

## African American women at historically Black colleges during the Civil Rights Movement

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*The African American Civil Rights Movement is a series of intentional occurrences in America that protested the legal segregation of African Americans and Whites. Inequality in the use of public spaces and the unequal opportunities for advancement of African Americans were the core reasons for this movement. This historical essay uses primary and secondary documents, as well as contemporary sources from non-educational fields, to assert that African American women were instrumental in the Civil Rights Movement and that historically Black institutions can be credited, in large part, for preparing these women for their roles.*

Historically Black institutions of higher education, especially normal schools founded to prepare African Americans to be teachers, played an instrumental role in the transformation of America. These institutions' academic and cultural missions to elevate the African American community through education were instrumental in equipping students with key skills in planning and leadership, as well as an understanding of the importance of civic engagement. This historical essay will span African American women's history in education from the early 1900s, just after the passing of the slavery-ending Emancipation Proclamation, to 1968 when famed Civil Rights Leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated.

It should be noted that the majority of historical texts assert that the Civil Rights Movement occurred from 1955 to 1968. However, in an effort to provide a better contextual framework for African American women's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, Black women involved in civic action pre-1955 will also be discussed in this essay. African American women like Ella Baker, a graduate of historically Black Shaw University, and Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of the historically Black Bethune-Cookman University, took charge in fighting for African American Civil Rights in the early 1900s. This is important to note because African American women's involvement in fighting for civil rights was not a new occurrence with the start of the 1955 Civil Rights Movement.

This essay will look at how historically Black normal schools empowered African American students through instructional ideology and mentoring, address where these women have been omitted from the history books, and examine specific instances of women from historically Black institutions leading in the Civil Rights Movement. This will support this historical essay's examination of the roles of African American women in the African American Civil Rights Movement and how historically Black

colleges and universities (HBCU), particularly those founded as normal schools, prepared those women to fulfill those roles.

### The Academic and Unwritten Missions of the HBCU

When reviewing the involvement of student-led protests during the Civil Rights Movement, the role of HBCU ideology cannot be left unnoted. The leadership of African American women in the Civil Rights Movement is important because of these individuals' impact on the movement, whether it were successfully leading the charge to desegregate a city's public transportation system or to challenge state legislators on inequality in educational funding. Among the hundreds of women enrolled at HBCUs that protested, many historical documents place these women on the backseat when it comes to the notoriety of being a Civil Rights leader. However, their involvement as college students suggests that these women possessed the common desire and will to make a difference in the Civil Rights Movement.

Anderson (1988) discusses the institution of education as an entity with academic philosophies and a commitment to those it serves. "A school is a community that cannot disavow responsibility for either intellectual or moral virtue" (Anderson, p. 1). He further asserts that a necessary relationship exists between popular education and the politics of oppression (Anderson). At HBCUs, different aspects of campus life, such as orientation and campus leadership, are "reinforced by values that engage the student in a dialogue between morality and history" (Shaw, 2006, p. 91-92). The importance of values at HBCUs is often written into the institutions' mission and campus codes of conducts, which could be a form of validation for why these institutions exist, especially under the circumstances in which they were founded. This is why students that attend these institutions develop "community sensibilities and cooperation, prerequisites to civic consciousness" (Shaw, p. 92). The faculty, staff, and administrators implement initiatives that can be traced to the university mission (Gallien & Peterson, 2005). Therefore, formal and informal mentoring by university staff grooms students to strive to meet the mandates of the HBCU in their daily activities (Gallien & Peterson). It is in this context that Williams and Ashley (2004) assert that it is nearly impossible to overstate the educational, political and social contributions of HBCUs.

The majority of historically Black institutions, especially those founded as normal schools, lacked adequate academic space and resources during the schools' early days of operation (Evans, 2007). However, some schools were better equipped, such as Howard and Fisk universities, which had many children of the country's elite African American families enrolled (Evans). Evans writes that "with a few exceptions from the Black upper

crust, all students at HBCUs worked" (p. 109). These jobs included working in the campus laundry room, cafeteria, or the campus fields and gardens, if agriculture was a focus (Evans). Tuskegee and Kentucky State, among some other historically Black schools, had a demerit system with threats of expulsion for students that failed to work chores (Evans). HBCU administrators had long instilled a sense of discipline and responsibility in students attending these institutions. The significance of students working to support their institution aligns with findings that students at HBCUs are invested in serving their campuses and the surrounding communities.

The combination of students knowing the history of African American's treatment in America and having the morals to stand up against racial inequality is directly related to lessons espoused by HBCU leadership. We can also understand why women attending these institutions were well prepared and inspired to take the lead in the Civil Rights Movement. However, the African American women have not always been credited for their leadership roles in the movement. The next section will look at where these women have been omitted in historical documentation of this era.

### **A Void in History: Women in the Civil Rights Movement**

In a course taught by Eleanor Gervasini Willis at the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, American women who shaped the Civil Rights Movement are explored through literature. The premise of the course is, "For today's children, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s is as remote as the Civil War" (Willis, 1997, ¶ 2). Willis states that today's student celebrates Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday with little awareness of the recent establishment of the holiday. Also, this holiday solely glorifies King. Though worthy of praise, the syllabus states, "without the help, support, hard work, and dedication of many people, particularly women, Dr. King would not have been able to accomplish as much as he did" (Willis, ¶ 3).

Willis looks at the roles, responsibilities and contributions of women like Ida Wells-Barnett, who attended historically Black Rust and Fisk universities. Wells-Barnett was a pioneering journalist whose writings exposed the details of lynching in the South in the early 1900s. Willis also covers Mary Church Terrell in her course. Terrell, though educated at the predominantly White Oberlin College, was heavily involved in the National Woman Suffrage Association speaking on behalf of African American women's battles against racism and sexism. Terrell also taught at Wilberforce University, an HBCU owned and operated by African Americans, before taking a teaching position in Washington D.C. at M Street High School, at the time noted as the nation's best African American secondary school (Willis, 1997).

These women were the beginning of the movement many would come to know in the 1960s.

When looking at the Civil Rights Movement, Crawford, Rouse & Wood (1993) discuss how "men led but African American women organized" the movement from 1955-1968. Women provided Civil Rights workers with places to eat and sleep, but also turned out in higher numbers at mass demonstrations and attempted to register to vote more often than men (Crawford, et al.). At the same time, women were subject to the most violent incidents of being clubbed or beaten in jail (Crawford, et al.). They were also fired from their jobs if they were rumored to be involved in the movement (Crawford, et al.).

The roles of women in the movement held just as much significance as the number of women involved. African American women were responsible for "generating popular support for the movement among rural Blacks" (Crawford, et al., 1993, p. 185). Despite the exclusion of African American women in top positions in the movement, their involvement garnered a sense of empowerment (Crawford, et al.). By using journal entries as primary documents, Crawford, et al. introduces Bernice Reagon, an African American student at the historically Black normal school, Albany State College in Georgia. Reagon wrote, "There was a sense of power, in a place where you didn't feel you had any power. There was a sense of confronting things that terrified you, like jail, police, walking in the street – you know?" (Crawford, et al., p. 185). Reagon participated in local demonstrations, sang with the Freedom Singers of Albany, and attributed her participation in the Civil Rights Movement as a confidence builder. Reagon's story as a student is not uncommon, but it is not commonly told.

Most African American women in the movement held background roles due to racism or sexism (Associated Press, 2005). The background treatment, however, was only in regards to leadership positions. African American women were "visible, but unsung" (Associated Press, ¶ 6). Photos, mostly from archived newspaper articles, are primary documents that shed light on young, African American women college students' role in the Civil Rights Movement. A photo from 1963 shows students from Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University (FAMU), a historically Black institution, in court answering charges filed against them for protesting segregated movie theaters (Associated Press). Most of the students in the photo were women. Another example of African American women college students involved in the moment is Bertha Gilbert, 22 years of age in 1964. She was photographed while being arrested by three Nashville, Tennessee, police officers for her participation in the student lunch counter sit-ins. This is the extent to which most African American women garnered any recognition

for their roles in the Civil Rights Movement. In 2005, Katherine J. Kennedy, director of Boston University's Howard Thurman Center, told the Associated Press that most African American women were:

Volunteers — women in the churches who cooked the meals and made sure all the preparations were made, the ones who cleaned up after the rallies and got ready for the next one. Most women who are sincerely interested in making a difference are not looking for the publicity for it. ... Making a true difference doesn't always come with fanfare (Associated Press, 2005, ¶ 17).

This concept of making a difference, by any means necessary, would become evident when looking intently at the roles of African American women students enrolled at historically Black colleges during the Civil Rights Movement. This paper will now explore Tennessee State University (TSU), FAMU, and Tougaloo College, three normal schools located in Southern state capitals. These institutions were selected because each possesses storied histories of campus involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, as well as premier location for protest of state government and legislators.

### **HBCU Women Lead the Movement**

#### *Tennessee State*

During the early years at TSU, founded in Nashville in 1909, all persons involved with the school worked to keep it running by either clearing rocks for new construction or, due to lack of resources, carrying chairs from class to class (TSU, 2008). The school's charge is "enter to learn; go forth to serve." This mission for students is to succeed academically, while preparing themselves to move forward with helping improve and serve society at large. This is evident when studying the Nashville student sit-ins, where TSU students were part of 70 sit-ins in 1960 (Sargent and Maxwell, 2004).

The Nashville sit-in movement started on February 6, 1960, six days after four students at the historically Black North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University (NCA&T), known as the "Greensboro Four," sat down to stand up against inequality (Sargent and Maxwell, 2004). Nashville had four HBCUs: TSU, Fisk University, Meharry Medical College and Baptist Seminary. The largest enrollment belonged to TSU. Diane Nash, a student at Fisk and one of the most notable leaders of the Nashville movement, led those students and is one of few African American women whose name is commonly noted as a Civil Rights leader. However, less than 10 years after the sit-ins started, Rita Geier would emerge from among the

city's HBCUs to be a part of the movement.

In 1968, Geier, now Rita Geier Sanders, was a 22-year old faculty member at TSU. Sanders filed a law suit "alleging a dual system of higher education" existed in Tennessee based on race (TSU, 2008, ¶ 10). This followed the University of Tennessee system opening a two-year, associates degree granted campus in Nashville, just 5 miles from TSU. That campus, which was predominately White, eventually became a three-year, non-bachelor's degree granting campus. As formal discussions began about the campus becoming a four-year bachelor's degree granting university, Geier sued the state based on racial motives to allow another four-year institution to overshadow the pre-existing historically Black TSU. Geier also argued that TSU had historically been under funded compared to other predominately White institutions in the state of Tennessee.

Geier's case, known as the Geier Consent Decree, would not be settled until 38 years later. The UT-Nashville campus was absorbed by TSU in 1979 (Tennessee State University, 2008). Geier cited the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King as the reason for her moving forward to file the lawsuit (personal communication, September 11, 2006). The case was closed in 2006, after the state ruled that TSU was finally on an equal level with resources as Tennessee's predominately White institutions. Geier's experience is an example of the work done by women from HBCUs during the Civil Rights Movement, even if it took four decades for her to garner widespread recognition as being a Civil Rights leader.

#### *Florida A&M*

FAMU, located in Tallahassee, was founded in 1887 as the State Normal College for Colored Students. The school earned land grant status under the Second Morrill Act of 1890 (FAMU, 2008). Similar to other HBCUs, FAMU worked with limited resources in its early years, but found rapid growth from 1950 – 1968 (FAMU, 2008). Students at FAMU, however, did not find the same growth for them off campus.

In 1959, two FAMU students, sisters Patricia and Priscilla Stephens, attended a summer workshop hosted by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in their hometown of Miami (Sargent and Maxwell, 2004). The two were trained on tactics for sit-ins and returned to Tallahassee in the fall where they joined Daisy Young, another African American woman and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) campus advisor, along with a few others, and started a campus chapter of CORE (Sargent and Maxwell).

The women planned and implemented a bus boycott and the city's bus system was desegregated within weeks (Sargent and Maxwell, 2004). Lunch counter sit-ins in February of 1960 did not go as well. Despite police

brutality, multiple arrests, and verbal abuse by White residents of Tallahassee, the students continued non-violent sit-ins for three years before lunch counters in the city were desegregated in 1963 (Sargent and Maxwell).

### Tougaloo College

In 1871, Tougaloo College was founded in Jackson, Mississippi by the American Missionary Association of New York. When the northerners opened a "normal department" to serve as a teacher training school for anyone regardless of race, the state of Mississippi discontinued funding the institution. The school's leadership pushed on despite this with a commitment to educational advancement and to improve race relations in the state (Tougaloo College, 2008). "Tougaloo College was in the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi, serving as the safe haven for those who fought for freedom, equality and justice and the sanctuary within which the strategies were devised and implemented to end segregation and improve race relations" (Tougaloo College, ¶ 4). Nine students took heed to the college's involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.

The "Tougaloo Nine," in March of 1961, attempted to integrate the largest, and exclusively white, library in Jackson, Mississippi (Tougaloo College, 2008). The students were arrested and held in jail for 36 hours (Tougaloo College). The protest is noted as the motivator of many young African Americans in Jackson to become active in the movement (Tougaloo College). Five of the nine were African American women, further advancing documentation that female students at historically Black colleges led and organized key movements in the fight for Civil Rights.

### Conclusion

Key factors and important individuals have been outlined in this brief history on African American women and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Leaders for racial equality had come before them, but most only had moderate success at making a widespread impact on ending segregation. However, it was not until the 1950s when HBCU students moved off campus with the movement that change began to occur in America. And among these student protests, many of the organizers and leaders were African American women.

Higher education practitioners can find this information useful in supporting today's women student leaders. As the women of the Civil Rights Movement were scholars in the halls of the HBCU academy, so are student leaders today. Campus leaders are beneficiaries of being students at institu-

tions founded to uplift the community. African American women, whether students or teachers at HBCUs, have long been involved in the Civil Rights Movement for African Americans, and the lessons learned at these institutions were pivotal in their preparation to change America. This historical essay provides practitioners with an idea of the impact of African American women on the Civil Rights Movement. Practitioners that work to serve all students will hopefully become more aware of the holes in history.

It should also be noted that many of the women Civil Rights activists enrolled at HBCUs during the movement are often omitted from their own alma mater's historical archives, though their contributions are significant. Regardless of institution type, women students have the potential to be subject to forms of sexism. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge these students' accomplishments, as well as note the historical significance of such accomplishments. Therefore, a history, such as this essay, can provide practitioners with the insight on how to better the historical vestiges of women leadership with the intellectual philosophies of HBCUs in an effort to better promote civic engagement among its current student leadership.

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## **The journey of identity development for Jewish Millennial college students**

Kimberley Kushner

*This paper discusses the ethnoreligious identity development of the Jewish millennial college student. Through analyzing Parks' (1986, 2000) theory of faith development and Phinney's (1992, 1996) model of ethnic identity development, this paper examines the shift from institutionalized Jewish community to non-institutionalized, Jewish peer networks of belonging and proposes that this shift occurs to help Jewish students make meaning of their minority identity within a majority White and Christian campus culture.*

Current college student development research provides a limited understanding of the identity development of Jewish college students (Behneman, 2007). One of the most prominent difficulties in understanding and researching Jewish identity development occurs because Jewish college students "do not fit neatly into established and understood notions of ethnic, racial, national, or religious identity" (MacDonald-Dennis, 2006, p. 267). Although American higher education typically sees Judaism as a religion, it is important that university administrators, student affairs practitioners, and developmental researchers also account for the ethnic components of this complex minority identity (Cousens, 2007).

Jewish college students often define themselves through blending both the religious and ethnic components of this distinct social identity. Although some students may identify as merely religious Jews or as merely ethnic Jews, most understand their identities as "primarily cultural and secondarily religious," and often have difficulties making meaning of these two identities and how they are connected within contemporary American society (Behneman, 2007, p. i; Cousens, 2007). Therefore, to make meaning of these multiple identity components, Jewish students who were raised with less conservative and less-defined Jewish backgrounds find networks of belonging amongst Jewish friends or other Jewish communities on campus. Traditionally, these networks were created through institutionalized communities such as synagogues, campus centers (e.g., Hillel: the Foundation for Jewish Campus Life), and Jewish community centers that directly related to Jewish peer group experiences. However, this traditional community structure has changed significantly with the rise of the millennial student generation. Millennial students, born between the early 1980s and the beginning of the twenty-first century, "are unlike any other youth generation in living memory...[t]hey are more numerous, more affluent, better educated, and