understanding how Armwood saw her role in society. She was very conscious of the fact that her ancestors had endured slavery. They had lived in a "socially approved and legally enforced state of poverty, illiteracy, and bondage."¹⁰¹ Unlike her relatives, Armwood had been born free and received the best education available. Armwood never saw herself as powerless or disadvantaged. While racism and sexism had a profound impact on black women's lives, in segregated black communities, they "were enabled as much as they were disabled." As historian Stephanie Shaw maintains, they saw endless possibilities, instead of limited opportunities.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort*, pp. 27, 28, 151.

¹⁰¹ Shaw, *What A Woman Ought to Be and to Do*, pp. xi, xii.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

Armwood's perception of herself as a leader within the black community who had a responsibility to help others was a driving force in her life that often pushed her to the brink of exhaustion. Her long list of accomplishments looks very impressive on paper, yet she wore herself out trying to uplift the race. Armwood's public persona hid the physically worn-out Armwood who frequently was overwhelmed by her numerous obligations. The super heroic Blanche Armwood that Floridians celebrate today was actually a woman who felt passionately about her work as an activist and who was devoted to the black community and racial uplift. However, she was also someone who regularly took on more than she could handle. Armwood's correspondence to the President of Spelman College, from 1911 to 1938, reveals how over-worked she became during her years of service to the African-American population.¹⁰³ Yet, they also demonstrate that she relied upon these communications as a means of gaining support for her projects and as a way of releasing the stress and worries associated with so many responsibilities. Armwood depended upon a network of people, a community of family and friends, for encouragement and assistance. Her parents, relatives, former classmates and teachers, and colleagues made up the community that gave Armwood the emotional and spiritual support she needed during the high and low points of her career. They enabled her to accomplish so much at a time when white Southerners confined blacks to a second-class status.¹⁰⁴

In their attempts to understand Blanche Armwood's career as an activist, local historians frequently utilize a conceptual framework that emphasizes the repressive

¹⁰³ See, for example, [Blanche Armwood], "Letter to Miss Tapley, President Spelman Seminary, May 3, 1916," *Blanche Armwood Washington File*.

nature of the Jim Crow South. They portray Armwood as a larger-than-life figure who succeeded despite the barriers black women faced in the early twentieth-century, while simultaneously arguing that racism had such a profound impact on the lives of African-Americans that black leaders, like Armwood, gave up the fight for equality. Scholars concentrate mostly on the external forces that defined Armwood's world, arguing that she became resigned to her lot in life as a black woman, and as a result, chose to accommodate rather than challenge the Southern racial system.

Looking over Armwood's impressive resume, it is difficult to accept the line of reasoning put forth by Halderman, Durham, and others who have examined her life's work. Many of the scholars who have written about Armwood's accomplishments rely upon race as the main category of analysis and focus primarily on the objective reality of racism in the Jim Crow South. They do not analyze the significance of gender and class in defining her world, nor do they investigate Armwood's subjective experience growing up in a black, middle-class family in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The internal forces in Armwood's life, like her family, friends, and teachers, set the foundation that empowered her to succeed in an oppressive society. They motivated her to be a leader, someone who had a responsibility to aid those less fortunate in the hope of uplifting the entire race. Armwood's perception of herself and of her duties as a middle-class black woman is key to understanding her career as an activist. It is very difficult to evaluate her contribution to the African-American freedom movement if one begins with the premise that Armwood abandoned the struggle to gain freedom and equality. Rather, one must start with the assumption that Blanche Armwood dedicated her entire life to

¹⁰⁴ For a more in-depth analysis of the importance of friendship networks for black women activist in the Jim Crow era see Crowell, "The Mingling of Congenial Souls."

improving the political, social, and economic status of blacks in American society because she believed that she could make a difference in fighting against racial discrimination.

Chapter Two

“Defeat the Wrong, Defend the Right”: Conservative and Radical Elements of Armwood’s Racial Philosophy

On November 23, 1913, twenty-three-year-old Blanche Armwood married an attorney named Daniel Webster Perkins. After spending seven years as an educator, she then gave up her job as principal of the College Hill School in Tampa, Florida. Not long afterwards, the newlyweds moved to Perkins’s hometown of Knoxville, Tennessee. Armwood enthusiastically embraced her new responsibilities as a wife and a housekeeper. She also remained dedicated to her role as a leader within the black community. Although she no longer worked as a teacher in the black public schools of the Jim Crow South, Armwood found other means to serve Knoxville’s African-American population. She actively participated in the city’s black Baptist Church and colored women’s clubs.¹⁰⁵

Armwood’s marriage to Daniel Perkins was short-lived. During her months in Knoxville, she discovered that her husband had an illegitimate son. Little is known about Armwood’s personal relationship with Perkins. However, her religious views and conventional attitude about marriage and motherhood would never allow her to be with a man who had a child out of wedlock. Armwood eventually had her marriage annulled

¹⁰⁵ [Armwood], “Letter to Miss Tapley, President of Spelman Seminary, January 19, 1914,” *Blanche Armwood Washington File*.

and, in late 1914, she returned to Tampa and resumed her life as a single woman. Having resigned from her post as a school principal several months earlier and without a husband to support her financially, Armwood had to find some form of employment.¹⁰⁶

While Armwood searched for a new occupation, the Tampa Gas Company (TGC) had a dilemma of its own that required the assistance of a respectable African-American woman. The TGC was established in 1895 with Peter O. Knight, one of Tampa's most powerful white attorneys, as a charter member. The company had a shaky beginning, narrowly avoiding a collapse in 1898 when the city of Tampa purchased two hundred and fifty gas streetlights. An eastern syndicate bought the business in 1900, and within a decade, it had 1,600 customers and annual sales of thirty-five million cubic feet of gas. In 1912, the Tampa Gas Company expanded and, with a larger plant and an enormous storage tank, it needed to augment its cash flow.¹⁰⁷

During this time, a number of white, middle-class Tampons owned one of the latest appliances of the day, the gas range, a device that was intended to make cooking easier. Many of them also employed African-American women as domestic servants. Unfamiliar with the most recent technology, the hired cooks did not know how to operate the gas ranges economically or efficiently. Oftentimes, they preferred to utilize the old-fashion coal or wood stoves instead, leaving the gas ranges unused.¹⁰⁸ Like any business,

¹⁰⁶ Since so little is known about Armwood's personal relationship with Perkins, the details of the annulment are not clear. It is not known exactly when Armwood had her marriage annulled. While some scholars claim that it was done in 1914, prior to her return to Tampa, other sources indicate that it may have taken place sometime in late 1915, after the couple returned to Tampa together. See [Daniel Webster Perkins], "Letter to Miss Tapley, President of Spelman College, September 28, 1915," *Blanche Armwood Washington File*; Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood," p. 39.

¹⁰⁷ Halderman, "Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation," p. 292.

¹⁰⁸ Blanche Armwood Perkins, "Educating Colored Cooks," *The Gas Record*, June 28, 1916, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 2, File 14; Durham, "Blanche Armwood: The Early Years," pp. 32, 33.

the Tampa Gas Company sought to profit from the sales of their appliances to the white, middle-class. However, the TGC failed to recognize that it would be necessary to train those who would be the primary users of the gas ranges in the kitchens of elite white homes. That is until the manager of the Tampa Gas Company, Roscoe Nettles, received numerous complaints from customers “about the wastefulness and the negligence of the average colored cook in using gas as a fuel.”¹⁰⁹

To assist his consumers and to protect the company’s sales in gas appliances, Nettles decided to hire a young African-American woman, proficient in the field of domestic science, as a demonstrator. His intention was to have a representative of the Tampa Gas Company show black cooks how to operate gas ranges. Two weeks after Armwood returned to Tampa, Nettles offered her the position. Armwood had no problem working for the TGC and accepted the job. However, she did have doubts about Nettles’s plan, believing that demonstrations would not be enough to teach black cooks all they needed to know about gas appliances.¹¹⁰ Armwood tactfully suggested to Nettles that if he wanted long-lasting results, the Tampa Gas Company should invest its money in a “well-equipped training school for colored cooks and housewives.” She argued that a competent woman would appreciate gas appliances and know how to use them efficiently.¹¹¹ Armwood convinced Nettles that an industrial arts school that specialized in domestic science was the solution to his problems for it would benefit the TGC and its customers.

¹⁰⁹ “Teaching Useful Arts,” *Tampa Tribune*, November 21, 1915.

¹¹⁰ Armwood Perkins, “Educating Colored Cooks,” *Armwood Family Papers*.

¹¹¹ [Blanche Armwood], “The School of Household Arts,” *Blanche Armwood Washington File*.

Armwood's idea of a school of household arts for African-American women was not new. Spelman Seminary provided courses in home economics for its students, as did many other black private schools for young women, including the National Training School for Women and Girls (NTS) in Washington, D.C. Established in 1909, and funded by the black Baptist Church, the National Training School specialized in domestic science. Under the leadership of Nannie H. Burroughs, the NTS tried to "re-define and re-present black women's identities as skilled workers rather than incompetent menials." The women activists within the black Baptist Church used the educational institution as a tool to command greater respect and dignity for African-American women who were trapped in low-status jobs.¹¹²

Armwood spent late 1914 organizing the new Tampa School of Household Arts (TSHA), which opened in January 1915. While major funding for the school came from the Tampa Gas Company, the project was a joint venture that included the Colored Ministers' Alliance and the Hillsborough County School Board. Armwood served as principal and head instructor of the TSHA for three years, from 1915 to 1917. She became fully involved in the field of domestic science as it was related to the interests of the TGC. Armwood oversaw the training of several hundred black women and girls on behalf of the Tampa Gas Company. Her primary responsibility, as an employee of the company, was to make sure that her students learned how to utilize the modern

¹¹² Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, pp. 211-213; [Tapley], "Letter to Blanche Armwood, May 8, 1918," *Blanche Armwood Washington File*. For a detailed analysis of the National Training School and its purpose see Victoria W. Wolcott, "'Bible, Bath, and Broom': Nannie Helen Burroughs's National Training School and African-American Racial Uplift," *Journal of Women's History*, 9 (Spring 1997), 88-110.

appliances and techniques that would enable them to properly perform their duties as domestic servants in Tampa's white, middle-class homes.¹¹³

From the beginning, the TGC took the Tampa School of Household Arts very seriously. Nettles required that Armwood become a member of the National Commercial Gas Association (NCGA). In order to do so, she passed an examination, in January 1916, that tested her knowledge of gas and its use as a fuel. The NCGA had Armwood "write an essay on the transformation of 'colored' cooks and housemaids into economic consumers, diagram a coal gas plant, calculate the cost of converting coal to gas and figure the percentages of gas used by various activities."¹¹⁴ Nettles also invested a large amount of the company's money in the Tampa School of Household Arts, believing that it would pay off in the long run with increased sales of gas appliances. In May 1916, Armwood received \$15,000 from the Tampa Gas Company for a new, fully furnished, cooking school and \$1,500 for operating expenses. The city of Tampa and the Hillsborough County School Board contributed \$1,500 each as well, giving Armwood \$4,500 to run the TSHA for the upcoming school year.¹¹⁵

Under Armwood's direction, the Tampa School of Household Arts offered free instruction to adult women and young girls.¹¹⁶ Mature women who labored as cooks, and housewives who "were eager to learn new dishes and methods of serving to use in their

¹¹³ Halderman, "Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation," p. 292; Durham, "Blanche Armwood: The Early Years," p. 32.

¹¹⁴ Halderman, "Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation," pp. 292, 293; Unidentified document, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 2, File 19.

¹¹⁵ [Armwood], "Letter to Miss Tapley, President of Spelman Seminary, May 3, 1916," *Blanche Armwood Washington File*.

¹¹⁶ Durham, "Blanche Armwood: The Early Years," p. 35.

homes,” were eligible to sign up for the afternoon course that met four times a week, once they obtained enrollment cards from one of Tampa’s black ministers. Through its association with the county school board, the TSHA provided morning classes, during the school term, for young girls above the seventh grade.¹¹⁷ While the TGC intended the Tampa School of Household Arts to train black cooks for its white, middle-class customers, Armwood also saw to it that housewives and young girls had the chance to participate in the program. She believed that all black women, regardless of age or economic status, should have the opportunity to learn domestic science skills, whether it was for employment purposes or for one’s own home. Aside from teaching their students how to use gas ranges, Armwood and her assistant instructor taught their pupils about food values, a balanced diet, the correct planning and serving of meals, and general competency in housekeeping. In addition, young girls had the option of taking a three-year course in cooking and sewing.¹¹⁸ The students who had perfect attendance and who satisfactorily finished their class work earned certificates of proficiency that Armwood promised would guarantee them better paying jobs. From the standpoint of the Tampa Gas Company, the TSHA was an immediate success. In its first year of operation, over two hundred women received certificates of completion.¹¹⁹

Armwood dedicated a large portion of her time promoting the Tampa School of Household Arts. She wrote several articles, that appeared in Tampa’s white and black

¹¹⁷ [Armwood], “The School of Household Arts,” *Blanche Armwood Washington File*; Unidentified document, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 2, File 22.

¹¹⁸ Hon. Michael Bilirakis, “Blanche Armwood: Tribute to the Late Blanche Armwood,” *Congressional Record*, October 2, 1984, No. 130, Part III.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*; “Teaching Useful Arts,” *Tampa Tribune*, November 21, 1915; Halderman, “Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation,” pp. 292, 294.

newspapers, discussing the significant role black cooks played in the area of domestic science, and of the need for a school of household arts to train them.¹²⁰ Furthermore, Armwood gave presentations at gas association conventions, most notably when the Southern Gas Association held its meeting in Tampa, in April 1916. She demonstrated to delegates from gas companies all across the country the economic and social benefits of establishing schools of domestic science for black women and girls in their own areas.¹²¹ The TSHA became a model for other programs. Armwood took time off from the Tampa Gas Company, usually during summer breaks, and set up similar institutions in Roanoke, Virginia; Rock Hill, South Carolina; and Athens, Georgia.¹²²

The TGC considered Blanche Armwood the ideal candidate to head the Tampa School of Household Arts for she had the educational qualifications and the teaching experience necessary to instruct black cooks on how to operate gas appliances. After graduating from Spelman Seminary, Armwood took several summer classes in home economics at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College, Columbia University, and the New York School of Social Sciences, and attended an American Red Cross course in

¹²⁰ See, for example, Blanche A[rmwood] Perkins, "Economy in the Home," *Tampa Tribune*, July 4, 1917; Blanche Armwood Perkins, "Manual Training in the Public Schools," unidentified article, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 2, File 10; B[lanche] A[rmwood] Perkins, "Mrs. B. A. Perkins' Letter," *Tampa Bulletin*, September 22, 1917, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 2, File 10.

¹²¹ [Armwood], "The School of Household Arts," *Blanche Armwood Washington File*; Milt Saul, "Tampa Sets Pace For Many Cities at Gas Meeting," *Tampa Tribune*, April 17, 1916; Armwood Perkins, "Educating Colored Cooks," *Armwood Family Papers*.

¹²² [Blanche Armwood], "Letter to Miss Tapley, President of Spelman Seminary, September 18, 1915," *Blanche Armwood Washington File*; Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood," p. 39.

social hygiene. In addition, she had spent seven years as an educator and a principal in Tampa's black public schools.¹²³

The Tampa Gas Company regarded Armwood as the perfect choice for other reasons as well. Their project, which was meant to increase company profits and assist their white, middle-class customers, required an African-American woman who knew how to maneuver between two distinct worlds. The TGC wanted someone who could convince both white, middle-class housewives as well as low-income black women that the Tampa School of Household Arts was a worthy endeavor that would benefit everyone involved. Given the racial, ethnic, and class struggles in Tampa, in the Jim Crow era, this was not an easy task. Whoever held the position of principal of the TSHA had to juggle the interests of whites and blacks, native and foreign-born, and address the needs of the middle-class and the working-class. She had to secure everyone's cooperation in running a successful school.

At a time when thousands of native-born blacks, Afro-Cubans, and foreign-born whites migrated to the city, Roger Nettles, and other members of the white establishment, wanted a "good" black woman representing the highly publicized Tampa School of Household Arts. Concerned about Tampa's image, white businessmen and politicians, such as Peter O. Knight and Donald Brenham McKay, preferred someone like Blanche Armwood, whose family had been around for several generations, to organize the TSHA. The Armwoods and the Hollomans had proven themselves as respectable African-Americans, long before the masses of poor, uneducated blacks moved to the region. In a period of constant racial, ethnic, and class tensions, elite white Tampan took a

¹²³ Clark, "Negro Women Leaders of Florida," p. 64; Durham, "Blanche Armwood: The Early Years," p. 32.

paternalistic attitude towards members of the small, black, middle-class, viewing the Armwoods and the Hollomans as reliable, hard-working, and obedient African-Americans. They favored Levin Armwood's youngest daughter because they saw her as someone who could be trusted to make a positive impression on white consumers, white delegates of the gas association conventions, and white gas company owners and managers who requested her services in cities throughout the South.¹²⁴

Meanwhile, the Tampa School of Household Arts would never have taken off without the support of the black community, especially the African-American women who worked as domestic servants in white, middle-class homes. As the head of a white-owned and financed school of household arts, Armwood had to persuade black, laboring women that the TSHA would also benefit them. Through her participation in black women's clubs, her church work, and her efforts to uplift black youth in the classroom, Armwood had proven her commitment to assisting the less fortunate. She was an established female leader whose status in the black community lent some legitimacy to the Tampa School of Household Arts among African-Americans. Having gained the respect of most black Tampan, Armwood was able to convince many of them that the TSHA was a worthwhile venture that would help black women.¹²⁵

Armwood's role as principal of the Tampa School of Household Arts was a major turning point in her long, distinguished career as an activist. Prior to her employment with the TGC, most white Tampan had never heard of Blanche Armwood for she had spent years working in the black community, seeking to uplift the race through African-

¹²⁴ Saul, "Tampa Sets Pace For Many Cities at Gas Meeting," *Tampa Tribune*, April 17, 1916; Armwood Perkins, "Educating Colored Cooks," *Armwood Family Papers*; "Teaching Useful Arts," *Tampa Tribune*, November 21, 1915.

American organizations and institutions. Armwood's job with the Tampa Gas Company changed her life forever. Her success with the TSHA made Armwood a familiar face and brought her recognition as a black leader in white Tampa. The white establishment came to see her as a representative of and a spokesperson for the city's growing black population. Over the next several years, one of Armwood's most important, yet challenging, tasks was her service as a racial diplomat, what historian Glenda Gilmore defines as a non-threatening figure who persuades paternalistic white businessmen, politicians, and clubwomen to endorse and even aid blacks in their self-help efforts.¹²⁶

In the summer of 1917, the New Orleans Gas and Light Company (NOGLC) convinced the Tampa Gas Company to release Armwood from her post as principal of the TSHA. The NOGLC had visited the schools that she had established in Tampa, Florida and in Roanoke, Virginia, and were very impressed with them. The company decided to create the largest school of domestic science for black women and girls in the South. The New Orleans Gas and Light Company offered Armwood the job of organizing and operating its new school. She accepted the challenge and soon afterward, Armwood relocated to Louisiana.¹²⁷

Prior to leaving Tampa, Armwood contacted Miss Lucy Hale Tapley, the President of Spelman Seminary, and requested her assistance in finding a replacement to head the TSHA. She explained to her that "the course of study at Spelman in the cooking school meets the approval of school authorities everywhere. The school's training in the

¹²⁵ [Armwood], "Letter to Miss Tapley, President of Spelman Seminary, September 18, 1915," *Blanche Armwood Washington File; Tampa Tribune*, April 22, 1916.

¹²⁶ Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, pp. 147-149.

¹²⁷ Halderman, "Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation," p. 296; Durham, "Blanche Armwood: The Early Years," pp. 43, 44.

dining room and dormitories makes Spelman girls qualified to run a school of household arts.”¹²⁸ Miss Tapley recruited Miss Virginia H. Brown, the daughter of Professor J. H. Brown, the President of Jerul Baptist Academy in Athens, Georgia. Miss Brown was a recent graduate of Spelman Seminary, having earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Home Economics. She took over as principal of the Tampa School of Household Arts in the fall of 1917.¹²⁹

During this time, Armwood was in Louisiana, coordinating the development of the New Orleans School of Domestic Science (NOSDS), which opened on October 15, 1917. The NOSDS followed the same format that Armwood had used in Tampa, Rock Hill, Roanoke, and Athens; however, it was on a much larger scale. Two hundred and fifty black women and five hundred black girls attended the New Orleans School of Domestic Science its first year. Armwood placed Miss Magnolia Griggs, another graduate of Spelman Seminary, in charge of the girls’ department. Like the TSHA, the New Orleans School of Domestic Science was a success, at least from the standpoint of the NOGLC and its white, middle-class customers. The NOSDS also enhanced Armwood’s reputation as a black leader beyond Tampa, Florida. Increasingly, the white establishment came to see Armwood as a diplomat for the black community, while many middle-class blacks viewed her as someone who had the ability to work with whites on behalf of African-Americans.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ [Armwood], “Letter to Miss Tapley, President of Spelman Seminary, September 18, 1915,” *Blanche Armwood Washington File*.

¹²⁹ A[rmwood] Perkins, “Mrs. B. A. Perkins’ Letter,” *Armwood Family Papers*.

¹³⁰ Durham, “Blanche Armwood: The Early Years,” p. 44; [Blanche Armwood], “Letter to Miss Tapley, President of Spelman Seminary, August 25, 1917,” *Blanche Armwood Washington File; Times-Picayune*, May 19, 1918.

Blanche Armwood's status as a black woman leader continued to grow in the years after she left Tampa. Armwood became known nationally as an authority in the field of domestic science, especially among her peers in the black women's club movement. When the United States entered World War I, in April 1917, energy and food conservation became an important part of the war effort. Armwood utilized her expertise in the area of home economics, serving as director of the dietetics courses for the black auxiliary of the Tampa Red Cross. She also gave several demonstrations on food conservation in Florida and in Louisiana. In an article for the *Tampa Morning Tribune*, on July 4, 1917, called "Economy in the Home," Armwood argued that "American housewives are permitted to show their loyalty and patriotism in the most practical manner."¹³¹ The white newspaper identified her as "Blanche A. Perkins of the Tampa Gas Co. Cooking School." The editors of the *Tampa Morning Tribune* refused Armwood the courtesy of referring to her as Mrs. Perkins, a mark of respect that white Southerners gave white women, not black women. In May 1918, Armwood published a wartime cookbook called *Food Conservation in the Home*. President Tapley loved Armwood's book so much that she purchased fifty copies to distribute to graduates of Spelman's industrial arts classes.¹³² In July 1918, Armwood attended the National Association of Colored Women's eleventh biennial convention in Denver, Colorado, where she showed off her skills in the field of domestic science. Armwood impressed everyone with her expertise during a lecture and a cooking demonstration on "Food Conservation as a War Service." The President of the NACW, Mary B. Talbert, appointed her Chair of the

¹³¹ [Armwood] Perkins, "Economy in the Home," *Tampa Tribune*, July 4, 1917; Durham, "Blanche Armwood: The Early Years," pp. 42, 43.

Home Economics Department.¹³³ Two months later, in September 1918, *Crisis*, a journal published by the NAACP, recognized Armwood for doing her part in the war effort. The magazine praised Armwood for teaching 1,200 black women about food conservation and wartime economy at the New Orleans School of Domestic Science, a project that cost the NOGLC \$12,000. *Crisis* proclaimed that “Blanche Armwood Perkins, of New Orleans, has brains, initiative, and executive ability.”¹³⁴

In July 1918, Armwood resigned from her position as principal of the NOSDS. From the beginning, Armwood had assumed that her employment with the New Orleans Gas and Light Company was temporary. Believing that Miss Griggs had done a wonderful job of handling the girls’ department, Armwood wanted her to serve as head instructor of the New Orleans School of Domestic Science once she left. Unfortunately, the NOGLC felt that Miss Griggs was unable to run the women’s section with as much success as Armwood had. Therefore, when Armwood departed, the company discontinued the adult program and donated the equipment from the school of domestic science to the local school board, allowing the New Orleans public school system to take over the young girls’ department.¹³⁵

After she left the New Orleans Gas and Light Company, the U. S. Department of Agriculture hired Armwood as a Supervisor of Home Economics for the State of

¹³² [Lucy Hale Tapley], “Letter to Blanche Armwood, May 8, 1918,” *Blanche Armwood Washington Files*; Burke, “The Success of Blanche Armwood,” p. 39.

¹³³ [Blanche Armwood], “Letter to Miss Tapley, President of Spelman Seminary, May 10, 1918,” *Blanche Armwood Washington Files*; Durham, “Blanche Armwood: The Early Years,” pp. 56, 57.

¹³⁴ “Men of the Month,” *Crisis*, September 1918, Vol. 16, No. 5, p. 235.

¹³⁵ [Blanche Armwood], “Letter to Miss Edith V. Brill, of Spelman Seminary, December 30, 1918,” *Blanche Armwood Washington File*; [Armwood] Perkins, “Mrs. B. A. Perkins’ Letter,” *Armwood Family Papers*,

Louisiana. Armwood traveled throughout the state, overseeing the work of six home demonstration agents. In February 1919, at the age of twenty-nine, Blanche Armwood married Dr. John C. Beatty of Alexandria, Louisiana. Beatty was a dentist who had graduated from Howard University Dental College. Four months after their wedding, at the end of the fiscal year, on June 30, 1919, Armwood retired from her position as Supervisor of Home Economics.¹³⁶

As with her first husband, Daniel Perkins, little is known about Armwood's relationship with John Beatty. Nevertheless, the way she chose to live her life, as a single and a married woman, reveals much about her attitude towards marriage and its place in her world. From the time Armwood graduated from Spelman Seminary, in 1906, until her first marriage, in 1913, she worked to provide for herself and her aging parents. After her marriage to Perkins was annulled, Armwood resumed laboring for pay in the public sector. Given her devotion to the African-American freedom struggle, she was fortunate, during these years, to find employment that allowed her to earn an income and serve the black community. In 1913 and 1919, Armwood resigned her posts as a school principal and a Supervisor of Home Economics, and embraced her new identity as a respectable housewife. Armwood's marriages to two professional black men meant that she could leave the labor force once she found a husband. Perkins and Beatty made enough money to allow Armwood to live a middle-class lifestyle. Her new status as a wife and a housekeeper enabled her to dedicate all her energies to racial uplift without having the burden of a full-time job. From 1919 until 1922, Armwood took on a number of projects that she believed would advance the race. She spent so much time traveling around the

¹³⁶ [Armwood] "Letter to Miss Edith V. Brill, of Spelman Seminary, December 30, 1918," *Blanche Armwood Washington File*; "Mrs. Blanche Armwood-Beatty," *Armwood Family Papers*; Burke, "The

South and the Midwest that it is likely that she saw little of Beatty. Armwood refused to allow her marriages to slow her down. She also relied upon them for middle-class respectability and financial security, two very important aspects of matrimony denied most black women in the Jim Crow South.

In the four-year period between 1919 and 1922, Blanche Armwood used her organizational skills on behalf of African-American associations. Having established the City Federation of Colored Women's Clubs in Tampa in 1915, Armwood developed several black women's clubs in Louisiana as well. She played a key part in the creation of the Louisiana Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, where she was chosen to Chair the Executive Board, and the Southeastern Federation of Colored Women's Clubs, where she was elected to the Office of Organizer. Armwood was also named State Organizer of the NAACP for Louisiana. At the local level, Armwood and Sara Mae Talbert, the daughter of Mary B. Talbert, a former president of the NACW, toured towns, in Louisiana and Texas, beginning in January 1921. As representatives of the National Association of Colored Women, they intended to build and strengthen states' black women's clubs and raised money to pay off a debt owed to Mary B. Talbert for representing the NACW at the International Council of Women in Christiana, Norway.¹³⁷

Believing that all women, regardless of race, "should have the privilege of the franchise," Armwood strongly supported the passage of the nineteenth amendment.¹³⁸

Success of Blanche Armwood," p. 40.

¹³⁷ Durham, "Blanche Armwood: The Early Years," pp. 66, 71, 74; "Blanche Armwood-Beatty," *Armwood Family Papers*; *Atlanta Independent*, June 30, 1921; Unidentified documents, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 3, File 8; [Blanche Armwood], "Letter to Miss Edith V. Brill, of Spelman Seminary, January 12, 1921," *Blanche Armwood Washington File*; Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort*, p. 163; Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood," p. 40; Otis Anthony and Marilyn T. Wade, *A Collection of Historical Facts About Black Tampa* (Tampa: Tampa Electric Company, 1974), p. 10.

Once it was ratified, in August 1920, she devoted her time to the upcoming presidential election, which was the first in which the federal government guaranteed American women the right to vote. Armwood joined the Republican Party, known as the party of Lincoln by most African-Americans of her generation, for she felt that it offered black Americans “the best solution for the many problems that confront us today.”¹³⁹ The Republican presidential nominee, Senator Warren G. Harding, appreciated that the newly enfranchised black women in the Midwest and the North were potential supporters and he sought the aid of national black women’s organizations to lobby on his behalf.¹⁴⁰ The leaders of the NACW, including Mary Talbert and Hallie Q. Brown, recommended Armwood to serve as a National Campaign Speaker for the Republican Party. For months, she traveled throughout Louisiana and Michigan, soliciting votes for Senator Warren G. Harding. She also created Republican Clubs to teach newly enfranchised black women of the need to participate in the political process. In October 1920, the Harding campaign invited Armwood to the Marion, Ohio home of Senator Harding to celebrate a Social Justice and Woman’s Day affair.¹⁴¹

In June 1922, Blanche Armwood returned temporarily to Tampa, Florida to assist in the establishment of the Tampa Urban League (TUL), an affiliate of the National Urban League, a social welfare organization that was designed to help African-Americans adjust to city life. Three months later, in September 1922, the TUL’s

¹³⁸ Blanche Armwood Perkins, “Sphere of Helpfulness,” *Armwood Family Papers*.

¹³⁹ Durham, “Blanche Armwood: The Early Years,” pp. 56, 62.

¹⁴⁰ Terborg-Penn, *African-American Women in the Struggle for the Vote*, p. 145.

¹⁴¹ Durham, “Blanche Armwood: The Early Years,” pp. 59, 60; Halderman, “Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation,” p. 297; Bilirakis, “Tribute to the Late Blanche Armwood.”

interracial board of directors appointed Armwood as its first Executive Secretary, a title she held for four years. Realizing that she was going to stay in Tampa longer than she expected, Blanche and her husband moved to the city permanently, and Beatty relocated his dental practice to Florida. In 1922, the Hillsborough County School Board also named Armwood the first Supervisor of Negro Schools, a position she occupied until 1930. During this time, Armwood tried to improve the county's black public schools, including obtaining Tampa's first accredited black high school. Finally, in the fall of 1922, Armwood became Florida's state director of the Anti-Lynching Crusade, a national movement launched by middle-class black women and led by Armwood's old friend, Mary Talbert, to disseminate information about the controversial Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, a measure before Congress that would make lynching a federal crime.¹⁴²

The year 1922 marked another phase in Armwood's long career as an activist. In the five years since she had left Tampa, Armwood's reputation as a black woman leader had grown substantially. While the national recognition that she received for her attempts to uplift the race caused resentment and jealousy among some of her peers in Tampa and in other areas of Florida, Armwood was determined to use her fame and connections to continue helping the less fortunate. For most of the 1920's, she focused her energies on the city's growing African-American population which had almost

¹⁴² Hawes, "One Woman Who Made a Difference," *Tampa Tribune*, February 26, 1983; Halderman, "Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation," pp. 297, 299; Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood," pp. 40, 41; Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, "African-American Women's Networks in the Anti-Lynching Crusade," in *Gender, Class, Race, and Reform in the Progressive Era*, eds. Noralee Frankel and Nancy S. Dye (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991), pp. 157, 158; "Armwood-Director of Anti-Lynching Crusades," unidentified stationary, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 2, File 18; Durham, "Blanche Armwood: The Early Years," p. 78.

doubled from 11,533 in 1920 to 21,172 in 1930.¹⁴³ Once again, Armwood cooperated with Tampa's white business leaders, politicians, and clubwomen. She sought their endorsement and even their assistance on a number of social welfare projects that ameliorated the living and working conditions of blacks in the region.

Scholars who have examined Armwood's list of accomplishments view her association with the Tampa Gas Company and its school of household arts as a defining moment of her career. However, many of them rely upon a conventional interpretation of Tampa history and a narrow understanding of black activism to explain the significance of her involvement with the TGC. Focusing on Armwood's larger-than-life public persona, local historians, in recounting her achievements, begin with Armwood's academic attainments at St. Peter Claver's Catholic School and Spelman Seminary, to demonstrate that she exhibited signs of greatness even as a child. They then move ahead to the period when the Tampa Gas Company hired Armwood and discuss her success at running the Tampa School of Household Arts. For the most part, scholars overlook the period between 1906 and 1914, stating only that that Armwood worked for seven years as an educator in Tampa's black public schools. With little information about Blanche's private relationships, they make brief note of her marriage to Daniel Perkins in 1913, and depict the eight years before Armwood's employment with the TGC as an uneventful period in her life. They portray her organization of the TSHA as the catalyst that launched her brilliant career.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Edward D. Davis, *A Half Century of Struggle for Freedom in Florida* (Orlando, FL: Drake's Publishing, 1981), p. 10; "Let's Work Together for Worthy Cause Laying Aside Petty Jealousies," unidentified article, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 2, File 18; Unidentified Documents, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 3, File 9.

¹⁴⁴ See, for example, Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood"; Clark, "Negro Women Leaders of Florida"; Jones and McCarthy, *African-American in Florida*.

John Durham and Keith Halderman, in particular, assume that Armwood's activism began in late 1914 when Tampa's white establishment "discovered" her.¹⁴⁵ Although, in reality, she had already spent several years serving the African-American community, to most whites, it would seem that Armwood appeared from out of nowhere to head the Tampa School of Household Arts. Her cooperation with the Tampa Gas Company brought Armwood to the attention of those who traditionally held power in Southern society, namely the city's elite white men. Once Tampa's white business and political leaders saw Armwood as a representative of the black population, she became important enough to be included in their interpretation of history.

Unfortunately, historians have followed a similar path. By presuming that Armwood's career started in late 1914, they ignore eight years of her life as a leader in Tampa and Knoxville's African-American communities. In the process, the scholars neglect the internal forces that defined Armwood's worldview. They also fail to appreciate her devotion to the African-American freedom struggle long before white Tampanians took notice of her. Downplaying her activities from 1906 to 1914, historians do not have a past to build upon to explain her new role as a racial diplomat, at least not from Armwood's point of view. Without laying the foundation necessary to comprehend Armwood's future accomplishments, they are left with the difficult task of trying to understand her decision to work for the Tampa Gas Company.

In addition, scholars' reliance upon the accommodation versus protest paradigm has influenced their efforts to make sense of Armwood's racial philosophy. Most historians today have moved beyond this narrow conceptual framework. They have

¹⁴⁵ Durham, "Blanche Armwood: The Early Years"; Halderman, "Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation."

broadened our understanding of black history and activism by exploring the gender and class components of the African-American freedom struggle.¹⁴⁶ However, those who have written about Armwood's various activities continue to use the Washington-Du Bois debate as a model to interpret her approach to the black freedom movement. Many scholars believe that because Armwood was a contemporary of both Washington and Du Bois, their public dispute over the most appropriate means to achieve racial equality affected her thinking as a black leader. The race-centered paradigm forces historians to define Armwood's actions in terms of a monolithic fight against racism. As a result, they do not take into account the significant role gender and class played in shaping her racial beliefs.

Durham and Halderman's examinations of Armwood's career reveal the impact that a narrow view of black activism and a white-centered perception of Tampa history have had on their understanding of Armwood's ideology. Beginning with her organization of the Tampa School of Household Arts, and then outlining her later involvement with the New Orleans School of Domestic Science and the Tampa Urban League, Durham and Halderman argue that Blanche Armwood was an accommodationist. They maintain that Armwood's efforts to train black women to be better domestic servants, her emphasis on industrial education and social welfare work, her collaboration with the white establishment, and her middle-class views reveal the conservative nature of her racial philosophy. Durham and Halderman contend that, starting with her association with the Tampa Gas Company and its school of household arts, Armwood

¹⁴⁶ See, for example, Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; Stephanie Shaw, *What A Woman Ought to Be and to Do*; Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*; White, *Too Heavy A Load*.

exhibited a willingness to accommodate to elite whites throughout her career. They imply that Armwood accepted the South's racial caste system and, like Washington, she chose to work within its limits, rather than challenge the status quo and demand racial equality, as put forth by Du Bois. By relying on race as the category of analysis, and by focusing on the victimization of African-Americans in the Jim Crow South, Durham and Halderman claim that she gave up the fight for freedom and equality.¹⁴⁷

To a degree, Durham and Halderman are correct: there were certain periods in her life, including her work for the Tampa Gas Company, when Armwood adopted a conservative strategy in her attempts to uplift the race. However, there were also times in Armwood's career when she protested the inferior status of African-Americans in the early twentieth-century. In an era when white Southerners legalized segregation, disenfranchised most black men, and terrorized African-Americans with violence, Armwood dedicated herself to a number of projects that contested the South's racial system. For example, Armwood's membership in the NAACP speaks volumes about her racial philosophy. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was set up by Du Bois in 1909 to legally challenge racial discrimination. If Armwood had abandoned the African-American freedom struggle, as suggested by Durham and Halderman, it would have made no sense for her to join the civil rights organization, nor would she have supported black female suffrage or opposed lynching. Armwood's stance on these important African-American issues counters the assumptions that Durham

¹⁴⁷ Durham, "Blanche Armwood: The Early Years," pp. iv, 22; Halderman, "Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation," pp. 288, 289.

and Halderman have made about her activism. Many of Armwood's activities demonstrate her repudiation of the white supremacist ideology of the Jim Crow South.

Nevertheless, how does one define Armwood's contradictory behavior? How could she participate in projects that, on the one hand, reinforced the status quo, and on the other, subverted it? Most scholars, who have examined Armwood's career, have been unable to come up with a satisfactory answer. Some stress the conservative aspect of her racial philosophy and ignore the rest, while others take the opposite approach and portray her as a rebel.¹⁴⁸ The accommodation versus protest paradigm has influenced how all these people understand Armwood's diverse actions. The dichotomous nature of the argument limits their ability to make sense of her behavior. The conceptual framework forces them to place Armwood in one category or another: she had to be an accommodationist or a protester. There is no room for the possibility that Armwood could have embraced both strategies at various times throughout her long career.

The paradoxical character of Armwood's racial ideology indicates that she did not see her own career from the same standpoint as many of the scholars who have written about her. Most historians who have examined Armwood's accomplishments consider her conservative leanings as proof that she accepted the South's racial system that barred African-Americans from first-class citizenship. They interpret her involvement with the TSHA, the NOSDS, and the TUL, her efforts to cooperate with elite whites, and her middle-class worldview, including her emphasis on an ideal notion of womanhood, as evidence of her accommodation to the white system that rejected African-Americans. Armwood's varied activities reveal that she made a distinction between white, middle-

class America and the South's racial system. Part of the first generations of African-Americans, who had never experienced slavery, Blanche Armwood believed in the goodness of America, its institutions, and its guiding principles. Her parents, having endured human bondage, wanted their daughter to have the opportunity to live the American dream. However, because of her race, the white, middle-class always regarded her as an outsider. No matter what Armwood achieved, she was still a black woman in a racist society. Her desire to be treated as a respectable middle-class woman did not imply that she understood mainstream America in white terms. Nor did her conservative leanings suggest that she wanted to be like a white woman. Armwood's faith in America was not an accommodation to the Jim Crow South. Rather, many of her actions illustrate her objection to the second-class status that white America imposed on African-Americans.

When Nettles offered Armwood employment with the Tampa Gas Company, she was under no obligation to suggest to him that a school of household arts was the most effective means of teaching black cooks about gas ranges. If all Armwood wanted was a job that allowed her to earn an income, she could have accepted the position of demonstrator for the TGC. Instead, Armwood saw the dilemma that the Tampa Gas Company had with black cooks as an issue that could be used to do something beneficial for poor African-American women in Tampa. She took advantage of the opportunity to

¹⁴⁸ Clark, "Negro Women Leaders of Florida," p. 63. Historian Maxine D. Jones also portrays Armwood as a rebel in her analysis of black women in Florida. See Jones, "No Longer Denied: Black Women in Florida, 1920-1950," pp. 240-267.

organize a school of domestic science for black women and girls, when a situation arose that made such an undertaking feasible.¹⁴⁹

To guarantee the success of the TSHA, Armwood presented the school as a community-wide project that benefited everyone involved. Aside from gaining the cooperation of the Tampa Gas Company, Armwood sought the collaboration of the city's black male leaders, through the Colored Ministers' Alliance. She gave them the responsibility of distributing enrollment cards to black women in their congregations who showed an interest in attending the Tampa School of Household Arts.¹⁵⁰ Armwood realized that the black ministers' participation brought respectability to the TSHA. By acquiring the approval of the "better class," Armwood assured the status of the Tampa School of Household Arts within the African-American community, making certain that it was not dismissed as a "white" endeavor. Her inclusion of the black male leaders also ensured that they were not alienated or threatened by a black woman taking control of such an important undertaking. The black elite demonstrated its recognition and approval of Armwood's achievement with the Tampa School of Household Arts in April 1916. Days after she gave a presentation at the Southern Gas Association meeting, "more than 500 of the most representative negroes of the community assembled to pay homage to Blanche Armwood Perkins and the great good she is accomplishing for the race." They

¹⁴⁹ Historian Beverly Guy-Sheftall discusses Armwood's exploration of a project that she knew elite whites would support. See Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Daughters of Sorrow: Attitudes Towards Black Women, 1880-1920* (Brooklyn, New York: Carlson Publishing, 1990), pp. 153-155.

¹⁵⁰ Unidentified documents, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 2, File 10; Blanche Armwood Perkins, "Letter to Ministers," *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 2, File 10.

held “A Citizens’ Complimentary Reception” at the Odd Fellow’s Hall in honor of her work with the TSHA.¹⁵¹

Armwood also saw to it that the Tampa Gas Company sent out letters to white housewives throughout the city, notifying them of the purpose behind the Tampa School of Household Arts. The TGC informed its white middle-class customers that the school intended to provide them with a more efficient workforce. Armwood made sure that the white women who hired domestic servants had something to gain from their employees enrolling in the TSHA’s program. She wanted them to encourage the black cooks and housemaids to sign up for the adult courses offered at the Tampa School of Household Arts.¹⁵² Although many black, working-class women resented their employers’ interference in their lives, insisting they join the TSHA, Armwood used the strategy to secure the assistance of elite whites.

To convince various people to endorse the Tampa School of Household Arts, Armwood was forced to appeal to a white and a black audience. To Nettles, the delegates of gas association conventions, and the white establishment, Armwood went out of her way to promote the TSHA in a non-threatening manner. The white description of Armwood as a “feminine Booker T. Washington” reveals a great deal about how whites perceived her. Armwood presented herself as very grateful to white generosity for funding the Tampa School of Household Arts. She carefully prepared her speeches and writings, playing on white nostalgia for an imagined Old South, conjuring up the image of the loyal and devoted Mammy and proclaiming that black women were eager to continue the tradition of serving white Southerners; they simply needed more advanced

¹⁵¹ *Tampa Tribune*, April 22, 1916.

instruction.¹⁵³ In addition, Armwood used traditional rhetoric about black and white women's places in society to sell elite whites on the idea that it was a profitable investment to spend their money on vocational schools for black women and girls. She argued that

as the white girl of the South learns more and more of what it takes to make *real* perfection in home-life, it becomes imperatively necessary that the colored girl to whom she entrusts so much, work arduously to keep apace with the progressive trend of the *age*, and become proficient in domestic service. Development in Southern home-life must be similar [for] white and colored, since one is dependent upon the other, the one for employment as a means of earning a livelihood, the other for service.¹⁵⁴

Armwood repeatedly emphasized, to her white audience, that black women who received certificates of proficiency from the Tampa School of Household Arts were qualified to do a far better job working for them than were ignorant, inefficient black women who had no training whatsoever. She stressed to the white community that the goal of the TSHA was to make black women more efficient domestic servants. However, Armwood had a hidden agenda. She highlighted the need to educate black women in the field of domestic science, not only to assist white, middle-class consumers, and gas company owners, but primarily as a means to improve race relations between blacks and whites in the South.

She argued that

the housewife in the South trusts her household affairs to her domestic servant. If the servant is well trained and efficient, and does her work conscientiously and well, a relation of confidence grows up between the white employer and her colored servants, which develops into love. This cannot but result in a higher respect for the colored servant and the colored race. This is a feeling that we are all striving to develop.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² "Letter to Housewives," *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 2, File 6.

¹⁵³ [Armwood], "The School of Household Arts," *Blanche Armwood Washington File*; Saul, "Tampa Sets Pace for Many Cities at Gas Meeting," *Tampa Tribune*, April 17, 1916; Armwood Perkins, "Educating Colored Cooks," *Armwood Family Papers*.

¹⁵⁴ [Armwood], "The School of Household Arts," *Blanche Armwood Washington File*.

¹⁵⁵ *Tampa Times*, April 6, 1916.

Armwood believed that a well-trained black servant made a far better impression on white employers who held negative attitudes about African-Americans in general, than did an incompetent, lazy domestic who confirmed white stereotypes of black women.¹⁵⁶

Although Armwood downplayed, to her white audience, the fact that black housewives attended the TSHA as well, she included them in her program from the beginning. Armwood realized that “their presence lent a peculiar dignity to the training that impressed and attracted the timid servant girl who would have looked distastefully upon an institution for working girls only.”¹⁵⁷ Secondly, she viewed the Tampa School of Household Arts as an opportunity “to help the girls and women of her race to know more about their chief profession ‘home-making.’”¹⁵⁸ Armwood lived in an era when, according to historian Jacqueline Jones, white Southerners exempted black women “from the middle-class ideal of full-time domesticity” and expected them to labor as domestic servants for white people.¹⁵⁹ Armwood wanted the TSHA to teach black women, young and old, homemakers and laborers, about domestic science skills so that, like white women, they too could be competent housewives who knew how to efficiently run their own homes.

Despite the aggravation of having to deal with white influence and interference in managing a school of household arts for black women and girls, Armwood chose to cooperate with the Tampa Gas Company to establish the TSHA. Having lived in Tampa

¹⁵⁶ [Armwood], “The School of Household Arts,” *Blanche Armwood Washington File*.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ “Mrs. Blanche Armwood-Beatty,” *Armwood Family Papers*.

¹⁵⁹ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family From Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), p. 45.

most of her life, she witnessed firsthand the amazing growth the city experienced since the late nineteenth-century, especially within the black community. In 1880, African-Americans made up 38 percent of Tampa's 720 inhabitants. When Armwood was born in 1890, approximately 1,600 black people resided in the city; in 1900, it had increased to 4,382; in 1910, the number more than doubled to 8,951. By 1920, the black populace had grown to 11,533. During these years, thousands of rural African-Americans from Florida, Georgia, Alabama, and the Carolinas who worked as agricultural laborers migrated to Tampa in search of better employment opportunities. Although the number of blacks increased substantially, their proportion to the city's total population steadily decreased to 22 percent by 1920.¹⁶⁰ Armwood also served as a teacher and a principal in Tampa's black public schools for seven years. She understood that the growing number of black women and girls arriving in the city had limited educational and economic opportunities available to them. Tampa did not have an accredited black high school, and most black girls, whose families had recently migrated to the region could never afford to attend a private institution like Spelman Seminary. Armwood realized that young black girls were fortunate to get a primary education, for economic conditions at home often forced many of them to leave school at an early age to find work to support their families. Poor and uneducated, they were confined to menial, low paying jobs that kept them subordinate to the white community. The vast majority black women and girls in Tampa labored as domestics, laundresses, and agricultural workers. In such a bleak world, Armwood viewed the Tampa School of Household Arts as a chance to provide the

¹⁶⁰ Arthur Raper, J. H. McGrew, and B. E. Mays, "A Study of Negro Life in Tampa," Tampa, 1927, pp. 2, 3, 4; Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes in the New South*, p. 27; Davis, *A Half Century of Struggle for Freedom in Florida*, p. 10; Mormino and Pozzetta, *Tampa: The Treasure City*, p. 163; Jones, "No Longer Denied," pp. 240-243.

masses of black women and girls with an education. She appreciated that most black women had to work to help their families make ends meet. Several times in her own life, Armwood had to do the same. She felt that manual training in the domestic sciences gave poor African-American women in Tampa the skills to improve their financial circumstances.¹⁶¹

In organizing the TSHA, Armwood procured the support of the Hillsborough County School Board to add to the legitimacy of the school as an educational institution. She wanted young black girls above the seventh grade to enroll in the Tampa School of Household Arts and receive high school credit for their participation. During this time, the only other alternative for older students who sought more than a primary education was to take upper level courses at Lomax, an overcrowded black elementary school. By securing the cooperation of the Hillsborough County School Board, Armwood incorporated what she could of the TSHA into the black public school system in Tampa. In May 1917, there were twenty-five high school graduates of the Tampa School of Household Arts, four of whom were also part of the five graduates of Lomax School. Thirty-four adult women completed the program of study offered by the TSHA as well.¹⁶²

In spite of Armwood's elite status within the black community, she was still an African-American woman in the Jim Crow South. Armwood shared with the women and young girls she sought to help common bonds of racial and gender discrimination. She rarely received the courtesy of being called Mrs. Perkins by white Tampanans; she abided by the rules of segregation; and she was limited in what she could do to assist African-

¹⁶¹ "Mrs. Blanche Armwood-Beatty," *Armwood Family Papers*; Armwood Perkins, "Manual Training in the Public Schools," *Armwood Family Papers*; Jones, "No Longer Denied: Black Women in Florida, 1920-1950," pp. 240-267.

American women in the Jim Crow South. Within the context of white Tampa, Armwood was virtually powerless to attack the larger forces in society that confined black women to the lowest rung of the social and economic ladder. She therefore focused her energies on ameliorating the plight of young black women who moved to the city, giving them a chance to survive in a harsh world. Armwood taught the black women and girls who attended the THSA more than domestic science skills; she trained them to be active community leaders. Armwood encouraged the development of positive identities for black women that challenged the negative and degrading stereotypes that white America perpetuated. She understood that when young women moved to Tampa, they were strangers in an unfamiliar city, with few options open to them. The graduates of the Tampa School of Household Arts formed their own clubs for working girls, such as the City Beautiful League, where members “devoted [their] meetings to the study and discussion of plans for beautifying [their] home, church, and school property.” More importantly, the organization “[served] as a social medium thus which the strange working-girl coming to the city may find respectable associations.” The City Beautiful League became a member of the Florida Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs.¹⁶³ In 1917, the *Tampa Bulletin*, the city’s black newspaper, reported that

in a response to a call issued by the principal of the School of Household Arts a number of women met at the Odd Fellow’s Hall last Sunday afternoon for the purpose of effecting an organization by means of which the certificate holders of that institution may keep in touch with each other for the purposes of mutual helpfulness. . . . A Y.W.C.A. can render valuable service in our city where no organization devotes its time to the interests of the working girls who constantly come hither and need direction into proper social channels and otherwise.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Durham, “Blanche Armwood: The Early Years,” pp. 40, 41.

¹⁶³ [Armwood], “The School of Household Arts,” *Blanche Armwood Washington File*.

¹⁶⁴ *Tampa Bulletin*, January. 20, 1917.

At a time when white society generally ignored poor black women and took little interest in their welfare, Armwood used the Tampa School of Household Arts as a vehicle to get them on their feet and as a tool to show them how to look out for one another.¹⁶⁵

For scholars such as Durham and Halderman, it appears that Armwood's efforts to organize the Tampa School of Household Arts hardly challenged the South's racial caste system. Despite the success of the TSHA, African-American women were still domestic servants. It could also be argued that Armwood contributed to their confinement to a lowly form of employment by encouraging the women to become better servants. However, as a middle-class black woman, Armwood attached an alternative meaning to the Tampa School of Household Arts. She saw it as the perfect opportunity to advance the race towards freedom and equality in American society. To understand how Armwood interpreted the goal of the TSHA from such a point of view, one must appreciate the importance of respectability for elite black women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Blanche Armwood's gender and class shaped her approach to the African-American freedom movement. Armwood adhered to the manners and morals of mainstream America, particularly its ideal notion of womanhood. She felt that women held a revered place in society for as wives and mothers they had the ability to mold the minds, souls, and morals of future American leaders. Armwood embraced the essentialist view that females possessed innate qualities, like nurturance, that made them better suited than men in addressing the many social problems of the day. Blanche Armwood grew up

¹⁶⁵ For an in depth examination of middle-class black women activists efforts to establish institutions that were meant to save young black working women from poverty and prostitution in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries see Darlene Clark Hine, "'We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible': The

during the “woman’s era,” a forty-year period, prior to the passage of the women’s suffrage amendment, when many upper and middle-class white and black women created a space for themselves in the public sphere through voluntary organizations. The clubwomen utilized their power as women to increase and validate their roles outside of the home.¹⁶⁶ Armwood felt that African-American women, given their moral superiority and their significant roles as wives and mothers, were especially qualified to take the lead in uplifting the race, whether it was in the home or through community work.

Upper and middle-class black and white women shared a common belief that women held an elevated status in society and made use of similar voluntary organizations to expand their active participation in the public arena. Yet, white supremacists in the Jim Crow South understood femininity in racial terms, excluding African-American women from their definition of womanhood. Most white Southerners associated black women with Jezebel and Mammy stereotypes. They looked down upon African-American womanhood viewing it as the exact opposite of white womanhood.¹⁶⁷ A Southern white woman wrote an article for a northern journal called *Independent* in 1904 expressing such views:

Degeneracy is apt to show in the weaker individuals of any race; so negro women evidence more nearly the popular ideal of total depravity than the men do They are the greatest menace possible to the moral life of any community where they live. And they are evidently the chief instruments of the degradation of the men of their own race. When a man’s mother, wife, and daughters are all immoral women, there is no room in his fallen nature for the aspiration of honor and virtue. . . . I sometimes read of virtuous

Philanthropic Work of Black Women,” in *Lady Bountiful Revisited: Women, Philanthropy, and Power*, ed. Kathleen D. McCarthy (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 70-93.

¹⁶⁶ For more information on the “woman’s era” see Sims, *The Power of Femininity in the New South*; White, *Too Heavy A Load*; Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*.

¹⁶⁷ Sims, *The Power of Femininity in the New South*, pp. 38, 39, 52, 53.

negro women, hear of them, but the idea is absolutely inconceivable to me. . . . I cannot imagine such a creation as a virtuous black woman.¹⁶⁸

While elite white women used their influence as women to justify their expanding roles in the public arena, African-American women had to convince whites that they too were ladies who deserved the same respect that society accorded their white counterparts. Middle-class black women fought hard to gain the right to utilize their power of femininity. Loosing confidence in black men, many elite African-American women felt that they had to protect black womanhood themselves. They formed organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women, which became African-American women's principal vehicle for race leadership. For them, defending black womanhood became a means to challenge the South's racial system.¹⁶⁹

Armwood realized that all black women had to behave in a respectable manner to refute the South's derogatory stereotypes. She understood that white Southerners did not distinguish between black women and that, despite her accomplishments as an activist and her privileged status within the black community, she still shared a common bond of racial and gender discrimination with working-class black women. While Armwood spent much of her time trying to differentiate herself from the masses, she also sought to convince working-class African-American women to embrace white, middle-class standards of feminine behavior. Armwood encouraged the thousands of poor, uneducated, black women who settled in Tampa to conduct themselves in a dignified

¹⁶⁸ "Experiences of the Race Problem. By A Southern White Woman," cited in Anne Firor Scott, "Most Invisible of All: Black Women's Voluntary Associations," *The Journal of Southern History*, 56 (February 1990), 10.

¹⁶⁹ Sims, *The Power of Femininity in the New South*, pp. 38, 39, 52, 53; White, *Too Heavy A Load*, pp. 24, 26, 36, 42.

manner. She did not want them to live up to the Jezebel and Mammy stereotypes of African-American women that bolstered white notion of black female inferiority. And of course, given her class leanings, Armwood felt that only those who conformed to the values of the dominant society and who had proved their worthiness deserved the respect of white America.¹⁷⁰

Armwood envisioned the Tampa School of Household Arts as an opportunity to contest the white South's perception of black women. The working-class black women who completed the TSHA's program received certificates of proficiency that demonstrated to the world that they were skilled laborers. The Tampa School of Household Arts, like the National Training School, offered many the chance to rise above the negative stereotypes by professionalizing domestic work. Instead of being perceived as incompetent people confined to menial employment, the graduates of the TSHA were educated workers who knew how to "conduct the affairs of the home in an orderly, wholesome, and economical way."¹⁷¹ Through her efforts, Armwood sought to gain poor black women respectability.

Armwood's writing also reveals her opposition to mainstream America's derogatory representations of black women. In the 1910's, Armwood wrote an article titled "Women's Sphere of Helpfulness." She argued that women played an important role in society for they had the "power to mold and shape the souls" of those who would one day "become our leaders, statesmen, legislatures, kings, and presidents" through the

¹⁷⁰ For an analysis of gender and class conflicts within the black community see White, *Too Heavy A Load*.

¹⁷¹ Armwood Perkins, "Educating Colored Cook," *Armwood Family Papers*; Halderman, "Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation," p. 294; Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, pp. 212, 213. Also see Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort*, p. 166.

church, the school, the home, and hopefully soon the vote. She then concluded that this noble duty elevated women to a high status of respectability.¹⁷² The assimilationist tone of Armwood's article hardly seems threatening. On the surface, it did not sound like she was challenging the South's racial system by encouraging black women to adopt white, middle-class values. However, it must be remembered that Armwood directed her article to a segment of the American population that faced discrimination, negative stereotypes, and inferior living conditions on a daily basis. In a world that associated black women with Mammy and Jezebel stereotypes, Armwood offered them an alternative image. She gave black men and women a new positive depiction of African-American women.¹⁷³ Her non-threatening article, like her involvement with the TSHA, contradicted white people's view of black women. Armwood's racial uplift work subtly undermined the racial status quo. She used the rhetoric and ideas of mainstream America to her advantage. Armwood manipulated the middle-class ideal notion of womanhood in a manner that benefited black women. It was a very covert form of protest. Armwood also disputed the social Darwinist theory that blacks were biologically inferior to whites. As Higginbotham argues, black women activists understood respectability "as a weapon against such assumptions since it exposed race relations as socially constructed rather than derived by evolutionary law or judgement." Armwood's emphasis on respectability showed African-American women that they were not biologically confined to the second-

¹⁷² Armwood Perkins, "Sphere of Helpfulness," *Armwood Family Papers*.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*; Hawes, "One Person Who Made a Difference," *Tampa Tribune*, February 26, 1983; Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, pp. 188-191; For an examination of Western popular culture's depiction of black men and women throughout the twentieth-century see Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 154, 155, 178.

class status that white Southerners assigned them.¹⁷⁴ Like the Armwood family, they too could move away from poverty and illiteracy to become respected, middle-class Americans.

Armwood's writings, like her association with the Tampa School of Household Arts, reveal the ambiguous place she held in society as a middle-class black woman. As hard as Armwood worked to uplift all black women, she also wanted to distinguish herself from the masses of poor, uneducated African-American women who migrated to Tampa. While Armwood constructed an alternative image of black womanhood, she never truly denounced the disparaging stereotypes of black women in white America for she needed them to function as the "other" from which she differentiated herself.

Historian Kevin Gaines describes the dilemma that middle-class blacks faced in the Jim Crow South. He explains that

black opinion makers occasionally embraced minstrel representations stressing culturally backward, or morally suspect blacks as evidence of their own class superiority While the ideology of a "better class" of blacks challenged dehumanizing stereotypes, it also exploited them, and could never fully escape them The middle-class character of the emphasis on positive representation of educated, assimilated blacks of sterling character was interdependent on the image of the so-called primitive, morally deficient lower classes Black elites tried to gain recognition of *their* humanity by ranking themselves at the top of the evolutionary hierarchy within the race based on bourgeois morality.¹⁷⁵

Armwood's status as a member of the black elite meant that she directed her writings to two groups of people. On the one hand, she focused on African-American women, encouraging them to behave according to white, middle-class manners and morals. Armwood argued that they should not provide ammunition to those who

¹⁷⁴ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, p. 192.

¹⁷⁵ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, pp. 74, 75. Also see Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort*, pp. 163-169.

criticized black women.¹⁷⁶ At the same time, Armwood addressed the white community in an attempt to demonstrate that not all black women conducted themselves in an inappropriate manner. She wanted to prove to the white establishment that there was a “better class” of African-American women who represented black progress. Therefore, while she tried to uplift the race, Armwood also wished to gain the respect of white America. She had the same two goals in mind as she organized and promoted the Tampa School of Household Arts. Armwood considered the TSHA the ideal opportunity to professionalize domestic servitude and to educate black women about their special roles in society so that they too would embrace white middle-class standards of respectability. Simultaneously, she used the school to earn the esteem of white Americans, showing them that there were black women out there who had moved beyond the stereotypes and that they deserved the reverence of white Southerners. Unfortunately, such an approach placed an enormous amount of responsibility for change on black women, and not on the white people who held negative attitudes about them.

Armwood’s association with the Tampa School of Household Arts had other important racial implications. Her efforts to professionalize domestic work enabled many black women to create an emotional space for themselves that allowed them to deal with the fear of rape. To appreciate black women’s concerns about sexual assault, one must understand the South’s racial caste system. Social variables such as race, gender, and class intertwined in the Jim Crow era, shaping people’s lives. Armwood grew up in a patriarchal and a white supremacist society where elite white men held social, economic, and political power over black men, and white and black women. Upper and middle-

class white women paid a price for their revered status in the South. White men placed them on a pedestal, promising to protect them from black male rapists. White women accepted the role as victim, and, consequently, they were helpless, despite the elevated place they held as Southern ladies. They were also complacent in a social structure that used them to justify the denial of basic citizenship rights for black men. Viewing African-American males as a potential threat, elite white men utilized various tactics, such as disfranchisement, segregation, and lynching, to strip them of their rights. Terrifying most Southern white women, they portrayed black men as sexual predators who attacked white women without a moment's hesitation. As defenders of white womanhood, white men argued that it was their responsibility to make sure that black men remained powerless. The white supremacist South based its social structure on white and black male competition, with white women being the prize. Elite white men historically had sexually assaulted black women with impunity. African-American men did not have the legal resources to protect their own women. Although they portrayed black men as sex-crazed rapists, in reality, white men had a long history, going back to slavery, of sexually violating black women. Armwood lived in a world where white men used lynching and rape as strategies to terrorize and keep black men, and white and black women, in their places.¹⁷⁷

African-American women who worked as domestic servants confronted the possibility of rape in the homes of their white male employers. In a society that demonized black female sexuality, black women were often defenseless to protect

¹⁷⁶ See also [Blanche Armwood Perkins], "Shall the American Woman Adopt Late Paris Models," *Armwood Family Papers*.

themselves from such abuse. Yet, historian Darlene Hine Clark argues that African-American women developed a culture of dissemblance “that created the appearance of disclosure, or openness about themselves and their feelings, while remaining enigmatic” in order to protect the sanctity of their inner lives from race, gender, and class oppression. According to Hine, dissemblance allowed them to “acquire the psychic space” and collect the “resources need to hold their own” in their struggles against oppression, including their fear of rape.¹⁷⁸

The effort to professionalize domestic science built upon the culture of dissemblance. Armwood was an expert when it came to dealing with white Southerners. She utilized a public persona that enabled her to interact with the white establishment. Her school provided black working women the chance to create a mental and physical space for themselves in a harsh environment. By playing the part of a professional employee, black women distanced themselves from the Jezebel representations of African-American women and the possibility of rape that such stereotypes perpetuated offering them the emotional reserves to deal with such situations when they arose.

As conservative as Armwood’s work with the Tampa School Household Arts appears to be to scholars like Durham and Halderman, there were some people in Tampa who found her activities threatening. In 1914, while organizing the TSHA, Armwood

¹⁷⁷ For an in-depth analysis of the South’s social structure see Sims, *The Power of Femininity in the New South*, pp. 38-40.

¹⁷⁸ Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women,” p. 41; For a detailed examination of rape as a form of female terrorism in the South and of middle-class black women’s efforts to help poor black women within the context of such a world see Jacqueline Dowd Hall, “‘The Mind That Burns in Each Body’: Women, Rape, and Racial Violence,” in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), pp. 328-349; Hine, “‘We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible,’” pp. 70-93.

received several anonymous death threats.¹⁷⁹ From the accommodation perspective, it seems surprising that a well-respected African-American woman who received high praises from many of Tampa's leading white businessmen and politicians faced such danger. On the surface, a school of household arts hardly challenged the city's racial system and Armwood even had the cooperation of the Tampa Gas Company. Yet some white Tampans realized that the TSHA gave black women the opportunity to step out of their "place" in the South. After all, educating African-American women put them on the same level as many non-elite white people. As Gaines argues, "to publicly present one's self . . . not as a field hand, but as successful, dignified, and neatly attired, constituted a transgressive refusal to occupy the subordinate status prescribed for African-American men and women."¹⁸⁰ Very little is known about the death threats. Aside from Armwood mentioning them, there are no details as to who made them or why. However, given the world she inhabited, one can speculate on the possible motivations behind them. Perhaps, lower-class whites resented that elite whites spent thousands of dollars for lowly black women, who, in their minds, did not deserve the attention or the school. Maybe, working-class whites, whose race elevated them to a higher rank than their black counterparts, felt threatened by the promotion of black women as "professional" domestic servants. While middle-class, white Tampans found Armwood's attempts to educate black women about domestic science skills beneficial, non-elite whites realized that her actions undermined their place in Southern society. Their reaction to Armwood's organization of the Tampa School of Household Arts indicated that, despite the

¹⁷⁹ Blanche Armwood Washington, "Mrs. Blanche Armwood Washington Writes," *Tampa Tribune*, November 18, 1933.

conservative nature of her activities, her efforts to uplift black, laboring women had the power to stir things up in Tampa.

Since most working-class black women did not leave written information about their experiences, it is difficult to determine if the schools of domestic science actually improved conditions or wages for black domestic workers. It is also hard to assess their views of the Tampa School of Household Arts and its goal of making black women better servants. Certainly, many who labored in white, middle-class homes may have used their ignorance about gas appliances as a form of resistance. As Jones argues, “gas and electric appliances could work miracles if used properly, but offered the resentful domestic the opportunity to wreak havoc on the employers’ pocketbook and nerves.”¹⁸¹ Obviously, enough African-American women attended to make the school a success. Over two hundred black women enrolled in the Tampa School of Household Arts its first year alone. They could have joined the TSHA for various reasons; some may have believed in Armwood’s rhetoric and wanted to improve themselves. Others may have been intrigued that for the first time in Tampa’s history, elite whites were willing to spend a large sum of money on them and they may have decided to take advantage of it.¹⁸² Whatever their motivations may have been, it is clear that not all working-class black women supported Armwood’s schools. While she was principal of the New Orleans School of Domestic Science, Armwood became involved in a dispute between African-American women domestic servants and their white middle-class employers. A

¹⁸⁰ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, p. 53. For an examination of white attitudes towards black progress see Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*.

¹⁸¹ Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow*, p. 165.

¹⁸² Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort*, pp. 165-167.

number of black women who labored as cooks, nurses, and housemaids formed a union in 1918. Deciding to take control of their work situations, they demanded a minimum salary of twenty-five dollars a month, a limit on their working hours, from eight in the morning to seven in the evening, and strictly defined duties that fell within specified job descriptions. The white housewives resisted the stipulations and threatened to do without the servants. “The rumor spread, and was publicized by the housewives, that the union, in order to increase its membership and thus its bargaining leverage, was threatening to give beatings to domestic servants who would not join the union.”¹⁸³ The *New Orleans Times-Picayune* claimed that Armwood had joined the opposition to the union:

Mrs. Blanche Perkins, head of the New Orleans School of Domestic Science . . . does “not approve of the union” for cooks. She says none of the cooks at the school have indicated interest in the union. Mrs. Perkins says education and more efficiency is the “better” way to more wages for servants.¹⁸⁴

Two days later, the *Times-Picayune* published another piece that clarified Armwood’s stance on the controversy.¹⁸⁵ The newspaper reported that the NAACP had criticized Armwood’s public disapproval of the methods used by the cooks’ union. To clear up any misunderstandings, Armwood made the following statement to the *Times-Picayune*:

The names of two prominent clubwomen were mentioned as being actively opposed to the recently organized union of colored domestics, and it was stated that I joined these clubwomen in the opposition. The statement was a mistake, since I have had no communication with them on the subject. I am neither advocating nor opposing the colored domestic union . . . [M]y work is strictly educational; my purpose here is to increase the efficiency of the colored womanhood of this city, along lines of home economics, and I have nothing to do with the labor problem . . . I insist the efficient cook will always be in demand, and will receive higher wages. The New Orleans School of Domestic Science proposes to produce skilled cooks and just there its mission ends.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ Durham, “Blanche Armwood: The Early Years,” p. 53.

¹⁸⁴ *Times-Picayune*, May 19, 1918.

¹⁸⁵ Durham, “Blanche Armwood: The Early Years,” p. 54.

¹⁸⁶ *Times-Picayune*, May 21, 1918.

Although all the details of the conflict are not clear, several important points concerning the incident stand out. First, the black working-class women who formed the union felt that the NOSDS was not the most effective means of improving their employment and chose to take another path. It is not known if any of them had attended the New Orleans School of Domestic Science. Whether they had or not, the black working women found Armwood's middle-class approach insufficient and decided to take control of their own work situations. The union represented black working-class women's efforts to fight for their rights themselves without relying upon a middle-class woman like Armwood to solve their problems for them. Their insistence on better wages and more defined working hours and job duties also illustrate that these issues were far more important to them than gaining white respect. As autonomous women, they planned on doing things their own way. The black laboring women who got involved in the union certainly challenged Armwood's entreaties about appropriate lady-like behavior.

Secondly, the dispute reveals that as the head of a white-owned and financed school of household arts, Armwood was between the proverbial rock and a hard place. Her response to the controversy and her attempt to publicly clarify her position demonstrated that she had to measure her words very carefully. As a diplomat, she had to balance the interests of her white employers and the black women she sought to help through the school. Because of her standing as director of a school for black women that specialized in domestic science, it is understandable that she was drawn into a dispute between domestic servants and white housewives. However, Armwood could not openly take sides. If she defended the domestic servants and their formation of a union,

Armwood risked admitting that the goals behind the NOSDS were not being met. She would also lose the cooperation and the financial assistance of her white employers. On the other hand, if Armwood joined the opposition to the union, she would be turning her back on the very women she purported to assist. The NAACP's rebuke of Armwood's alleged disapproval of the union indicates that if she publicly stated her support of the white, middle-class housewives, she would be seen by many African-Americans as betraying her race. Armwood had no choice but to remain neutral in the entire matter. She was caught between elite whites, whose financial aid she relied upon and whose respect she wanted, and the masses of black women she shared common bonds of racial and gender discrimination and whom she sought to uplift.

Armwood's approach to the African-American freedom movement consisted of conservative *and* radical elements. Higginbotham put it best when she argued that by insisting on conformity to the established rules of society, black women subverted "the cultural logic of white supremacy and condemned white American" for its failure to live up to the rhetoric of "equality and justice found in the Constitution." According to Higginbotham, speaking up for one's rights became the logical conclusion of respectability, not its antithesis. Armwood's involvement in the suffrage movement and the anti-lynching crusades illustrated how she could stress white middle-class values while also utilizing traditional forms of protest including "petitions, boycotts, and verbal appeals to justice" without seeming contradictory.¹⁸⁷

In the early twentieth-century, female suffrage became a major political issue. Passage of the nineteenth amendment would give white women a voice to shape public

¹⁸⁷ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, pp. 15, 187, 221, 222.

policy. However, for black women, the stakes were much higher. Since African-American women experienced both sexual and racial discrimination, they saw segregation, lynching, and poverty as important women's issues. The right to vote would provide them with a weapon to fight for better conditions for women and black people.¹⁸⁸ For a South that barred most African-American men from public life, black women's suffrage threatened the status quo. White Southerners had stripped black men of their voting rights in the late nineteenth century. They utilized a wide array of tactics that eliminated them from the political process. By the turn of the century, African-American men, confined to a second-class citizenship, lacked the political power to fight against the legalization of racial segregation and the terrorization of black men and women. Although most African-American women remained disfranchised like their male counterparts, after the passage of the suffrage amendment in 1920, Armwood's stance on the issue and her efforts to get black women to vote had serious racial implications. She demanded that blacks "should have the privilege of the franchise" and felt that African-American women in particular would take the lead in attaining civil rights for all blacks Americans.¹⁸⁹ She "believed that the women who are of greater courage than men will demand that the vote which has been denied the Southern brother through grandfathers' clauses . . . be restored to him"¹⁹⁰ Armwood's support of the woman suffrage amendment and her participation in the 1920 presidential election reveals the radical element of her racial ideology. Her actions clearly demonstrated her belief in full political equality for African-Americans.

¹⁸⁸ Halderman, "Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation," pp. 289-291.

¹⁸⁹ Armwood Perkins, "Sphere of Helpfulness," *Armwood Family Papers*.

Armwood's involvement in the anti-lynching crusades revealed her conviction that the federal government had a responsibility to protect all of its citizens. Armwood lived during the height of the lynching era in American history. National organizations, such as the NACW and the NAACP, took the lead in trying to make lynching a crime. Many studies have been done on the NAACP's efforts to pass anti-lynching legislation in the 1920's and the 1930's. Historians acknowledge the efforts of Ida B. Wells, a militant African-American woman journalist who organized the first anti-lynching organization (in Great Britain) in the late nineteenth-century and who spurred black women activists to action through the NACW and later the NAACP which she helped found. However, little has been written about the role African-American women played in the anti-lynching movement. Through the NACW, middle-class black women sought to end the awful crimes by educating the white public about the horrific nature of mob violence. They also politically lobbied for a law making lynching a federal offense.¹⁹¹ In 1922, the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill was introduced in Congress that ordered a \$10,000 fine for any county where a lynching took place. It also provided U. S. Courts jurisdiction over county officers and lynchers.¹⁹² That year, Mary B. Talbert "spearheaded the Anti-Lynching Crusade under the auspices of the NAACP."¹⁹³ She headed a fifteen-woman committee that

¹⁹⁰ Durham, "Blanche Armwood: The Early Years," p. 62.

¹⁹¹ Terborg-Penn, "African-American Women's Networks in the Anti-Lynching Crusade," pp. 148-159. For more information on Ida B. Wells and her efforts to end lynching, see Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*.

¹⁹² Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, *Afro-American Women of the South and the Advancement of the Race, 1895-1925* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), pp. 225, 226; Claudine L. Ferrell, *Nightmare and Dream: Antilynching in Congress, 1917-1922* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1986), pp. 122, 123.

¹⁹³ Terborg-Penn, "African-American Women's Networks in the Anti-Lynching Crusade," p. 157.

organized seven hundred African-American women, who acted as state workers across the nation, flooding their communities with literature about the crimes committed by lynchers and appealing to moral and religious believers to condemn the horrors of lynchings. The crusade was planned to begin in November 1922 and to end January 1923. The goal was to “arouse the conscience of the women of America, both white and Black.” State workers raised thousands of dollars to flood the nation with newspapers ads against lynching and printed prayers warning of societal destruction.¹⁹⁴

Blanche Armwood served as Florida’s state director of the Anti-Lynching Crusade.

Although the federal proposal was eventually defeated, Armwood actively supported the movement. In one instance, she even debated with a white reader in the *Tampa Morning Tribune* over the need for the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill. In a letter to the newspaper, a white Tampan wrote:

If the advocates of the Dyer bill would devote one-tenth the money, time, and determination they have put into the efforts to have this spectacular thing enacted, into a campaign to eradicate the cause for which lynching in the South is the remedy, there would be no need for such a bill anywhere but so long as the “bad nigger”- and he is usually of “high color” and “high eddication”- is made to believe he will be able to do his devilment and be protected through a bill which will penalize a whole county that makes an example of him, just so long will lynchings be; and all the Dyers bills in all the files of all the advocates of such methods will not operate to save one single black rapist from the nearest tree or post when he lays foul hands on a white woman in the South. If the courts will not punish promptly and effectively the black rapist, the people will, and this is no appeal for mob law either, but a simple statement of facts.¹⁹⁵

Two days later, Armwood replied:

Mr. Editor, the Negroes of this community feel that the editorial referred to shows such a spirit of antagonism to Negro education and advancement as we are reluctant to characterize as the *Tribune’s* real attitude. And permit us to say, Mr. Editor, that authentic statistics show that from 1889 to Jan. 1, 1922, there have been 3, 465 known lynchings in the United States; in only 581 of these cases or 16.6 percent were there even accusations of rape. Of the 3,465 persons lynched 718 were white and 2,718 were colored showing that the Dyer bill was not intended to protect Negroes alone The premium that white men put on their womanhood is worthy of the commendation of any people. Making criminals of hundreds of fathers of the future womanhood of their race who participated in mob murders is rather inconsistent however. Please let us say further, Mr. Editor, that we do not know any case where educated Negroes have been lynched save in race riots like the ones in Arkansas and Oklahoma, where the bloodthirsty mob found pleasure in destroying the lives and property of the best Negro citizens, as a means of humiliating the entire race. Nor do we understand what is meant by the Negro of “high color.” Surely the writer does not refer to mulattos whose color

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

¹⁹⁵ *Tampa Tribune*, November 30, 1922.

proves the disregard our Southern white men have had for racial purity and the value of virtuous womanhood even among the Negroes, their humble loyal friends . . .

Yours for peace and civic righteousness,
BLANCHE ARMWOOD BEATTY¹⁹⁶

It took a great deal of courage for Armwood to write the editorial to the *Tampa Morning Tribune*. Florida had its share of lynchings, including the massacre at Rosewood, a small black town to the north of Tampa, that took place in 1923. However, as a representative of the black community and as Florida's director of the Anti-Lynching Crusade, she felt an obligation to protest such incendiary remarks. Armwood opposed the white supremacist attitude towards lynching in the South that used the protection of white womanhood as an excuse for racial violence. She countered the white justification of lynching as a means of punishing black male rapists. The NAACP's journal, *Crisis*, took note of Armwood's bold action, publishing the debate in the January 1923 edition of the magazine.¹⁹⁷

Durham and Halderman saw Armwood's editorial as uncharacteristic or atypical of her "accommodationist" approach.¹⁹⁸ However, Armwood's response to the letter in the *Tampa Tribune* was consistent with her racial ideology. Southern whites used lynching as the ultimate form of intimidation to remind blacks of their lowly status in society. While the white reader argued that black males "of 'high color' and 'high eddication'" who dared to step out of their place should be made an example of, Armwood believed that respected, educated African-Americans did not deserve to be

¹⁹⁶ *Tampa Tribune*, December 2, 1922.

¹⁹⁷ *Crisis*, Vol. 25, February 1923, pp. 183; For a history of ethnic and racial violence in Tampa see Ingalls, "Lynching and Establishment Violence in Tampa, 1858-1935;" Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes in the New South*.

¹⁹⁸ Durham, "Blanche Armwood: The Early Years," p. 23; Halderman, "Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation," p. 300.

treated in such a “humiliating” way. Black people who adopted white standards of respectability should be treated accordingly. Armwood’s emphasis on respectability gave her a platform to demand equal rights for all Americans. However, at the same time, the editorial also revealed her class bias. Although Armwood protested the discriminatory treatment of blacks in the Jim Crow South, she was not a militant activist. Raised as a middle-class African-American woman, Armwood believed that the best way for black people to achieve equality would be to embrace mainstream American manners and morals. This was one of the factors that distinguished them from the masses of poor, uneducated blacks. Only by moving away from poverty and illiteracy could they demand freedom and equality.

In the end, Armwood’s place in the social structure as a middle-class black woman influenced the wide range of tactics she used to combat the inferior status of blacks in early twentieth-century America. Her strategies consisted of both conservative and radical elements that reflected her racial philosophy.¹⁹⁹ Armwood had two goals in mind as she fought for equality: she tried to uplift the race and gain the respect of white America. The dual objectives emerged from the tensions Armwood tried to balance as a middle-class African-American woman who shared with elite white women a common belief that women held a revered status in society and bonds of racial and gender discrimination with poor, uneducated, black women. Armwood realized that despite her family’s upward mobility, racism would always be a factor that confined successful African-Americans like herself to a second-class citizenship and united her with her less fortunate sisters. Consequently, Armwood felt that elite African-Americans had an obligation to educate the masses about mainstream values in the hope of raising the entire

race. On the other hand, she demanded that white America live up to its ideals of freedom and justice for all. This is where the conservative and radical aspects of her ideology came together. Given her place within the social structure, Armwood justified the need for a school of domestic science to teach black women behavior that middle-class America determined as appropriate, and at the same time, she petitioned Congress to pass a bill that would make lynching a federal crime. Armwood expected blacks to improve themselves and make the race worthy of equality, while simultaneously demanding that the dominant society grant those who proved their willingness to work hard and live a respectable life first-class citizenship.²⁰⁰

Despite her middle-class leanings, Armwood played a vital part in keeping alive the hopes and dreams for racial equality in the early twentieth century. Through her writings and her work with the schools of domestic science, Armwood instilled in the black community a strong sense of self-esteem and racial pride in an era when most white American believed blacks were inferior and unworthy of full equality. Politically, she also tried to change the laws that kept African-Americans confined to a second-class status. Although most black women remained disfranchised after the passage of the nineteenth amendment and the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill failed to become law, Armwood's participation set an example for future generations of activists who continued the fight for freedom.

¹⁹⁹ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, p. 15.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-18; See also Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*.

Chapter Three

“To Help Mankind and Those in Need”: Armwood’s Social Welfare Activism and Enrollment in Howard University Law School

In late 1922, while Armwood served as Florida’s state director of the Anti-Lynching Crusades, she also focused her energies on improving the living and working conditions of the masses of poor, illiterate, and oftentimes unemployed African-Americans who migrated to Tampa. In a decade when the city’s black population grew from 11,533 in 1920 to 21,172 in 1930, Armwood gained the cooperation of the white establishment on a number of social welfare projects that were intended to benefit the African-American community. As Executive Secretary of the Tampa Urban League and as Supervisor of Negro Schools for Tampa and Hillsborough County, she, once again, played the part of a racial diplomat, a non-threatening figure who convinced elite whites to publicly endorse and even help blacks.²⁰¹

Armwood’s association with the TUL began in June 1922, when visiting family and friends in Tampa. There she met Jesse O. Thomas, southern field secretary of the National Urban League (NUL). Founded in 1911, the NUL was an interracial social welfare organization, with a middle-class orientation, that sought to raise the social and

²⁰¹Raper, McGrew, Mays, “A Study of Negro Life in Tampa,” p. 3; Davis, *A Half Century of Struggle for Freedom in Florida*, p. 10.

economic status of African-Americans by helping them adjust to urban life. Eleven years later, the National Urban League had affiliates in forty cities throughout the country. Black community leaders in Tampa, concerned about the increasing numbers of African-Americans moving to the city, requested Thomas's assistance in organizing a local chapter. Having little to do while on vacation, Armwood volunteered to manage the fundraising campaign and membership drive to establish the Tampa Urban League. The Executive Board that was set up to oversee the development of the TUL accepted her offer and agreed to pay \$125 for her services.²⁰²

Armwood coordinated the campaign drive to raise \$3,000, the amount estimated to operate the Tampa Urban League for six months. She raised a large amount of the budget at a tag sale and an outing at Oak Grove Park, which was sponsored by the city and sanctioned publicly by Mayor Charles H. Brown, who declared July sixth as "Social Welfare Day" for Tampa's black citizens. The founders of the TUL used the accumulated funds to pay the salaries of the Executive Secretary and an office helper. They also rented a building large enough to serve as a community center and furnished the headquarters with everything "necessary to equip and maintain a public welfare bureau for Negroes."²⁰³

²⁰² "Tampa Urban League," stationary, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 3, File 6; *Tampa Bulletin*, November 11, 1933; Moore, *A Search for Equality*, pp. 46, 47; Weiss, *The National Urban League*, pp. 112, 117-123.

²⁰³ "Social Welfare Day for Tampa Negroes Proclaimed July Sixth," unidentified article, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 3, File 7; "Tampa Urban League Has Begun Effective Work Among Negroes," *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 3, File 7; "Drive to Aid Urban League," *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 3, File 7; "Teams Volunteer Services for Drive Tampa Urban League," *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 3, File 7; "Public-Pulse," *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 3, File 7; "Will Begin Drive for Funds to Starts Negro Urban League," *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 3, File 7; Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood," p. 40.

Although the fundraising campaign fell short of its \$3,000 goal, the Executive Board made plans to officially organize the Tampa Urban League. As required by the NUL, an interracial board of directors was instituted to govern the TUL.²⁰⁴ Forty-five “representative men and women of both races” were selected to sit on the committee.²⁰⁵ Several African-American leaders participated, including Blanche’s father, Levin Armwood, Jr., her sister, Mrs. Idella Street, and Mrs. Christine A. Meachem, principal of Harlem Academy, one of Tampa’s black public schools. Reverend A. W. Pulley, pastor of Beulah Baptist Church, and two businesswomen, Mrs. Lila B. Robinson and Mrs. Gertrude R. Chambers, co-owners of Robinson and Chambers Hairdressers, also got involved with the Tampa Urban League. Prominent members of the white establishment made up the board of directors as well, such as Donald B. McKay, Peter O. Knight, and Perry G. Wall, mayor of Tampa during the 1920’s. Mrs. Julia Norris, a club woman, Mrs. G. W. Atkinson, Executive Secretary of the Tampa Welfare League and Community Chest, John G. Anderson, Jr., chairman of the Board of Education, and H. E. Snow, Tampa’s chief of Sanitation, also served on the interracial committee.²⁰⁶

The board of directors created ten departments within the Tampa Urban League, each dealing with a specific area of concern. They included education, health and hospitals, child welfare, housing, juvenile delinquency, recreation, parks and

²⁰⁴ Weiss, *The National Urban League*, p. 112.

²⁰⁵ “Drive to Aid Urban League,” *Armwood Family Papers*.

²⁰⁶ “Urban League Notes,” unidentified article, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 3, File 7; “Negroes To Be Asked to Aid School Fund,” unidentified article, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 2, File 7; “Annual Report of the Activities of The Tampa Urban League, Sept. 15, 1924 – Sept. 15, 1925,” *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 3, File 6, p. 5; Anthony and Wade, *A Collection of Historical Facts*, p. 10; Mays, *Born to Rebel*, p. 115; Maryclaire P. Crake, “‘In Unity There is Strength’: The Influence of Women’s Clubs on Tampa, 1900-1940,” MA Thesis, University of South Florida, 1988, p. 97.

playgrounds, law enforcement, race relation, industry, and social service extension. The interracial council also elected Blanche Armwood as the first Executive Secretary of the Tampa Urban League and agreed to formally open the TUL to the public on September 15, 1922. In preparation for her new responsibilities, Armwood visited the National Urban League's headquarters in New York City. Meanwhile, her husband, John Beatty, left their home in Alexandria, Louisiana and relocated to Tampa permanently.²⁰⁷

Armwood held an important post within the Tampa Urban League. It was her responsibility to run the entire organization. She "set the agenda for Board meetings, provided [her] nominal superiors with most of the pertinent information available to [her], made policy recommendations, and carried out or refused to carry out policy directives adopted by the [Board]." The purpose of the board of directors was to prevent the consolidation of power in the office of Executive Secretary. The committee held veto power over Armwood's decisions if its members disagreed with her policies or programs.²⁰⁸

Armwood was the ideal candidate to head the Tampa Urban League. As with the TSHA, the TUL needed an Executive Secretary that knew how "to be both the chief spokesperson on Negro affairs and the liaison between black and white worlds."²⁰⁹ The interracial board of directors agreed upon someone who could work successfully with white and black Tampanians. In the 1910's, Armwood had proven herself to the white establishment as a reliable, hardworking, "good" black woman who knew how to

²⁰⁷ "Annual Report of the Activities of The Tampa Urban League," p. 6; unidentified article, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 3, File 7; "Urban League to Begin Operation Sept. 15," unidentified article, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 3, File 7; "Tampa Urban League Has Begun Effective Work Among Negroes," *Armwood Family Papers*; Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood," p. 40.

²⁰⁸ Moore, *A Search for Equality*, p. 58.

cooperate with whites. At the same time, her accomplishments outside of Tampa and the recognition she received as a “National club woman” made Armwood a popular choice among many African-American leaders who felt that she had the experience necessary to take on the most important leadership position in Tampa’s black community.²¹⁰ Given her previous achievements as a racial diplomat, it made sense for the board of directors to select Armwood to run the Tampa Urban League, especially in the beginning, as it sought to establish itself as a worthy organization that required the support of whites and blacks.

While the NUL focused on matters of national significance, the Tampa affiliate concentrated on local issues that concerned African-Americans in southwest Florida.²¹¹ As Executive Secretary, Armwood addressed a wide range of problems that confronted the black community, including “juvenile delinquency, a lack of recreational facilities, underpaid jobs and unemployment, police brutality, poor housing, [and] inferior educational facilities”²¹² The TUL sought job opportunities for blacks and social services to facilitate the process of urbanization for the thousands of rural African-Americans who moved to the city.²¹³ The words which appeared on the TUL’s stationery, summed up the organization’s philosophy:

Let us not work as colored people nor white people for the narrow benefit of any group alone, but TOGETHER as Americans for the Common good of our common city, our common country.²¹⁴

The Tampa Urban League laid out a specific plan of action:

²⁰⁹ Mays, *Born to Rebel*, p. 107.

²¹⁰ *Tampa Bulletin*, November 18, 1933.

²¹¹ Moore, *A Search for Equality*, p. 58.

²¹² Mays, *Born to Rebel*, p. 107.

²¹³ Weiss, *The National Urban League*, p. 66.

We

1. Try to show social welfare agencies the advantages of cooperation.
2. Secure and train social workers.
3. Protect women and children from unscrupulous persons.
4. Fit workers (for) (to) work.
5. Help to secure playgrounds and other clean places of amusements.
6. Organize boys' and girls' clubs and neighborhood unions.
7. Help with probation oversight of delinquents.
8. Maintain a social center for convalescent people.
9. Investigate conditions of city life as a basis for practical work.²¹⁵

Through its social welfare activities, the TUL promoted equal opportunity for blacks in Tampa. According to historian Nancy Weiss, the object of the Urban League was to win a place in the American system for blacks. The social service organization took American democracy at its word, seeing the American creed as broad enough to embrace African-Americans. Weiss explains that, unlike radical protest movements, the Urban League tried to attain its objectives within the democratic process, mainly through social and economic institutions and power centers.²¹⁶ As with her involvement with the Tampa School of Household Arts, the TUL was the perfect vehicle for Armwood, for it allowed her to create “the conditions of economic opportunities that would enable blacks who took advantage of them” the chance to secure “their rightful places in urban society.”²¹⁷ Its slogan, “Not Alms, But Opportunity,” summed up not only the TUL’s approach to the African-American freedom struggle, but Armwood’s as well.²¹⁸

Blanche Armwood’s accomplishments as Executive Secretary represented the pinnacle of her long, distinguished career as an activist. Under her leadership, the TUL

²¹⁴ “Tampa Urban League,” stationary, *Armwood Family Papers*.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

²¹⁶ Weiss, *The National Urban League*, p. 68.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 68; “Tampa Urban League,” stationary, *Armwood Family Papers*.

provided Tampa's black inhabitants with some of the institutions and services that they desperately needed. The organization, for example, was instrumental in setting up the first public library in the African-American community. It also chartered the Booker T. Washington Branch of the Tampa Chapter of the American Red Cross, which offered courses in home health and hygiene for black women and girls. The Tampa Urban League sponsored a children's clinic, a school nurse, vaccinations, treatment for tuberculosis, and a class on midwifery. For working mothers, the TUL founded the Busy Merrymakers women's club, which in turn established the Helping Hand Day Nursery and Kindergarten.²¹⁹

In addition, the local school board appointed Armwood its first Supervisor of Negro Schools for Tampa and Hillsborough County in 1922. During her eight years in office, Armwood secured five new school buildings, organized Parent-Teacher Associations in every black school in Hillsborough County, increased black teachers' salaries, and extended the school year from six to nine months for black students. The high point of her term came in 1926 when Booker T. Washington High School opened its doors to African-American youths in Tampa. Four years later, in 1930, it became the first accredited black high school in Hillsborough County and only one of a few in the state of Florida.²²⁰

In the early twentieth century, as Tampa grew into a metropolitan center, white controlled city, county, and state governments did little for African-Americans in

²¹⁹ "What is the Urban League? What has it done in Tampa?," Tampa Urban League pamphlet, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 3, File 6; Halderman, "Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation," pp. 298, 299, 301, 302.

²²⁰ *Tampa Tribune*, November 28, 1930; Hawes, "One Person Who Made a Difference," *Tampa Tribune*, February 26, 1983.

southwest Florida. While white Tampa attained the trappings of a modern city, with public services like water and sewer facilities and paved and lighted streets, the black community was ignored. African-Americans were either excluded from many civic institutions or were segregated to ones that were far inferior.²²¹ At the same time, World War I had dramatic consequences for blacks across the country. Historians Gary Mormino and Anthony Pizzo describe, in *Tampa: The Treasure City*, how the European conflict interrupted the supply of unskilled immigrants who labored in factories in the North. In response, Southern blacks began, in 1915, the Great Migration to Northern cities, a movement that remained unabated for fifty years. Thousands of African-Americans left Tampa for major urban areas such as Chicago and Harlem in the hope of finding better job opportunities. Meanwhile, thousands of rural blacks from Florida and Georgia who worked in cotton fields and turpentine camps moved to Southern cities like Tampa. As the number of black Tampanians increased steadily in the 1910's and into the 1920's, black neighborhoods, without the assistance of the local government, were not prepared to handle the influx of people. As a result, these areas of the city declined overtime.²²²

As Executive Secretary of the Tampa Urban League and as Supervisor of Negro Schools, Armwood primarily addressed poverty issues. In 1927, the TUL, along with the Tampa Welfare League and the Young Men's Christian Association, put together a report called "A Study of Negro Life in Tampa" that described the inferior conditions found in the city's black community. The study provides a first-hand account of the dreadful

²²¹ Halderman, "Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation," p. 288; Mormino and Pozzetta, *Tampa: The Treasure City*, p. 50.

experiences African-Americans faced everyday in Tampa's black neighborhoods. It focuses on "limited employment opportunities, inadequate housing, poor sanitation, almost non-existent recreational facilities, insufficient medical care, and neglected schools."²²³

Housing stood out as the most graphic representation of impoverishment in black Tampa. When "A Study of Negro Life in Tampa" was done in 1927, African-Americans made up approximately 20 percent of the city's inhabitants. Over 23,000 black residents were segregated to eight separate sections of Tampa. At this time, nearly 95 percent of the black population rented some kind of living quarters, only 950 blacks owned their own homes. In its examination of African-American living conditions, "A Study of Negro Life in Tampa" used a black area called the "Forty-Four Quarters," as an example of decent housing in the African-American community. In this neighborhood, each home had inside water and sewer connections and daily garbage service. Other conditions, however, were less unfavorable. The area got its name from the fact that forty-four homes were crammed on a small lot. Smaller versions of the "Forty-Four Quarters" sprang up everywhere in the black community. Small patches of land covered with homes dotted most of the African-American settlements. College Hill, the second largest black section in Tampa, with 4094 people, had a similar version, except the houses there lacked water and sewer connections and had inadequate garbage services. Overcrowded

²²² Mormino and Pozzetta, *Tampa: The Treasure City*, p. 163.

²²³ Raper, McGrew, Mays, "A Study of Negro Life in Tampa," pp. 2-4; Halderman, "Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation," p. 298.

and unsanitary conditions made these buildings the most hazardous properties in Tampa.²²⁴

Educational facilities were hardly any better. Despite the progress Armwood had made as Supervisor of Negro Schools in the previous five years leading up to the report, many black public schools in 1927 had “poor ventilation, insufficient blackboard space, poor seating, dark rooms, inadequate desks-some made from boxes. Some of the buildings [were] old, dilapidated and unfit for human habitation.”²²⁵ African-Americans in Tampa had access to only one tennis court, one private park, and two theaters. According to “A Study of Negro Life in Tampa,” the proportion of whites to blacks was four to one, yet the mortality rate was two to one. In 1927, fifty-seven more African-Americans died than were born.²²⁶ Migration led to the increase in the city’s black population, not the birth rate. The black illiteracy rate was ten times that of whites and thirty-nine percent of black youths, “between the ages of six and eighteen, [were] out of school each day.” As adults, most African-Americans worked as untrained laborers or servants.²²⁷

The deep poverty in the black community was connected to race. It was not a coincidence that the vast majority of African-Americans in Tampa were poor. To ensure blacks’ second-class citizenship, white Southerners not only stripped them of their political and social rights, but they also made sure that nearly all African-Americans were

²²⁴ Raper, McGrew, Mays, “A Study of Negro Life in Tampa,” pp. 7, 9, 10, 14, 15.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 24, 31, 40; For an excellent summary of the appalling conditions in Tampa, see Halderman, “Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation,” p. 298.

restricted to the lowest rung of the economic ladder. The Jim Crow South disenfranchised blacks, legalized segregation, and terrorized African-Americans with violence. In addition, white supremacists regulated blacks to menial forms of employment and denied them adequate educational opportunities, health care, recreational facilities, and housing.

Armwood's activism must be understood within this larger context. Her social welfare work had important racial implications. As historian Linda Gordon argues, race issues were poverty issues for African-American women reformers; the two could not be separated from one another. At the same time, women's issues were also race issues.²²⁸ Under Armwood's leadership, the Tampa Urban League devoted much of its time to the concerns of African-American women, offering, for instance, classes in home health and hygiene, sponsoring a course on midwifery, and coordinating the development of the Helping Hand Day Nursery and Kindergarten for working mothers. As a black women activist, Armwood became involved in a variety of social welfare projects, hoping to move the entire race towards freedom and equality. Consequently, social welfare activism took on an entirely different meaning for black women reformers, like Armwood, than it did for white women. Middle-class African-American women focused on universal needs, such as education and healthcare, that benefited all black people, while white women concentrated more on charity for a select, deserving few.²²⁹ Providing a day care center for working mothers, health clinics for children, and

²²⁷ Raper, McGrew, Mays, "A Study of Negro Life in Tampa," p. 53; Halderman, "Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation," p. 298; Davis, *A Half Century of Struggle for Freedom in Florida*, p. 10.

²²⁸ Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*, p. 132.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 114, 123, 124, 127; Gordon, "Black and White Visions of Welfare," pp. 577, 578.

employment opportunities for adults, the TUL fought against the extreme poverty that permeated the city's black community. Such efforts gave African-Americans the chance to overcome the obstacles that kept them confined to an inferior status. Gordon describes the relationship between social welfare work and the African-American freedom struggle. She explains that black women activists "could not . . . separate their welfare from civil rights agitation, anymore than they could separate the defense of black womanhood from the defense of the race." According to Gordon, racial uplift was defined as social welfare work and was seen as a path to racial equality and African-American "poverty could not be ameliorated without challenges to white domination."²³⁰ Armwood's attempts at racial uplift helped African-Americans find everyday ways of contesting the racial status quo. She used her roles as Executive Secretary of the Tampa Urban League and as Supervisor of Negro Schools to educate the masses of African-Americans who migrated to Tampa how to persevere in a racist society. As historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham maintains,

even such quotidian activities as women's fund raising, teaching in Sabbath schools, ministering to the sick, or conducting mothers' training schools embraced a politically subversive character within Southern society. In many respects, the most profound challenge to Jim Crow laws, crop liens, disfranchisement, the dearth of black public schools, and the heinous brutality of lynching rested in the silent, everyday struggle of black people to build stable families, get an education, worship in their own churches, and "work the system" as Eric Hobsbawm terms it, "to their minimum disadvantage."²³¹

Contrary to some scholars' assessment of Armwood's racial philosophy, there was "no inherent contradiction between" her social welfare/racial uplift activism "and anti-discrimination thinking."²³²

²³⁰ Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*, p. 132.

²³¹ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, pp. 17, 18.

²³² Gordon, "Black and White Visions of Welfare," p. 582.

In his analysis of Armwood's of achievements, Keith Halderman uses her work with the Tampa Urban League and as Supervisor of Negro Schools, like her association with the Tampa Gas Company, as proof that Armwood adopted an accommodationist strategy to advance the race. He argues that Armwood "was consistent in her efforts to gain the maximum interracial teamwork possible" in her dealings with government, business, political parties, and social welfare agencies.²³³ Basing his study on the turn of the century debate between Washington and Du Bois, Halderman claims that Armwood's strategy of interracial cooperation illustrates how her career reflected the conciliatory approach advocated by Washington.²³⁴

Halderman utilizes Benjamin E. Mays's account of his experiences in Tampa to critique Armwood's racial philosophy. Mays had a remarkable career as a black leader that included serving as President of Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1971, Mays wrote his memoir titled *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography*, in which he discusses his two-year term as Executive Secretary of the Tampa Urban League, from 1926-1928.²³⁵ Halderman argues that some African-Americans began to "criticize Armwood for being too accommodating to whites."²³⁶ He refers to Mays's autobiography, explaining that

Benjamin E. Mays, her successor in the Urban League, said that when he first came to Tampa the racial atmosphere contained too much "sweetness and light." He attributed these apparently favorable relations to reciprocal flattery and assessed the situation as one of benevolent paternalism. He specifically criticized Armwood for her

²³³ Halderman, "Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation," pp. 288, 289.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

²³⁵ Mays, *Born to Rebel*, pp. 106-124.

²³⁶ Halderman, "Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation," p. 300.

support of an unsuccessful plan to concentrate all of Tampa's blacks in a single subdivision of new housing.²³⁷

Mays's impression of Tampa's race relations and his depiction of himself as a protester, someone who refused to stay in his place and accept "the status quo without complaint-preferably with gratitude" is well-suited for Halderman and his interpretation of Armwood's strategy of interracial cooperation.²³⁸ Mays offers a traditional interpretation of African-American resistance that relies upon the accommodation versus protest paradigm to understand black activism. In his narrative, Mays gives one example after another where he found himself clashing with Tampa's white establishment, many of whom were also members of the board of directors of the TUL. Mays portrays himself, in contrast to Armwood, as someone who would not play the games expected of him by white Tampan.²³⁹

Halderman argues that while Armwood bowed to elite whites and accepted the racial system, Mays challenged the white establishment and overtly protested segregation. Since Halderman believes that Armwood endorsed a more conservative racial ideology, he distinguishes between her attempts to uplift the race and civil rights agitation. Although he concedes that she succeeded in improving the quality of life for some African-Americans in Tampa, Halderman maintains "that people like Blanche Armwood gave up what was already lost. Whether a more militant approach would have advanced the race faster is impossible to say."²⁴⁰

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 300, 301.

²³⁸ Mays, *Born to Rebel*, p. 107.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 106-124.

²⁴⁰ Halderman, "Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation," p. 303.

Armwood's actions contradict the argument put forth by scholars who depend upon the accommodation versus protest paradigm to interpret her accomplishments. Many of Armwood's activities, such as her organization of the TSHA, her involvement with the NAACP, her support of black female suffrage, and her opposition to lynching, demonstrate that she did not abandon the African-American freedom struggle. A newspaper headline, "Tampa Mob Sets Fire to Negro Realty Office," illustrates that Armwood's social welfare work in the 1920's had significant racial implications as well. The Associated Press reported that there had been protests against a proposed black residential community in Tampa. "[F]ifty white men set fire to a sales office of a Negro sub-division [and] . . . a Negro property owner, recently reported . . . the placing of a fiery cross before his home."²⁴¹ The circumstances surrounding the establishment of an all-black subdivision in Tampa demonstrates the link between Armwood's social welfare work and civil rights agitation.

As Executive Secretary of the Tampa Urban League, Armwood endorsed the idea of creating a residential area where the entire African-American population in Tampa would live, rather than being spread out in eight separate sections of the city. She sought the cooperation of elite whites to organize a subdivision that would provide African-Americans with "paved streets, electric lights, sewerage, public transportation, and police protection."²⁴² Armwood's uncle, John Holloman, and A. J. Prince were both real estate developers who were willing to sell lots in the vicinity where the all-black community

²⁴¹ "Tampa Mob Sets Fire to Negro Realty Office," *Papers of the NAACP*, Part 7, the Anti-Lynching Campaign, 1912-1955, Series A: Anti-Lynching Investigative Files, 1912-1953.

²⁴² Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood," p. 41.

was planned for reasonable prices so that more families could afford to own property.²⁴³

When Benjamin Mays became Executive Secretary of the TUL, however, he bitterly opposed the subdivision, arguing that it would create even greater segregation. In 1927, he abandoned the plan, stating that it was “highly undesirable, impractical, unwise, and unsafe for Negroes; that the facilities would be too long provided, that in case of racial conflict Negroes could be located and abused too easily for comfort.”²⁴⁴

Armwood saw the project from a different standpoint. Unlike Mays, she was a native of Tampa, and despite her years away from the city, she still considered it her hometown. Tampa was a short stop in Mays’s long, illustrious career. Although he was dedicated to helping African-Americans, Mays had no family ties to the city. One can make the argument that Armwood had ulterior motives for supporting the establishment of the black subdivision, hoping that it would financially benefit her family. She certainly may have seen it as an excellent opportunity for her relatives to make a profit. However, given Armwood’s life-long devotion to African-American freedom and opportunity, she did what she thought was in the best interest of the black community. Armwood advocated the black residential area because she saw it as a means of improving the standard of living for the masses of uneducated African-Americans who came to Tampa, labored in menial, low paying jobs, and lived in dilapidated homes that had no sewer or water connections.

The white men who set fire to a sales office of the black subdivision and threatened a black property owner by placing a fiery cross on his lawn terrorized African-

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, Mays, *Born to Rebel*, p. 112.

Americans because they opposed the development of a residential area that was intended to improve black housing conditions. The white reaction illustrates that, like Armwood's work with the Tampa School of Household Arts, some white people in Tampa, presumably non-elite whites, felt threatened by the idea of a well-equipped African-American subdivision that provided blacks with all the trappings of a modern community.²⁴⁵ The white men appreciated that poverty issues had important racial implications. The establishment of a black residential community implied that African-Americans deserved housing that was equal to those of white Tampan. Such an idea implicitly challenged the white notion of white racial superiority over African-Americans. Armwood's effort to fight poverty in black Tampa was a covert form of protest that subtly undermined the city's racial system. The white mob's response illustrates that Armwood's social welfare activism had significant consequences. For the white men who participated in the mob violence, there was a dangerous relationship between racial uplift and civil rights agitation. The act of terrorism against African-Americans who supported an all-black subdivision reveals that Armwood's social welfare activities, while conservative in nature, had the potential to disrupt the status quo in a white supremacist society that confined blacks to the lowest rung of the political, social, and economic ladder.

One of Armwood's first actions as Executive Secretary of the Tampa Urban League was to gain the support of the white community for the TUL and its efforts to combat poverty in black Tampa. She secured the endorsement of the *Tampa Tribune* and

²⁴⁵ I argue that some non-elite whites felt threatened by the black subdivision because, in his autobiography, Mays explains that white business and political leaders in Tampa pushed him to support the development of the black residential community. According to Mays, twelve white men and one lone black man owned the

the *Tampa Daily Times*, the city's two leading white newspapers, prodding them to write a weekly column on the Tampa Urban League's accomplishments every Sunday to familiarize white Tampanns about the organization.²⁴⁶ Armwood also asked the Hillsborough County League of Women's Clubs (HCLWC) "to appoint an Advisory Committee . . . to serve in an advisory capacity to the Urban League to help them shape their plan of work."²⁴⁷ She specifically requested that the committee be made up of Southern white women, for "they had a more understanding, sympathetic knowledge of [black] problems than women who had not lived among [African-Americans] all their life."²⁴⁸ Armwood reassured the white women that "she did not expect [them] to work, or had any desire for social equality, but simply wanted [them] as having greater experience, to assist [the TUL] in obtaining better living conditions, school facilities, etc., for [her] group of people."²⁴⁹ The Hillsborough County League of Women's Clubs agreed to cooperate with the Tampa Urban League. The HCLWC

contribute[d] \$25.00 per month for milk for the undernourished Negro children. [It] made a school survey. [It attempted] to have the location of the [Clara Frye] Hospital changed to a more suitable place with larger grounds . . . [and it] visited [the] Day Nursery.²⁵⁰

Armwood recognize that elite white public approval for the Tampa Urban League lent legitimacy to its efforts to aid African-Americans. Without the support of the white

subdivision, and consequently, stood to profit from its establishment. See, Mays, *Born to Rebel*, pp. 111, 112.

²⁴⁶ The *Tampa Tribune*'s weekly column was titled "Urban League Notes," and the *Tampa Daily Times*'s column was called "Urban League Weekly Bulletin." "Tampa Urban League Has Begun Effective Work Among Negroes," *Armwood Family Papers*.

²⁴⁷ "Annual Report of the Activities of The Tampa Urban League," p. 2.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 3.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

establishment, the TUL did not carry much weight when dealing with white public officials on issues like sanitation, education, juvenile delinquency, and housing. As with the TSHA, Armwood realized that the Tampa Urban League, small as its impact was, needed the paternalistic endorsement of the city's white business leaders, politicians, and clubwomen to succeed.

Armwood relied upon the assistance of white clubwomen, in particular, when petitioning the local and state governments for services for the black community. When it came to increasing the school term for black students from six to nine months, for instance, she appeared with Mrs. Julia Norris and Mrs. W. F. Miller, the President of the HCLWC, at a special session of the Hillsborough County School Board to appeal for a minimum nine-month school term.²⁵¹ Armwood was aware that she had little, if any, influence in persuading the all-white board to extend the school year. Yet elite white women, like Norris, carried more weight in Tampa and the state of Florida for they were the wives, daughters, and mothers of the white men who held political, social, and economic power. The white clubwomen also had more experience in lobbying the local government for programs and were far more likely to get aid than would black women. In the early 1920's, the Florida Federation of Women's Clubs (FFWC) got the state legislature to pass a bill funding a home for delinquent white girls. In 1925, Armwood, as a member of the Florida Federation of Colored Women's Clubs (FFCWC) collaborated with the FFWC in an attempt to establish the same sort of facility for African-American girls. Working with white women, like Mrs. Norris and Mrs. W. S.

²⁵¹ "Urban League Weekly Bulletin," *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 3, File 7; Crake, "In Unity There Is Strength," pp. 73, 74.

Jennings, the wife of ex-governor Sherman Jennings, she lobbied the state legislature for a \$25,000 appropriation to build a refuge for delinquent black girls. Both initiatives eventually passed; the Hillsborough County School Board permitted the extension of the school term, as long as the African-American community agreed to raise the money necessary to pay the expenses of operating the black public schools for an additional three months.²⁵² In 1937, the Florida legislature finally approved the funds for a state-financed institution for black girls.²⁵³ Armwood appreciated the advantages of gaining the support of white clubwomen to advance her causes. She managed to get many of the Tampa Urban League's programs implemented by securing their cooperation.

Although Benjamin Mays took a different approach to African-American progress, his story about Tampa in the 1920's yields important insights into Armwood's world in the Jim Crow South. Unlike Armwood, Mays was a newcomer to Tampa who, as Executive Secretary of the TUL, had to deal with white people about whom he knew very little. His outsider status gave him with a unique perspective on the city's white establishment. Mays's narrative is a candid view of what it must have been like for Armwood to maneuver in a racist society as a spokesperson for and a representative of the black community. His account gives three instances when he was forced, in his interactions with leading whites, to take a stand for social equality. Mays clashed with Mr. Peter O. Knight and his wife, Mrs. Ruth Atkinson, and J. G. Anderson, Jr., all of whom were members of the board of directors of the Tampa Urban League. Compared to

²⁵² Historian James D. Anderson examines the "double taxation" placed on blacks in the South who raised extra funds to pay for the extension of the school year for black public schools. See James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

²⁵³ "Urban League Weekly Bulletin," *Armwood Family Papers*; "Negroes to be Asked to Aid School Fund," *Armwood Family Papers*; Crake, "In Unity There is Strength," pp. 73, 74, 86, 87.

most of their contemporaries, they were fairly progressive whites who oversaw his work with the TUL, and that of Armwood as well. But seen through Mays's eyes, the Knights, Atkinson, and Anderson, emerge as elite white Southerners who took a paternalistic and a patronizing attitude towards African-Americans. They did not mind aiding blacks through organizations, such as the Tampa Urban League; however, they perceived African-Americans as the "other" with whom they could not identify at all.²⁵⁴ The Knights, Atkinson, and Anderson did not comprehend Mays's desire to be treated with respect and dignity nor did they understand his aversion to racial discrimination. The very idea that he sat down in a white person's house, demanded that his wife be referred to as "Mrs. Mays," rather than as Sadie, or wrote an article protesting the absurdity of segregation at a black school pageant was too much for them. Two years after he arrived in the city, Mays got a better job offer and left Tampa for good, before he was fired.²⁵⁵ His autobiography lends an appreciation of how difficult a role Armwood took on as a racial diplomat and the skill that was needed to play the game. Armwood was a master at cooperating with a paternalistic white establishment that believed that African-Americans were inferior people who did not deserve social equality with whites.

Given the discord between Mays and the white establishment in Tampa, one wonders how Armwood convinced elite whites to collaborate with her on a number of social welfare projects that were meant to benefit the black community. Publicly, the city's white political and business leaders and clubwomen presented themselves as generous, caring people who wanted to see African-Americans in Tampa improve their

²⁵⁴ For a discussion of white women reformers' perception of those who needed welfare as the "other," see Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*, pp. 127, 128.

²⁵⁵ Mays, *Born to Rebel*, pp. 113-124.

situation.²⁵⁶ Reminiscing about black loyalty during the Civil War, Mrs. Julia Norris explained why the HCLWC decided to honor Armwood's request for their assistance:

Going back along memory's path, and taking stock of the debt our people owed to this group of people, remembering that our grandmothers for four years were left in the care of this Negro race, and never once were they false to this trust, we have tried to repay in a small measure this debt we owed.²⁵⁷

The white establishment had its own reasons for supporting Armwood's efforts to uplift the race. They backed many of the Tampa Urban League's programs because it was to their advantage to do so. Concerned about the increasing number of blacks migrating to Tampa and the terrible urban blight in the black neighborhoods, elite whites cooperated with Armwood because they wanted to get a handle on a situation that had the potential to explode. By assisting African-Americans in their endeavors to help themselves, through organizations like the Tampa Urban League, the white establishment felt that it could lessen some of the social problems arising in the black sections of the city. The "Urban League Weekly Bulletin" of the *Tampa Daily Times*, for example, explained why white clubwomen decided to aid the TUL in its treatment of tuberculosis:

Tuberculosis occurs more frequently among negroes than whites because of the living conditions: their economic status being such as prevents their living under conditions that preclude the progress of the disease. Because these women of thought and culture realize that disease germs know no race or geographical boundary or lines in any city, they are actuated by laudable self-defense as well as by the desire to relieve suffering among their less fortunate fellows. They want to improve the home life of the women and men upon whom they depend largely for domestic service. They want clean, honest, reliable workers and are therefore willing to provide agencies that will develop these traits.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁶ See, for example, "Social Welfare Day for Negroes Proclaimed July 6," *Armwood Family Papers*; "Urban League Weekly," *Armwood Family Papers*; "Urban League Notes," *Armwood Family Papers*.

²⁵⁷ "Annual Report of the Activities of The Tampa Urban League," p. 3.

²⁵⁸ "Urban League Weekly Bulletin," *Armwood Family Papers*. For more information of tuberculosis and black domestic workers see Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom*.

The leading white Tampans who worked with Armwood and the Tampa Urban League did so because they wanted to protect themselves and their families from the contamination of diseases. As the employers of domestic servants, they desired “clean, honest, reliable workers,” not sickly ones who brought tuberculosis into their homes.²⁵⁹ Elite whites saw Armwood’s social welfare activities not as a means of abolishing racial injustice or poverty, but as a way of getting a handle on the ailments that plagued the black community. Once the awful conditions in the black sections of Tampa spread to white neighborhoods and affected them and their loved ones, elite whites sanctioned organizations like the TUL that sought to ameliorate the terrible conditions in black Tampa.

As a racial diplomat, Armwood went out of her way to make sure that the white establishment did not see her social welfare activism as a challenge to the racial status quo. She stressed to white business leaders, politicians, and clubwomen that African-Americans in Tampa did not look to them to change the laws in society that confined blacks to a second-class status; nor were they counted upon to alter the South’s racial norms. The Tampa Urban League was designed to abet blacks as they tried to uplift themselves. Leading whites gave their public support for such efforts, and in some cases, they assisted by raising funds or lobbying the government. They lent their weight as elite whites to many of the social welfare activities that the TUL sponsored. But they would never have cooperated with Armwood if she had argued that the purpose of the Tampa Urban League was to attack or dramatically change the social fabric of the South’s racial system. The main message of the TUL, and the one that Armwood emphasized the most,

²⁵⁹ “Urban League Weekly Bulletin,” *Armwood Family Papers*.

was that the Tampa Urban League tried to help some African-Americans have an equal chance to succeed in life. Through its efforts, the TUL provided opportunities for blacks, who in turn had a responsibility to take advantage of them and make something of their lives. The burden of change fell squarely on the shoulders of African-Americans.²⁶⁰

Armwood downplayed social equality when dealing with whites. She reassured them that blacks wanted simply the freedom to experience the American dream in their own black world. Armwood refrained from directly challenging segregation, as Mays did, for she understood that such an approach would alienate white supporters. Leading white Tampans would never tolerate a demand for racial integration as seen in their reaction to Mays. It was dangerous for Armwood, or any African-American for that matter, to overtly contest the racial status quo in the Jim Crow South. The white establishment in Tampa used lynching as a violent means of maintaining control and doing away with those who disrupted the social order. In “Lynching and Establishment Violence in Tampa, 1858-1936,” historian Robert P. Ingalls argues that

in a period prior to the 1920’s members of Tampa’s business and professional establishment clearly participated in and condoned collective violence. Largely insulated from outside forces and committed to the preservation of white supremacy and the cigar industry, Tampa’s elite found the tradition of lynch law a useful means of protecting its position against threats posed by blacks, immigrants, and radical workers.²⁶¹

Concerned about tarnishing the city’s public image and hoping to attract new businesses to the area, many leading white Tampans turned away from lynching during the

²⁶⁰ “What is the Urban League? What has it done in Tampa?;” “If not, Why?;” Tampa Urban League Pamphlet, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 3, File 6; “Urban League Notes,” *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 3, File 7; “Annual Report of the Activities of The Tampa Urban League,” p. 1.

²⁶¹ Ingalls, “Lynching and Establishment Violence,” p. 643.

1920's.²⁶² Yet, there was always the possibility of violence, as in the burning of the black subdivision sales office and the 1923 massacre of African-Americans in Rosewood, a small, mostly black town north of Tampa and west of Gainesville. With eight lynchings, Florida had the most lynchings of any Southern state in 1926.²⁶³

As Executive Secretary of the Tampa Urban League and as Supervisor of Negro Schools, Armwood gave the impression to elite whites that she accepted segregation. Although she disarmed them by publicly denouncing social equality, she also insisted that they follow the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision and provide *equal* accommodations for African-Americans and whites. Armwood's social welfare activities in the 1920's reveal her desire to balance the situation in Tampa in favor of African-Americans. She fought for equal opportunities, services, and institutions for blacks. Armwood lived in the South during the nadir in American race relations. Prior to the New Deal era, when the federal government took a more active role in people's daily lives, Armwood felt that she had to gain the active support of leading whites for her racial uplift projects to ensure their success. Playing the part of a racial diplomat, she presented herself as a non-threatening figure to the white community. Yet in reality, the white establishment knew little about the real Blanche Armwood, seeing only her public persona. Although, unlike Mays, she publicly downplayed social equality, Armwood's social welfare activism had broader implications. By ameliorating abysmal educational facilities, living conditions, and health care for African-Americans and expanding job opportunities, she implied that blacks deserved better treatment. They had the right to a decent education, adequate

²⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 644.

²⁶³ *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 8, 1927.

housing, safe neighborhoods, and good paying jobs. Her actions indicated that the quality of life for the masses of African-Americans moving to Tampa should be equal to, albeit separate from, whites.

Even though Armwood used interracial cooperation as a strategy in her racial uplift work, it certainly did not mean that she catered to elite whites in Tampa. As a representative of the black community, it was very important that Armwood make a positive impression. In many of her writings directed to the city's white citizens, Armwood presented African-Americans as united in their efforts to uplift the race and appreciative of any white support and aid to black social welfare activities. However, in Tampa's black newspaper, the *Tampa Bulletin*, a different image of Armwood appeared. There were numerous conflicts between African-American leaders. Differences of opinion, jealousies, and competition divided many of them, despite their attempts to display a unified front to the white community. In 1933, after Armwood relocated to Washington, D. C., she wrote an editorial, in the *Tampa Bulletin*, informing black leaders that she had no intention of dethroning the current Executive Secretary of the Tampa Urban League. Apparently, some African-Americans were envious of her accomplishments and felt threatened by her visit to Tampa.²⁶⁴ Armwood's honesty, forthrightness, and determination as revealed in the article did not match the polite, respectful, obliging tone in her writings addressed to white people. The difference demonstrated that she lived in two distinct worlds. In the black community, Armwood spoke up for herself and defended her actions in a determined manner. Yet such an

²⁶⁴ *Tampa Bulletin*, November 18, 1933; "Let's Work Together for Worthy Cause Laying Aside Petty Jealousies," *Armwood Family Papers*; "Mrs. Wilson Makes Statement Concerning State Federation," unidentified article, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 3, File 9.

approach would not have helped Armwood's causes in her dealings with the white establishment. Dissemblance allowed her to gain the support of Tampa's white political and business leaders and clubwomen for various projects. As a representative of one community to another, Armwood used the strategy of interracial cooperation as a covert, subtle means of getting white leaders to endorse and even assist blacks in their efforts to improve their economic status in society.

In addition to serving as Executive Secretary of the Tampa Urban League and Supervisor of Negro Schools for Tampa and Hillsborough County, Armwood spent the 1920's using her oratory skills on behalf of the Republican Party. In 1927, President Calvin Coolidge recruited her to tour New England. Armwood also organized several speaking engagements to raise funds for Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona Beach, which was co-founded by her close friend, Mary McLeod Bethune, another prominent black woman activist who went on to secure a cabinet post in President Franklin Roosevelt's administration. In the late 1920's, Armwood experienced a devastating loss when her husband, John Beatty, was shot and killed while fighting with the family chauffeur. Little is known about the circumstances surrounding the slaying, although rumors circulated of an alleged affair between Armwood and her driver. Beatty's death was eventually ruled an accident.²⁶⁵

Armwood had a very difficult time dealing with the sudden loss of her husband and immersed herself in church work, where, in 1930, she met Edward T. Washington, a maintenance supervisor for the Interstate Commerce Commission. The two married in 1931 and, not long afterwards, they moved to Washington, D. C. Throughout the 1930's,

²⁶⁵ Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood," p. 42; Hewitt, *Southern Discomfort*, p. 165.

Armwood actively participated in the NACW and the NAACP. She served as President of the John Wesley Zion Church Choir as well. Armwood tried to secure a position in the District of Columbia's black public schools. However, she was unsuccessful, even with a recommendation from Florida Congresswoman Ruth Bryan Owen. Armwood continued her speaking engagements and worked as an aide for Republican Congressman Oscar DePriest of Illinois, the first black elected to the House of Representatives in the twentieth century.²⁶⁶ In 1931, she joined an "emergency financial campaign" to raise \$15,000 "to bring [the National Training School for Women and Girls] through a serious financial crisis" and became the director of the "Bethune Appreciation Campaign" to benefit Bethune-Cookman College, in the summer of 1934. Although Washington, D. C. was her new home, Armwood remained devoted to Tampa's black community. As the Great Depression worsened, she established and presided over the Tampa Golden Rule Recovery Alliance, an organization that was "[d]evoted to the [g]eneral [w]elfare of Tampa's Negroes" and that pushed for aid for African-Americans who encountered difficult times.²⁶⁷

In the fall of 1934, Armwood enrolled in Howard University School of Law. Since she did not have a college degree, the university accepted her as a special student based on her "record of service to the race and the Nation."²⁶⁸ Armwood earned her law

²⁶⁶ "Letter from Superintendent of Schools in Washington D. C. Frank W. Ballow," *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 2, File 13; unidentified article, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 3, File 1; Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood," p. 42; Halderman, "Armwood and the Strategy of Interracial Cooperation," p. 302.

²⁶⁷ "Bethune Appreciation Campaign," letterhead, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 3, File 14; "Emergency Financial Campaign March 22 to April 4, 1931 for National Training School for Women and Girls," program, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 2, File 13; "The Tampa Golden Rule Alliance," letterhead, *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 3, File 14; Hawes, "One Person Who Made a Difference," *Tampa Tribune*, February 26, 1983; Burke, "The Success of Blanche Armwood," p. 42.

²⁶⁸ [Blanche Armwood], "Letter to Miss Florence Reed, President of Spelman College, April 10, 1937," *Blanche Armwood Washington File*.

degree in 1937 and her juris doctorate degree in 1938. The first black woman from Florida to obtain a law degree, she considered applying to practice before the Florida Supreme Court, and even wrote Peter O. Knight, asking his advice on the matter.²⁶⁹ Armwood's graduation from Howard University School of Law marked another significant phase in her career as an activist. It represented a move away from an emphasis on racial uplift toward a focus on the legal fight against racism. The Blanche Armwood who graduated from Spelman Seminary in 1906, whom the Tampa Gas Company hired in 1914, and who was appointed Executive Secretary of the Tampa Urban League in 1922 was a different person from the woman who entered Howard School of Law in 1934. While she remained dedicated to racial justice, her views on how to best serve the African-American community altered overtime, in response to larger social and political transformations taking place in the United States in the 1920's and 1930's.

Several factors led to the shift in Armwood's activism. First, society changed dramatically during her lifetime. World War I, the Roaring Twenties, the Jazz Age, the Red Scare, the New Negro, and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan redefined American life. Women's entrance into electoral politics signaled by the passage of the woman suffrage amendment, the Great Depression, and the New Deal era, which expanded the power of the national government, transformed Armwood world as well. African-American women's activism also changed greatly by the 1930's. Gordon describes the evolution in black women's social welfare work. She explains that grassroots black groups, "seizing upon the New Deal's promise, . . . demanded federal intervention against Jim Crow local

²⁶⁹ "Armwood's transcripts from Howard University School of Law, 1934-37," *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 2, File 13; [Armwood], "Letter to Miss Florence Reed, President of Spelman College, April 10, 1937,"

government.”²⁷⁰ While more left-leaning women shifted to civil rights, through the NAACP, Mary McLeod Bethune established a mainstream organization, which Armwood joined in Washington, D. C., called the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW).²⁷¹ The NCNW departed from the NACW’s uplift tradition and focused mainly on lobbying. Gordon explains that the organizations combated racial discrimination in public housing, Social Security coverage, and New Deal relief programs and fought for minimum-wage and maximum-hours legislation for farm laborers and domestic servants. As women became involved in party politics, the new generation of black women activists also campaigned for the nomination of black women to government agencies.²⁷² The National Council of Negro Women abandoned “the feminist/womanist perspective” of the National Association of Colored Women.²⁷³ Influenced by the masculinized New Negro of the 1920’s, the younger generation of black women reformers did not criticize men nor did they use their womanhood to legitimize their leadership. Gordon argues that “the new mood rejected the emphasis on respectability” and marked the end of “female moral reform and its replacement by women’s participation in previously male politics.”²⁷⁴ The transformation in American society and the evolution of black women’s activism motivated Armwood to reassess her career in the mid-1930’s. Armwood’s

Blanche Armwood Washington File; Hawes, “One Person Who Made a Difference,” *Tampa Tribune*, February 26, 1983; Burke, “The Success of Blanche Armwood,” p. 42.

²⁷⁰ Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled*, p. 138.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

²⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 138, 139.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

decision to attend Howard University School of Law reveals her desire to take her work in a different direction.

Secondly, Armwood came out of the 1920's exhausted and ill. Despite her accomplishments as Executive Secretary of the TUL and as Supervisor of Negro Schools, Armwood recognized that she could only do so much through social welfare work and that her focus needed to shift elsewhere. Armwood had always had an interest in politics and in the law. Her involvement with the NAACP, the female suffrage movement, the 1920 presidential campaign, and the anti-lynching crusades demonstrated her faith in the American system. Armwood strongly believed in the rhetoric that all people were equal before the law and that the federal government had an obligation to protect its citizens, regardless of race or gender. While she never completely abandoned racial uplift, by the mid-1930's Armwood had adopted a new approach to the African-American freedom struggle.

Unfortunately, Armwood's career ended just as she prepared to start a new phase of activism. In great demand as a public speaker, Armwood postponed practicing law and pushed herself to travel around the country on behalf of various African-American causes, even though she was physically worn out and suffered from a number of ailments as a result of having spent years over-working herself. As impressive as Armwood's list of accomplishments are today, her three decades of service to the African-American community took a toll on her health. In October 1939, while on a speaking tour in Medford, Massachusetts, she became ill and unexpectedly died, presumably from phlebitis and exhaustion. Upon her death, Armwood was eulogized by Dr. Benjamin Mays, then President of Morehouse College at the John Wesley A.M.E. Church in

Washington D. C., and by Reverend C. S. Long, President Elder of the St. Paul A.M.E. Church of Tampa. She was laid to rest in the Armwood family plot at L'Unione Italiana Cemetery in her hometown of Tampa, Florida.²⁷⁵ With no children or dependents, Armwood left “a trust of [her] property” to her alma mater, Spelman College, in the hope that the little wealth that she had taken a lifetime to accumulate would “serve worthy Negro girls” upon her passing.²⁷⁶

Armwood’s sudden death leaves us wondering what she might have achieved had she lived long enough to practice law. Given her pioneering nature, she may well have been one of the NAACP lawyers of the 1940’s and 1950’s who challenged segregation, culminating in the 1954 Supreme Court *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* decision that outlawed racial segregation in public schools. Although we will never know what Armwood would have gone on to do, her determination to become an attorney was an important moment in the evolution of her activism. Although the strategies and tactics that Armwood used to fight against the second-class status of black in the Jim Crow South changed greatly overtime, she always remained committed to the African-American freedom movement. Her lifelong goal was to advance the race towards freedom and racial equality in American society.

²⁷⁵ [Dr. Lester Julian Eford], “Letter to Blanche Armwood, December 30, 1937,” *Armwood Family Papers*, Box 3 File 1; [Armwood] “Letter to Miss Florence Reed, President of Spelman College, April 10, 1937,” *Blanche Armwood Washington File*; Burke, “The Success of Blanche Armwood,” p. 42.

Conclusion

Blanche Armwood's legacy has lived on long after her death. Over the years, several local historians, writers, and organizations have included her as a vital part of the history of Tampa and Florida. They have kept her legacy alive by describing her varied achievements and by underscoring her dedication to the African-American population during one of the most racist eras in American history. However, in their efforts to understand Armwood's career as an activist, scholars have utilized a conceptual framework that stresses the oppressive nature of the Jim Crow South. They portray Armwood as a larger-than-life figure that succeeded despite the obstacles black women faced in the early twentieth-century, while concurrently maintaining that racism had such a deep impact on the lives of African-Americans that black leaders, like Armwood, abandoned the struggle for equality. Scholars, such as Keith Halderman and John Durham, focus mainly on the external forces that defined Armwood's world, arguing that she became resigned to her lot in life as a black woman, and consequently chose to adapt to rather than challenge the Southern racial system. Unfortunately, the supposition that Armwood abandoned the fight for freedom and equality has shaped how historians interpret her activism and how we assess her role in the African-American freedom movement today.

²⁷⁶ [Armwood] "Letter to Miss Florence Reed, President of Spelman College, April 10, 1937," *Blanche Armwood Washington File*.

When examining Armwood's long list of achievements, it is difficult to accept the line of reasoning put forth by Halderman, Durham, and many others who have studied her life's work. Most of the scholars who have written about Armwood depend upon race as their primary category of analysis and concentrate largely on the objective reality of racism in the Jim Crow South. They do not explore the importance of gender and class in defining her world, nor do they investigate Armwood's subjective experience living in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Armwood's perception of herself and of her duties as a middle-class black woman is key to understanding her career.

The goal of this thesis is to offer an alternative interpretation of Armwood's activism. It begins with the postulation that Blanche Armwood devoted her entire life to ameliorating the political, social, and economic status of blacks in American society because she believed that she could make a difference in fighting against racial discrimination. This study argues that she rejected the white supremacist ideology of the Jim Crow South and insisted on equal opportunity and political equality for all African-Americans. Rather than confine Armwood to the accommodationist or protest model, this thesis examines how social variables such as race, gender, and class intersected in her life, shaping her worldview and leadership style. It explores how Armwood's experiences as a southern, middle-class, black woman affected her racial ideology.

The overarching debate that took place at the turn of the century between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois has traditionally overshadowed the significance of black women activists like Blanche Armwood in the long fight for racial justice. Moving away from the Washington-DuBois argument, this study demonstrates that Armwood contributed greatly to the African-American freedom movement. She left behind a

powerful legacy of resistance against the second-class status that white America imposed on blacks during the nadir in African-American history. Throughout her years of service to the black community, Armwood contested the white South's perception of African-American women. In a world that associated them with Mammy and Jezebel stereotypes, Armwood gave African-Americans a new, positive depiction of black women, one that emphasized racial pride and self-esteem. She insisted that African-American women deserved the same respect that society accorded white women. Armwood also used what historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham refers to as traditional forms of protest, including petitions, boycotts, and verbal appeals to justice, to combat the lowly conditions that blacks faced in the South.²⁷⁷ Armwood set an example for future generations of black activists by challenging the laws that confined African-Americans to an inferior status. She fought for political equality, demanding that black women should have the right to vote and participate in the civic process as women and as African-Americans. In addition, she believed that the federal government had a responsibility to protect all its citizens and that every American was entitled to equal treatment before the law. Finally, Armwood's racial uplift work revealed her faith in the cornerstone of the American creed, its promise of equal opportunity. She provided some blacks with the chance to move away from poverty and illiteracy to become respected middle-class Americans.

Blanche Armwood belonged to a generation of black men and women who fought against racial oppression in their own local communities in a period that is known as the lowest point in American race relations. Although she lived in an entirely different world and adopted strategies that contrasted sharply with those of later generations, Armwood

²⁷⁷ Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, p. 187.

tackled many of the same issues that African-American activists of the Civil Rights Movement battled for as well, including racial pride and dignity, equal rights, and better living conditions. In their efforts to carry on the challenge against racial discrimination, black agitators of the 1950's and 1960's depended upon the institutions and resources that earlier generations of black women and men had built. They also inherited a legacy of resistance against the second-class status that white Americans forced on blacks. In her own way, Armwood played a vital role in setting in motion the future forces that led to the African-American freedom struggle that erupted in full view in the 1960's.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁸ For a discussion of black women's contribution to the African-American freedom movement, see Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, pp. 227-229.

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