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# Black Women in Durham Politics, 1950–1996

## From Grassroots to Electoral Politics

Grace Walton

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*Based on the author's senior thesis in African-American history, this article about black women by a black woman was conceived to educate Americans about a different kind of history. It illustrates the silent political struggles of black women in Durham, North Carolina, and their gradual acceptance into American politics from 1950 to 1996. The oral history design demonstrates that black women's political activity underwent a transformation from grassroots politics to full electoral participation, which brought them to the forefront of Durham politics. Through both types of political activity, the unique political consciousness of black women continues to have a great impact on the community's political institutions.*

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I felt somehow for many years that George Washington and Alexander Hamilton just left me out by mistake. But, through the process of amendment, interpretation, and Court decision, I have finally been included in "We the People." — Barbara Jordan

— Janet Cheatham Bell  
*Famous Black Quotations*

**T**his article about black women by a black woman was conceived to educate Americans about a different kind of history. Readers will not learn about George Washington or Alexander Hamilton. Although it does not mention war, it is very much about struggle — the silent political battles of black women in Durham, North Carolina, and their gradual acceptance into American politics. Readers will hear the voices of the women and learn about their cultural experiences as blacks and women. Gender, combined with ethnic experiences, produced a unique political identity for black women. I demonstrate that their political activity underwent a transformation from grassroots politics to full electoral participation, which brought them to the forefront of Durham politics. I also show that through both types of political activity, the unique political consciousness of black women continues to have a great impact on the political institutions in the community.<sup>1</sup>

I write about the political involvement of these black women to show historians and Americans who are ignorant of their political activities that they have been a vital motivating force in the black community. They have always been politically active, and their political role in Durham gets larger and more powerful every day. With such a dynamic political force rising in America, it is time to write "her" story into "his"tory.

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Americans have to open their eyes and change their definitions of history and politics. Studies have often failed to recognize such societal factors as gender and race, which make up political identities and individual agendas. One must understand that politics is more than voting and serving in the House of Representatives. For centuries politics commended and applauded the accomplishments of males, primarily white males. It conveniently omitted the contributions of many other groups of people, neglecting to view them as part of history. Black women, specifically, have been overlooked as contributors to history simply because their political participation did not fit the mode of the white American version of historical participation.

The "position of any group in America is indicated by [its] relative influence in the societal decision-making process."<sup>2</sup> Black women, because of their race and gender, have never had an influence in the American political structure. Their political behavior was formed by their culture and gender. Their politics reaches into every area of life outside the legislature. Many black women are not concerned with building space centers or nuclear weapons because their issues revolve around bringing themselves and their children out of poverty. They are concerned with equal employment and fair wages.

Their unique status as fourth-class citizens resulted in their political behavior deviating from the standard concept of political activity, particularly voting and campaigning.<sup>3</sup> The politics of Durham's black women focused on working, through their community, to change living conditions for everyone, black and white. Their political behavior centered on revering their heritage while working to improve their condition. In the past, their politics also translated into sacrificing their personal agendas for the good of their race. Since the civil rights movement, black women have not limited themselves to community involvement. In recent years they have moved into electoral politics, bringing to it their culture and gender; this complex identity brought a different point of view to Durham's political institutions.

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## **Methodology**

I surveyed the political involvement of black women in Durham from the mid-1950s to 1996 to show their evolution from grassroots to electoral political activity. My multifaceted research methods were necessary because documentation on the lives and politics of these women was limited. I therefore interviewed seventeen black women in the community, to determine their political activities during and since the civil rights era. Their names appear in Appendix A.

I asked each one twenty questions, varying or eliminating some of them because several women were not native to Durham or I needed a clearer response regarding their personal experiences. See Appendix B for the questions.

Owing to unavailability, scheduling conflicts, and a few rejections, my list became much more diverse than it had been originally. I attempted to interview women who were first in every area of the city's politics.<sup>4</sup> Since many were public officials, it was difficult, if not impossible, to reach them. Therefore, my list of interviewees was far from exhaustive, and many more stories remain to be told. Yet I feel that the women I interviewed symbolized the overall black female population because they included representatives from every socioeconomic background. Their diversity reflected their varying points of views on all issues, from education to the civil rights movement to the need to eliminate racism. In addition, talking to them helped me understand the areas where black women

have thrived and what issues have been important to them and to learn their overall perspective regarding their low political status in Durham.

While these interviews comprised the majority of my research, I consulted books that covered the general history of the activities of Durham's black community during the civil rights struggle. Elaine Burgess's *Negro Leadership in a Southern City* and William Keech's *The Impact of Black Voting* conveyed the temporal racial climate and the progressive nature of the city.<sup>5</sup> I searched through forty years' worth of the *Durham Herald Sun* and *Carolina Times* to attempt to reconstruct the racial climate and general atmosphere in the fifties and sixties. According to the newspapers of the civil rights period, men such as Howard Fuller, Floyd McKissick, and Howard Clement were leaders in the accomplishments of black people. Yet I found no mention of the political involvement of the black women of the time. In more recent years, the newspapers covered the election of black females to the school board and various other positions briefly. Still, I garnered few specific details about their grassroots political behavior, the organizations with which they were affiliated, and the roles they played in the civil rights struggle.

Lacking this material, I researched the area of black feminist psychology to obtain information concerning the factors that contribute to the political identity of black women. I browsed through books covering their general political behavior and books on feminist theory by Bell Hooks, Paula Giddings, and other black theorists to better understand how black women nationwide form their political identities and agendas. What I found was consistent with much of what I discovered about Durham's black women. Those I interviewed gave me a strong sense of the aesthetic nature of their political consciousness, detailing how their social experiences made them more aware of certain issues.

I approached this project as an oral history because I felt that only these women could tell the female story. The results are in two parts, the first covering the political activities of black women during the civil rights period, the second demonstrating the evolution of black women's political activity since the civil rights period. I identify each interviewee to make clear whose opinions are being presented. All quotes from secondary sources are cited.

I hope that through the words, actions, and experiences of the women, readers will understand that it is impossible for a black woman to be simply black or simply a woman. Her experiences have been affected by her status as a woman and as a black, two identities that cannot be separated. The mind-set of black women and their multilayered characters are what made their politics so distinct. I hope that by my documentation, American scholars who are ignorant of the facts will pay attention to black women and give them the credit they deserve.

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### **The Civil Rights Struggle: Grassroots Politics**

In 1957, Durham, North Carolina, was not much different from the rest of the South. Jim Crow was strongly established throughout the city.<sup>6</sup> Blacks and whites were not allowed to eat together, drink from the same water fountain, or live in the same areas. The railroad tracks separated the races — on one side, beautiful houses of the white people, the other lined with a string of boarded-up houses, garbage thrown all around, and half-naked, barefoot black children played in the street.<sup>7</sup> Blacks' living spaces were restricted to areas that were considered less than desirable by the white community, and job options were strictly limited because no one wanted to hire a black.<sup>8</sup>

The blacks, who for the most part inhabited the East End and the Hayti area, worked primarily in the tobacco plant. Although it was grueling labor, they had few options. Since many white businesses owners would not hire them, the blacks either worked in the tobacco company or became domestic servants. Some were employed at the Merchants and Farmers Bank. The few educated among them secured jobs in the black-owned North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company.<sup>9</sup>

In general, all facilities and opportunities for blacks were inferior to those for whites. The school systems — one for blacks and one for whites — probably suffered the worst inequities.<sup>10</sup> The black system was decidedly inferior — the graduates of a black high school in Durham did not receive the equal of even an eleventh-grade education at any Northern school.<sup>11</sup> The teachers were required to teach all subjects rather than those in their special fields, and the books were not only outdated but inappropriate for the grade levels in which they were used. There was little opportunity of employment for blacks without a higher education.

Yet for all its problems, Durham's reputation throughout the South was that of a "unique town . . . that is more liberal than what you would expect in a Southern state."<sup>12</sup> Throughout the Jim Crow South, Durham's name preceded itself. After all, blacks had built the North Carolina Mutual Insurance Company, the largest and most successful black insurance company in the world.<sup>13</sup> Durham's black population, while considerably poorer than its white counterparts, had been relatively successful and financially mobile. Because of the blacks' accomplishments, Durham was called everything from the capital of the black middle class to the black Wall Street of America.<sup>14</sup>

Durham, with its white and black population, has always been considered "progressive"<sup>15</sup> because outsiders perceived it as having "more racial harmony between the races than in any other city in America."<sup>16</sup> This is not to say that it was free of Ku Klux Klan harassment because, as everyone knows, the Klan was as active here as anywhere else.<sup>17</sup> In spite of Klan abuse, staunch segregation, and separate and unequal facilities, blacks were allowed to establish their own businesses, buy their own houses, and in some cases, live peacefully.

In June 1957, notwithstanding the prominent middle class, many black communities were still poverty-stricken, and the Jim Crow laws placed numerous restrictions on blacks. Ironically, Durham was ringed by academic institutions — Duke University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the North Carolina Negro College — that attracted students from all over the country. These scholars often brought their progressive ideas from the North, which conflicted with North Carolina's social traditions.

As more and more blacks became more educated, and with the influx of outsiders, blacks tolerated the Jim Crow sanctions less and less. Political meetings, in such local churches as Saint Joseph's A.M.E. and White Rock Baptist Church in the Hayti area, were held more frequently, the issues ranging from equal education to better housing.<sup>18</sup> Howard Clement, Howard Fuller, Floyd McKissick, Douglas Moore, and other local leaders had begun meeting with the mayor about naming blacks to the Board of Education, the Human Relations Committee, the County Commissioners Board, and various other political posts. At the same time, the students of Hillside High School and the North Carolina Negro College became politically active, attending meetings of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Negroes, and local churches.<sup>19</sup>

On a Sunday morning in 1957, Douglas Moore, a young black minister, and six protesters gathered to stage a sit-in at the Royal ice cream parlor near Roxboro and Dowd

streets.<sup>20</sup> Virginia Williams, one of the demonstrators, described it, saying, “[We] decided that we needed to actually stop just sitting around and actually do a sit-in.” At the time, whites could sit and order, but blacks had to go to the back parking lot and order through a window. Williams said, “Knowing we weren’t gonna get through the front door, [we] went to the back just like we were supposed to, but once we got there we just went right through the swinging door. We just headed for [a] booth and sat down. Of course they called the police and we were arrested and somebody came down and paid our bond.”

Historians usually credit Greensboro as the birthplace of the sit-ins, but these events started three years earlier in Durham. Williams says that “it got a little excitement but then it died down,” but she describes the civil rights period as “very upbeat. It was just exciting.”<sup>21</sup> As the movement gained more momentum in the sixties, the boycotting and sit-ins increased considerably, and the Royal ice cream parlor was one of the first stores to be closed. Throughout the civil rights era, women like Virginia Williams helped sustain the movement by protesting and working behind the scenes to effect change in Durham.

In 1960, Faye Mayo, an elementary school guidance counselor, was a student at North Carolina Negro College. A faithful protester throughout the sixties, she, like Williams, attended every march in Durham and said that “the women were really the ones out there. It was the college students, who were [mostly] black women.” Mayo attended Saint Joseph’s A.M.E., the local church, and participated in many of the mass meetings. Active in the NAACP, she was named Miss NAACP when she was a college student. In 1963, Mayo was also arrested at the Howard Johnson sit-in on highway 15-501. She is pictured protesting in a local newspapers and in *North Carolina and the Negro*. Many factors motivated Mayo to participate.

I had had no problems with segregated schools because I didn’t know any different. [But] there were lots of things that just weren’t right, especially when it came to employment. Even myself, I had to go Philadelphia to business school when I graduated. There were no jobs in North Carolina unless you had a college education and could teach. I knew that this wasn’t right because I knew a lot of [black] students couldn’t go to college; they needed decent jobs. Here in Durham it was mostly to the tobacco companies and warehouses and the Mechanics and Farmers Bank, but they couldn’t hire everyone. We knew there was no future as far as jobs. In education we had used textbooks. It was not fair that we were denied the better educational facilities in Durham than the Caucasian people were offered in their high schools.<sup>22</sup>

The black women of Durham were quite aware of the racial discrimination because they were most often its victims. For this reason, the young and the old protested, marched, and provided technical support to the organizations and the protesters. They knew that their chances for success were very slim, not only for them but for the rest of the black community, but their “value system to move a community forward is a concept of community unity.”<sup>23</sup> Their desire to create more opportunities for themselves and others spurred them on and made them a vital source of support for the movement.

According to Beverly Washington Jones, a professor at North Carolina Central University (NCCU), formerly North Carolina Negro College, the movement “was . . . generated by young people.” The young women in middle school, high school, and college made up a good number of the protesters and, as Washington said, the young students were “engaging the older established leadership to become sensitive to the issues that were confronting the community.”<sup>24</sup>

Debra Giles, a former county commissioner for Durham, was a sophomore at Hillside

High School when she became active in the civil rights movement. She said,

My sisters and I all participated in the marches and the boycotts, all to improve the African-American access to facilities and jobs and all those things. We got arrested several times. The infamous Howard Johnson used to own a hotel/motel, but it was one of the places that was being picketed and we were drug off site from there. Curiously enough, it was exciting to us because we basically were reared in a typical middle-class environment but felt a sense of responsibility for getting involved in it.<sup>25</sup>

Young black women like Giles and Jones provided the spark for the leadership to move forward through their desire and enthusiasm for change. Their courage and strength forced the older generation out of its silent revolt and elicited the attention of the white community, but they were not limited to confrontational activities.<sup>26</sup>

Many Durham black women also tried to engage the greater community in working together through grassroots endeavors. Betty Copeland, a clinical psychologist at the Durham Department of Mental Health and former school board member, recalled her efforts as a college student in the 1960s.

[In 1967] I created, along with one of my buddies on campus, an organization called GAS, Grassroots Association for Students. What we did was connected with a number of the organizations out in the community. We became members of the student government, traveled the state getting other students involved. We focused on needs in the community, like better sewage, better housing, better education.<sup>27</sup>

Like other women, Copeland was a member of the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Negroes, which was, and is still, among the most prominent black political organizations in the city. Started in 1935, it asserted that it planned to place political power in the hands of blacks. The committee served as a vital force for political motivation and mobilization. At the time, black men were the presidents and spokesmen for this organization and the NAACP. Giles believed that although women were active members, it took a long time before they were permitted to assume leadership positions. Despite the social definitions of gender roles, black women were always present at the meetings and participated in the committees.

The women were allowed "to participate but not hold positions of [power]" in these organizations because of the societal perception that women should tend to the family and be seen but not heard.<sup>28</sup> Despite this restriction, Josephine Clement, while not politically active at the time, owing to her maternal responsibilities, said that black women in black institutions were always "the foundation of such organizations. Just like the church, schools, and businesses, women have gone in and run these organizations and held them together. The men took the offices on top."<sup>29</sup>

It was assumed that the women played traditional "supportive" roles as opposed to the visible males' leadership posts.<sup>30</sup> Virginia Williams said of the work of black women in the NAACP, "Basically, we were out picketing. I think some women always made sandwiches or drinks or something. They made sure that you had something to take with you. We'd call and say 'I'm ready to be picked up' and they would come and pick [us] up and take [us] where [we] needed to go. Women mainly headed the office."

While "it has been the custom to devalue these functions simply because they are female tasks" does not mean that these roles were insignificant.<sup>31</sup> The women became secretaries and office staff who organized the pickup routes for the picketers and communicated with the various Durham leaders, organizing march locations and mass meetings. Many women gained useful managerial skills as they performed these tasks. They learned

how to run meetings and organizations and developed networking skills and financing techniques, all of which prepared them to become effective leaders.

Black women were in the forefront of decreasing racial strife and violence in the communities. Elna Spaulding, the first black woman member of the Board of County Commissioners, recalled that "Durham was really in a crisis situation. Racial lines were tightly drawn and as for communication, racial relations were the lowest they had ever been, and they were never very good." She and other women, white and black, recognized the potential for violence of the same level as that of Birmingham and Montgomery. Therefore, they worked together diligently to prevent outbreaks of violence.

After attending a 1968 women's conference in New York on methods for preventing violence in communities rife with racial tension, Spaulding called a meeting of the women of Durham. More than 125 women showed up. This was a landmark event because, as Spaulding maintained, it "was the first time that [a] grassroots level of women, biracial, had ever come together to work specifically on community problems."<sup>32</sup> As a result of this meeting, Spaulding formed Women in Action for the Prevention of Violence. The group, which met every two weeks, held panel discussions and addressed various ways in which women in the community could combat Durham's problems. A number of community members referred to Spaulding as one of the most prominent black female leaders of the time. Her actions and involvement have served as a great inspiration to many of the women who have followed in her footsteps.

While Spaulding worked to increase interracial communication, Ann Atwater began to fight for issues concerning housing for the low-income black population. As an occupant of such housing who was behind on her rent, Atwater decided to take control of her life. She met Howard Fuller, of whom she said, "At the time, he decided that he would train several people. He then put me through . . . community action technician training. After that, we got started on how to deal with housing, employment, and welfare. You name it, we were there."

Following the training program, Atwater, Fuller, and several other leaders formed the United Organization for Community Improvement (UOCI). Atwater worked on housing very closely with this group because she knew the trials that beset low-income occupants. She commented, "When people would go up to rent a house, the tenant selector would feel the black women to see if they were pregnant. They wouldn't fix the houses up and treated people like dogs in public housing."

Private housing landlords were no better, frequently neglecting to make repairs. When they took care of them, they raised rents significantly, a factor that exacerbated the housing situation for blacks. Many of them could not afford to buy a house and when forced to leave, they had no place to go.

Atwater worked closely with the UOCI to educate blacks about their rights. In addition, she was assigned to investigate the welfare system and inform all citizens about the services available. She worked to disseminate this information throughout the community to further empower lower-income blacks and extended her struggle to include establishing equal educational facilities for black children. Her adamant stand for education stemmed from the difficulty her children had encountered in school. She and a number of other black women protested faithfully in front of City Hall and the school board committee to obtain better facilities for their children. When she looked back, she remembered that "when we started in the schools we found out that Hillside children who were in the twelfth grade were using eleventh-grade books. We fought to get the right books in there. We found out that we had teachers in there, teaching, say, math and they were

English teachers.”<sup>33</sup> Atwater fought tirelessly for improvements in the school systems; when the quality of facilities was increased, her daughter went from failing her classes to becoming an honor roll student.

Atwater’s community involvement represented a great service to the progress and education of all people. Through her various accomplishments, she became an outstanding leader within the community. Having fought for civil rights all her life, she believed, with other Durham women, that the “struggle is ongoing.”<sup>34</sup>

Margaret Turner, who shared Atwater’s belief, was a staunch fighter for the civil rights cause. As an American Tobacco Company worker for more than thirty years, she said that she was not just another black tobacco worker because she was respected by everyone with whom she worked. She recounted her experience at the factory, saying, “I worked in the cigarette department where it was clean. But the black women, they worked in the dirty part of it, doing the processing of the tobacco. But you see I was too much of a clean person to do that. When I went to get a job I didn’t go where the black women went because it was too dirty. I was just the type of person that wanted the best for myself.”<sup>35</sup>

The pride, dignity, and strength that Turner exhibited throughout her life earned respect from many people, black and white. Although she was merely a tobacco worker, the supervisors consulted her for advice about the black workers. She seemed to be a natural leader and worked actively to integrate the factory’s facilities, starting with the bathrooms. The workers went to every floor and posted signs in all the whites’ bathrooms, which said that a black person had used them. The confusion that ensued led to the eventual integration of all the company’s facilities. Turner’s actions were a prime example of the ways in which black women subtly changed conditions in Durham. While they had no control over the laws and no voice to be heard, they helped effect change through their subtle tactics and informal gatherings.

In the early 1950s and 1960s, Margaret Turner “jumped feet-first into the civil rights movement. Every day, when her daughters got out of school, she accompanied them on the picket line,” trying to bring people together by making whites understand that blacks needed and wanted the same possessions that whites enjoyed. A lifetime member of the NAACP, she succeeded Floyd McKissick as the “state NAACP youth adviser.”<sup>36</sup>

Throughout her life, Turner was a renowned leader for civil rights who transmitted her undying spirit to fight for truth and justice to the student picketers. As a leader on the picket line, she said, “I was good for not negotiating ‘cause some of the issues and things that [one of the male leaders at the time] brought back to us, I just wouldn’t accept. They had to come by me, because I was the one out there with those kids. Those kids respected me and also respect me today.” A number of prominent black women leaders, including Vivian McCoy, Beverly Washington Jones, and Viola Williams, came under her guidance during the civil rights movement.

Even at seventy-six, Turner did not feel that she had completed her work. She wanted to do better, to do more. As part of her four years’ continual involvement, she served on the Durham Human Relations Committee, helping to foster better race relations and eliminate discrimination. From working the polls for fifty years, she remembered that during the civil rights period “you saw [women] at the polls more than . . . men. Women played the biggest role in the voter registration.” Despite all that Turner witnessed in Durham throughout her lifetime, she had no hatred toward anyone. She worked in the struggle for freedom because, she said, “It was given to [me] that that was what I was supposed to do in life.”<sup>37</sup> Black women throughout Durham felt an obligation to strive for social improvements for blacks and participated in many ways.

The variety of political activity in which the black women of the time engaged may appear to have represented an insignificant contribution, but one must remember the thirty-to-forty-year differences between then and now. The standards of feminism and political importance have changed dramatically. Virginia Williams felt that “considering you are talking forty years ago, [the impact of black women’s activities] was very strong. Because even if they were not heads of something, women were always there to make sure things went along fine.”<sup>38</sup>

Those black women were locked into a gender role prescribed by American society. They were expected to be workers, mothers, and wives, not to aspire to positions of power. This factor was compounded by the strong sense of family responsibility characteristic of black women throughout history. The traditional role of mother and wife took priority in many women’s lives because the “concept of motherhood is of central importance in the philosophy of the African-American population.”<sup>39</sup> This is the reason that Elna Spaulding, Josephine Clement, and a score of others were not visible as leaders. At the same time, their maternal identity served as an impetus for much of their political involvement. The desire to protect their children from threats of violence and hopes of improving the quality of life for their families motivated them to picket, boycott, appear in front of the school board, and confront an angry mob of Klan members in order to effect change in Durham.

Black women considered it “their duty and responsibility to participate in such events.” They were compelled to act because they “had to fight harder because [they] have been at the bottom. Even at the point where [they] have had to sublimate [themselves] to help the men.” Durham’s black women assumed supporting roles in accordance with their traditions and society’s definition of their status. Any attempt at leadership within the black community would have been regarded as an attempt to undermine the overall black fight for equality. Therefore, the women politicked at a strictly grassroots level — as secretaries, cooks, and marchers; by offering subtle suggestions to their husbands, they could influence the men’s political conduct and indirectly affect the outcomes of political events.

Although black women played subtle roles during the civil rights period, they did the groundwork and laid the foundation for the battle in Durham. Without their money raising for various organizations, there would have been no funding. Without their making the phone calls, setting up meetings, picking up marchers, protesting, and doing the “day-to-day work to keep these organizations running,” there would have been no movement. Although the women were not “in positions of power in the larger community, they nevertheless [had] access to this larger power through their power in the black community.”

Numerous Durham citizens believe that black women run many of the organizations, regardless of their title or position. For this reason, they are important in the black community. Elna Spaulding, Ann Atwater, and Margaret Turner’s groundbreaking work in bettering race relations was most important to the advancement of policies like integration and school merging. Black women undoubtedly were an invaluable battalion in the struggle for equality, which “helped bring women to the forefront” in the years following.<sup>40</sup>

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### **After the Struggle: Electoral Politics**

As the civil rights movement reached its peak, black people gained full citizenship privileges. After passage of the Voting Rights Acts of 1965, the politics of blacks changed

dramatically. Before the movement, many barriers kept them from voting and holding any political office, so blacks were forced to engage in protest politics. As the doors of opportunity opened for them, black men and women countrywide gradually abandoned protest politics. When they began to seek electoral office, the percentage of black legislators increased dramatically.

In the late sixties, Durham saw the selection of the first black man and black woman to sit on the Board of County Commissioners — members of this board and the school board were still appointed. As soon as the spheres of political activity broadened, black women were immediately active in the structure. Those in Durham had acquired all the managerial and political skills necessary to run organizations through their community involvement. Black women had decades of experience as active church members, sorors, mothers, wives, and secretaries. In addition, as wives of the presidents of the North Carolina Mutual and the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Blacks — its present title — they were highly exposed practitioners of politics. As mothers, they were active in community organizations — local churches, wives clubs, sororities, and PTA boards. Many were highly educated and had acquired remarkable managerial skills at college.

It seemed that the only reason black women were not part of the political system in Durham was attributable to racism and sexism. Since the sixties, black women have been elected or appointed to almost every political board in the city and county and have become prominent executives of community organizations and businesses. Today's black women are probably the most dominant and outspoken people in politics, from the Board of Education to the chambers of the state Senate.

From their limited political opportunities and years of discrimination, the women became attuned to the needs of the Durham community. In the sixties, they understood the need to foster healthy relationships between the races. As blacks, the women understood the necessity for a better educational system, because their community's schools had for so long been inferior. As women and mothers they understood the need for decent, affordable housing, a more efficient welfare system, and better jobs that do not continually force people into poverty. Their experiences as a group at the bottom of the political scale molded their political behavior and ideas.

### ***Moving into Electoral Politics: Changing the School System***

Prior to 1968, Elna Spaulding focused on raising her family. She kept abreast of the political situation in Durham through her husband, Asa Spaulding, who was an important political figure in the city. She was inspired by her attendance at the 1968 New York City conference on preventing violence in the community at which the women were asked to form special groups to subdue the violence.

The conference marked her entrance to the world of politics. It inspired Spaulding to organize Women in Action for the Prevention of Violence. She called meetings and led the group, which provided the impetus for biracial community interaction in Durham. This experience enhanced her management abilities, leading to her appointment as the first black woman to sit on the Board of County Commissioners, which later became an elective position. Spaulding was then elected and served five consecutive two-year terms. Her presence on this political board, she believed, had given all black women opportunities. In fact, many women in political offices called Elna Spaulding their inspiration and mentor.

Although she sat on the county commissioners board for many years, Spaulding's primary focus was — and is — on community work. She considered Women in Action

her most important mission. The organization, serving the entire Durham community, accomplished a great deal in terms of increasing interracial interaction and improving race relationships. In 1970, the members established a referral and information crisis line for victims of violence that was instrumental in aiding the peaceful integration of Durham schools. The organization also sponsors the Elna Spaulding Founder's Award, which recognizes community members who have dedicated themselves to serving the city. Spaulding's political involvement, both at the grassroots and at the electoral level, had a great impact on the future political endeavors of Durham's black women. As the first black woman to hold a political position, she opened the doors to politics for other black women.

Before long, Spaulding was joined on the Board of County Commissioners by Josephine Clement, whose groundbreaking work established her as another mentor and inspirator of black women. During the early sixties, she was absorbed with raising her family, manifesting her concern for her children by participating in a number of PTA boards while all six of her offspring were in school and becoming PTA president. Her maternal instinct led to her interest in the quality of Durham education, so Clement served in many positions that affected the school system.

In 1971, she was a member of a joint county commissioners board to plan the "consolidation of the city and county [systems]." Of this early political experience, she said, "I was the only black woman. I was very much aware that I was the only black woman. We wrote a new charter, and in there the rights of blacks and the rights of females were addressed. We failed to pass it but it was a model for what we might have in the future."

Clement was the first black or woman in many positions. She believed it was important to have people sympathetic to minority needs on these boards. After serving on the joint county commissioners board, she was asked to turn her attention to the needs of blacks and women on the Durham Board of Education. Members of the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People and of the League of Women Voters encouraged her to run because she was knowledgeable about the school system. She became the first black woman to sit on the Board of Education and the first woman, black or white, to chair it.

During her ten years as a school board member, Clement visited schools to observe the quality of the facilities, the educational standards, and the teachers, establishing a pattern that the Board of Education has since followed. After heading the board for five years, she ran for the Board of County Commissioners and continued to work toward improving the school system. As county commissioners, "we worked on the schools. I was a liaison for the schools. I had an opportunity to work more closely with the budgets, what the schools were asking for, and what the county was able to pay for."<sup>41</sup>

Clement believed that her greatest contribution was as chair of the Board of Education. She surely had a great impact on the political system of Durham and more specifically the Board of Education. As the sole black person and woman sitting on these boards, she felt there was a definite lack of people who were genuinely interested in the schools and the children. She thought that she and people like her bring a more humanistic perspective to their work. Her being "black and female" introduced a "different point of view to the boards."<sup>42</sup> Her presence not only empowered other black women to run for office but helped to make the rest of Durham more receptive to black women in positions of power.

Although she no longer holds elective office, Clement continues to act in the community. She worked on Jim Hunt's gubernatorial campaign, the Board of Trustees of Shaw

University, the visitor's board at Wake Forest University, the Duke University Advisory Board, and the Board of Social Services. The purpose of her involvement is to "improve the status of humankind."<sup>43</sup> She set an example that many black women have since admired and emulated.

Debra Giles was among the women who followed in Spaulding and Clement's footsteps. Giles said, "For me personally, having role models like Josephine Clement and Elna Spaulding [and] just seeing how they conducted themselves was a motivator." As a product of the civil rights movement, Giles was always politically oriented, and in the early nineties she extended her grassroots political skills to electoral politics. She described her start in formal politics.

I was on the Board of County Commissioners from 1990 to 1994, and that was my first attempt at elective office. I was involved in church activities and a member of my nursing sorority. Saying that I was a product of the civil rights movement simply draws me to social organizations. My interest in the political process sort of evolved out of my involvement in traditional social involvement. I am a nurse by professional training, so because county government is largely a human service government, it always has piqued my interest.

As a county commissioner, she worked on the school merger, one of the most controversial projects in Durham. There had always been two government systems, the county system and the city system. The school systems were organized the same way, but, as a result of white flight, they were racially divided. The whites who lived in the city moved to the county after the city was desegregated, and the blacks remained in the city. The distribution of funds was also unbalanced. Although both systems received the same amount, the white communities had more money to invest in the schools, so the country system was far superior to the one in the city. Since the black community had no extra money for enriching their schools, the textbooks of the predominantly black schools were outdated and their teachers were ill prepared.

In 1991, the Board of County Commissioners suggested that the school board consider merging the school systems. Since neither faction could reach a definite decision, the commissioners undertook the project. Giles described the problem.

The funding formulas for the schools really created a problem in terms of allocating resources to the greatest need, because you have to do per capita funding. [This] meant that anytime that you gave a dollar to the city schools, the county schools had to get the same dollar even though they didn't need it. If we didn't get greater resources back to the inner city school system there would never be an improvement in the quality of education. So in order to give the local people an opportunity to decide its own fate, the Board of County Commissioners merged the schools. It was done through some special legislation [passed by] the General Assembly.

There had been heated debate over this subject, and because of her advocacy of the merger, Giles was almost defeated in 1992. After her reelection, she worked on increasing government contracts in minority neighborhoods and fighting for better allocation of resources for those who have no voice in Durham politics. She said, "Where you have balance of resource allocation, you are going to have improvement in quality of life for citizens. So I definitely think that [the commissioner board] played a major role in bringing that about."<sup>44</sup> Giles's achievements certainly contributed to a more efficient distribution of the resources. Her presence as a black woman undoubtedly helped to put these types of projects into action. Debra Giles was one of the most outspoken members of the

board in favor of the school merger, which eventually worked against her. She was defeated in the 1994 Republican sweep.

Improving educational facilities for all Durham children has been a primary concern for many black women who have served in political posts. While a number of them worked on the merger issues, others chose different ways to affect the school system. Willa Bryant sat on the school board from 1983 until 1991, preceding the merger. As a member, she was instrumental in the reallocation of resources in the school system. "Our focus then was to help the kids adjust to an integrated system, with hopes that the possibilities would be better." She felt that many of the women, herself included, have focused on education to make the future better for children all over Durham. Never having considered herself politically oriented, she tried to stay out of politics because she did not think it had anything to do with what she tried to accomplish. Yet, as she reflected on her reasons for joining the board, she said, "I thought I needed to work on the school board because I figured I would have something to offer. I figured that I could make a contribution." She realized, after her eight-year term, that achieving any type of progress would be difficult in the face of other board members' personal agendas, but as she looked back, she felt that she did accomplish something.

During her term on the school board, Bryant recognized the need for new schools in two of Durham's poverty neighborhoods. The board faced a number of conflicts because some members did not want to spend money on new schools for these predominantly black areas. But Bryant also had a personal agenda.

I went on [the school board] with the determination that [Hillside] should get a high school that was a high school, not a dungeon. East End school was like a dungeon. There was no point in repairing. When I was [with] the school board one time it was pure raining in the library, and the teachers were running around trying to cover up the books. They had come up with plans to renovate and I said, "You don't need to renovate East End; you don't need to renovate Hillside. They just need some schools."

While the Board of County Commissioners was passing the merger, Bryant helped to get two new schools built in Durham. Before she rotated off the board, she, along with the other board members, bought the land for the schools and hired the architects. Although she shunned the political process, she has a sense of achievement when she drives by the new Hillside High School on Fayetteville Street.

Aside from her school board successes, Willa Bryant was active in helping children, functioning through Alpha Kappa Alpha and organizations like Women in Action. She worked primarily through the Edgemont Community Board to see that there were programs for children. "I knew [Edgemont] was an area where somebody needed to work with those children over there so they would be better fitted to go to school. We finally got us a day care over there. We chased money until we were sick."

Although the work is nonstop and sometimes seemingly useless, Bryant continued to help provide scholarships and other programs "to try to provide an environment for kids to grow up, not only in our community, but throughout the city."<sup>45</sup> Her work in both the public and the private spheres was felt all over Durham, and she served as a mentor to other women throughout the community.

Betty Copeland, a psychologist who considered Willa Bryant a mentor and friend and served with her on the school board, was involved in several counseling programs. She also started a coalition for the prevention of adolescent pregnancy. Regarding her tenure on the school board, she explained, "I wanted to assist the kids. That was my main focus,

not knowing the cutthroat political junk that goes on. I just was not aware. It was that I wanted to help kids [and] be a change agent for those things I thought needed change. That's not necessarily the way it worked."

Copeland focused on a variety of board issues, including fairer testing in the schools, counseling, and parent involvement. Her endeavors included public speaking, networking, and lobbying the legislature, yet she believes that her most significant contribution was related to her becoming, from 1968 to 1972, chair of the Association of Black Psychologists. In that position she worked to dispel white Americans' opinions about blacks and to improve family relationships. "My activities were geared toward having a wholesome environment in the home. Having a real love for children, hoping they grow up, come back, and improve the world."<sup>46</sup> Copeland and many other women have brought their love for children to these boards, fighting vehemently to improve organizations and institutions to benefit the youngsters in the community.

Mary Ann Black has the same love for family and children. As a clinical social worker and county commissioner, she not only shares a bond with Betty Copeland but has worked closely with Debra Giles and dealt with educational issues similar to those tackled by Willa Bryant. Black, a graduate student from South Carolina during the Durham civil rights battle, was relatively inactive at the time. But as she became absorbed with Alpha Kappa Alpha, she met and was greatly inspired by Elna Spaulding. Indeed, she admired a number of Durham's black women for their work because, she said, they are "very active hard workers and when I think of many of the activities that occur in Durham County, for example, the Martin Luther King celebration, the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black's Banquet, the men are out front in terms of getting some of the glory, but it is the women who tend to put it together. I've been impressed by that."

Black has several notable accomplishments to her name. A member of the Board of County Commissioners from 1990 to 1996, she believed her background as a social worker made her sensitive to issues concerning families, women, and the working poor. She tended to aid all people because she saw herself as an elected official representing the total community, not as the "African-American who is there only to represent African-Americans." As a commissioner she gained the respect of the entire community for her confident stand on trying to heal its racial strife.

During the debate over the school merger, Black was the only board member who advocated the unification of the community, constantly reiterating to her fellow board members that "we've got to listen to the community; we've got to do something different." The Durham community was then split on the school board's voting procedures. The white population wanted a voting system that allowed the entire community to choose all seven members-at-large of the board. The black population wanted district voting because they are concentrated in certain areas of Durham, which makes it easier for them to elect black candidates. Black explained.

I said I wanted a plan that would let the people vote for more than three people. The plan would have some districts and some at-large voting. One of the things that I asked is that it be fair and constitutional. If the courts say "Mary Ann Black, this plan is unconstitutional," I will be the first one out there to go about trying to figure out how to go about designing a new plan. Being able to form a consensus around the community is what I won a national award for. I have gotten a lot of phone calls from people who have thanked me for standing up and being strong and not ripping up this community.

Black was extremely proud of her role in the divisive merger issue. As a county com-

missioner, she fought for improvements that benefit the entire community. Viewing the political structure, she devised methods to alleviate problems like the school board issue. Her political identity as a black female and social worker motivated her to bring certain issues to the forefront. She admitted that when “you get elected you need to think about how does this vote impact all areas and everybody,” but she is highly conscious of female issues whenever she votes on legislation. She said, “When I’m looking at funding programs, I’m thinking in the back of my head, ‘Now, how will this positively affect families who are in trouble?’ I’m concerned with jobs that pay well because, as you know, females tend to be in jobs that don’t pay well. When we have females as heads of households that are getting minimum wage jobs, you’re putting people into poverty.”

Black’s activities were strongly centered on improving the socioeconomic status for all people. Black thought about women and blacks when she talked to the Chamber of Commerce about better jobs because she wanted to elevate everyone’s social status. This is an important subject because, in general, “Conditions in the wider political economy simultaneously shape black women’s subordination and foster activism.”

As a commissioner, Black worked to improve the efficiency of the Department of Social Services, whose standards have improved, raising benefits for families and children. Her objective in the social services department was “to help the department move to a better place in the sense of protecting children and senior citizens. So I was instrumental in helping the department move forward in terms of protecting children.”

As a social worker who counseled children and women primarily, she was aware of the disadvantages of these groups. Her recognition of the issues that affect them caused her to formulate her agenda, both in and out of the political arena, to center on bettering the services that primarily affect these groups. Outside her work as a commissioner, Black tutored and raised scholarship money for children in Durham with her sorority, whose main interest is community service. With respect to her overall leadership, she felt that she lent a “sense of fairness [and] a perspective that is balanced.”<sup>47</sup> Mary Ann Black is recognized as an advocate for blacks, women, and children; her actions made an authoritative impression, and she earned a great measure of respect in the community.

Mozelle Robinson, the director of administrative services in the Financial Aid Department at North Carolina Central University and a member of the school board for five years, was also greatly concerned with educational affairs in Durham. Since the early 1970s, she had been active in local politics, registering people to vote and organizing precinct volunteers and voting poll workers. On the school board, she focused on a variety of issues concerning education, stating,

I have tried to advocate the need to close the academic gap that exists among the races of Durham’s students. I have tried to get people to talk about “equity” rather than “equal” when it comes to putting resources where the greatest needs are for improving performance. I have tried to bring about unity among citizens in Durham by focusing on what’s best for the children. I have tried to represent grassroots people and socio-economically disadvantaged students, who may not otherwise have a voice.

Robinson believed that since black women have always been active in Durham politics, they advanced in government because they acquired organizational skill from their experience in the community. In her opinion, they are highly concerned with improving the economic status of the whole populace, which is obvious, as she remarked, “from the range of our involvements — from public office to the Chamber of Commerce to community service sororities.”

Robinson sensed that black women bring a more delicate approach to these boards. As a black single mother, she thinks that she is more responsive to certain issues, for example, after-school child care, than some of her fellow board members. Because of her experiences, Robinson said she is especially sensitive to issues where race and gender intersect, which affects her political behavior.

As for her accomplishments on the school board, Robinson helped implement a new student assignment system, saying it "has brought all of Durham's students together under one system, a system still in its infancy." She also served on the board that passed the school merger. Her actions and those of other black women helped create more unity in the community. She remarked, "Durham must move forward together for what's best for our entire city."<sup>48</sup>

Black women's concern for improving Durham's educational and economic systems stretched further than the school board, the Board of County Commissioners, and the City Council. Jeanne Lucas, a state senator, openly declared that she had always championed legislation for educating children. Having lived through the civil rights struggle in Durham, she thought that the problems of the day were still the same. Education, welfare, health care, affordable housing, and taxes were important issues that still had to be addressed. With more black women moving to the forefront in the political arena, she believed they were being dealt with more often. In the senate, she thought that there had been a void of voice. In other words, the black lower-class population, as well as the female population, had not usually had a representative in the Senate who was interested in advocating their positions. Through supporting the improvement of such systems as welfare and social services, Lucas ensured that the issues of the voiceless groups were addressed, whereas they normally would not have been mentioned.

Lucas saw that more than at any time in the past, Durham black women were chairing various committees and organizations, which had a decidedly positive impact. Women in decision-making roles continue to work through the community to effect change. Their actions opened the eyes of the Durham leaders to the concerns of the underclass population as well as encouraging other black women to become politically active. Through Delta Sigma Theta and her church, Lucas also worked in the community to bring about change. She was secretary of the Board of Trustees and taught Sunday school. In addition to her church work, she founded Habitat for Humanity in Durham, but as a state senator she didn't have much time to devote to community activities. In the Senate she fought for children, the elderly, and the disabled, hoping that her work "[made] sure that families who don't have a voice are maintained. [She wanted] to make sure people aren't hurt by legislation."<sup>49</sup> It is necessary for black women to be in positions of power because there is seldom anyone else to safeguard their needs.

With black women increasingly in significant positions, the diverse concerns of Durham's population began to be addressed. Elaine O'Neal Lee is an ideal representative of this trend. As one of the youngest district judges in North Carolina, she perceived Durham as an unusually progressive southern town that contributed largely to the political progress of black women. With Duke, North Carolina Central University, and the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill generating liberal ideas, the city's residents became more receptive to black women as leaders.

Lee viewed women like Jeanne Lucas, Elna Spaulding, and county judge Carolyn Johnson as role models, realizing that black women "have had to come to the forefront." In her early thirties, Lee said that every time she sat in court, she saw "the breakdown of the black family. I guess for me it's even more so because every time I'm in criminal

court, that's where I see our men. Every time I am in juvenile court, that's where I see our male children. Every time I'm in child support court I see our men again."

Lee believed that the lack of a black male family, of community, and of positions of power forced black women to assume leadership. As a young, strong black woman in the judicial system, she hoped her presence would give others the courage to break the barriers that hindered black women's progress. She said that black women showed the community that they were "going to have a say-so in Durham." Lee ran into problems because of her age — many thought she was too young to have such a high position of power. But she said, "Well, the majority of the people coming through this court are my age. They are my peers and who better to pass judgment on them? Don't tell me I'm too young; those arguments aren't valid. If I'm too young, then surely Reagan was too old!"

Her age did not handicap Lee as a district court judge. She worked diligently to present fair and equal decisions in all her cases, saying that when people saw her on the bench, she wanted them "first of all to see a black woman, but in the understanding that we're all in this together. We all got to work together. Here I come from a different culture, different way of life, but when I make my decisions I try to make them on an individual basis, keeping in mind that I have to follow the law in terms of what punishment or in the interest of fairness." As an elected black official, Elaine O'Neal Lee considered herself not as a crusader for the black community, but rather as a representative for the whole community.

Lee, an advocate for children, tried to ensure that her decisions reflected what was best for the children involved because they were helpless and at the mercy of her rulings. Like Jeanne Lucas, she did not want children to be hurt by legislation or by her findings. She said that she received a loving, giving spirit from her mother, which pushes her to do all she can to help people.

As a student at NCCU Law School, Lee initiated a mentoring program for Durham children and the students at the law school in addition to being active in the community with Delta Sigma Theta. She said that when she was younger, she used "to pray to the Lord that He would send me something where I could satisfy this desire to help others. So here I am!"<sup>50</sup>

There she was, one of the few influential black women, proving to the greater Durham community that such women, young and old, were quite capable of leading the community and tackling judicial matters. Her work also reflected her personal desires to protect those who lacked control. She helped break down the judicial system barriers for black women.

While her court endeavors had a significant effect, Lee sensed that women who do not hold visible positions of power are the real heroes.<sup>51</sup> She said,

I can think of African-American females who are not necessarily in the paper all the time but who are what I call silent givers. One lady was my campaign manager. She was the key person behind the march — Unity March in Durham, in February of [1946] — and I cannot remember if her name was mentioned. But she was the organizer, Marian Cobbs. Hazel Rich was very instrumental in [my] being elected. She was the chairman of the Durham Housing Authority and she's well-known in certain circles, but if you mention her name on the street [people] will say, "Who's that?"<sup>52</sup>

Beverly Washington Jones shared Lee's sentiments, saying, "When you begin to look at the whole idea of involvement in politics, you really have to define what you mean. It is important to define what you're looking at. You do have what is called grassroots leadership. Some people who are leaders politically decide they can do more not by being

elected, but by maintaining their involvement in the community.” Jones had been active in the continual struggle for civil rights in Durham since her middle-school days. For example, addressing gender issues in the schools, she surveyed reasons why girls do not perform as well as boys in science and math. In addition, she worked on project AMPLE (African-American Males Preparing for Excellence) and with Governor James Hunt “in terms of creating SAT preps to see why kids aren’t making the level they need to be making.” She also worked with programs testing magnet systems in schools and laboratory schools with small classes.

Her concern for educational and children’s issues is one of the reasons Jones served on the Durham school board. Jones thought that having minorities there allowed normally powerless groups to have a voice. Black people, as she saw it, “no longer want to defer power. We want one of us sitting on the board.” Abuse of power by public officials inspired her to get involved. She stated, “My involvement was because the superintendent decided to furlough everyone. I said that’s ridiculous, he must be stopped. So that’s when I decided I needed to run because I [knew] that this is not the way it operates.”<sup>53</sup>

The outspoken, confident stand of black women brought them far in Durham politics. But most public officials recognized that a number of other women go unnoticed simply because they do not hold public office.

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### **The Silent Givers**

The black women in electoral politics were trying to change the institutions to serve the entire community. It is notable that many of them began working in Durham and in its organizations. Beverly Jones, Elaine O’Neal Lee, and numerous others emphasized that the community had a number of leaders, many of whom moved from secretary to president in the organizations, yet they tend to be invisible because they have not served in electoral politics. As Jones remarked, the boundaries of politics must be expanded to include them because the traditional outlines of activity do not truly incorporate grassroots politics. Black women’s politics was born through grassroots enterprises; to marginalize the women is to further marginalize the significance of their political achievements. Although most of them are regarded as leaders by the larger community, they have not chosen to become part of the formal political structure.

Cynthia Brown, for instance, who, in 1996, had lived in Durham for only five years, learned that the black women were heavily involved in politics. Brown had just been elected to the Durham City Council but said she had not yet accomplished anything there. Still, she had been highly engaged in the community through local organizations. Re-counting her projects, she said, “In low-income-housing communities, I’ve been involved in trying to help provide leadership development so that they can start to organize themselves around workplace issues, school issues, and those kinds of things. A lot of the work that I have been involved with has been around economic injustice questions.”

Brown also worked through the Institute for Southern Studies to examine solutions to systemic oppression. In 1996 she was the executive director of Southerners for Economic Justice and had worked with the alumni association of Bennett College to raise money so that others could attend college. Although new to Durham politics, she thought that having black women in electoral and other positions of power brought a different perspective to the political table. “There is no way that an African-American woman could be at the table and not have some impact, but the fact [is] that when we come to the table, we’re gonna be thinking about issues that may not even cross men’s minds. We’re

gonna bring our relationships with our children and the kind of issues that have to do with our well-being in the community.”

Brown’s political agenda concentrated primarily on equality and justice for Durham’s low-income residents. She believed that once the lower socioeconomic classes are elevated, all other groups would be elevated. Her goal as a city councilwoman was “seeing that wherever resources can be invested in underserved communities, that they get their fair share.” She added,

[The political issue is] not just about ensuring that resources get invested; it’s about helping everybody else understand their relationship to these communities so that they then see that they need to be investing time. I can make sure that I advocate that they invest money into these communities to improve housing. However, if I don’t talk about trying to provide jobs in those communities and the supports that will enable human development, then it’s only a matter of time before those physical structures are torn down.<sup>54</sup>

I suspect that Brown’s work on the City Council and in other community organizations has had a great impact on the educational and economic resources in Durham. I also think that her perspective is an example of Beverly Jones’s comment that the trend of black women’s politics was moving toward economic rather than social issues and that black women were beginning to address those issues.

Ann Atwater, a longtime Durham grassroots leader, had always been concerned with economic issues. During the civil rights era she worked tirelessly for the rights of low-income-housing residents. In her mid-sixties in 1996, Atwater was raising two grandchildren and was president of her Birchwood Heights community. She said she was “working with adjacent communities in trying to [rid] our neighborhood [of] drugs.” Atwater had been very active in the Democratic Party, serving as its vice chair. She worked on her own, as well as through her church, to find affordable housing for families and provide them with clothing and used furniture to save money for them. She, along with her church group, “[got] up people’s rent, light bill, and water bill to help them live happy.”<sup>55</sup> In addition, Atwater worked on the Victims Organization’s Assistance Board, helping drug addicts and victims of abuse take control of their lives. Fighting the Housing Authority to fix her community’s activity center, she declared that you have to be strong with the institutional leaders in Durham because there is a great amount of discrimination against low-income people. Although she remained in a low-income-housing area, she gained the respect of people all over Durham and received more than two hundred awards for her struggle to end discrimination and inequity in the city.

When one discusses fighting discrimination in Durham, the NAACP immediately comes to mind because it has been one of the most vigorous black institutions in the area. Like many civil rights institutions, the NAACP was run primarily by men. Yet in 1986, Florine Robinson became president of the Durham chapter. Through it, she fought to eliminate racism, saying that while she was president, “everything was focused on racism. I was the president of the NAACP for seven years, and during that time we worked with people who were having racial problems and those who were disadvantaged.” To Robinson, the political advancement of black women had a great impact because she believed it had given everyone “an opportunity to learn about each other,” referring to strong attempts by many women to increase communication between the races.

As president of the NAACP, Robinson founded a number of chapters, including those at Duke University and NCCU. Under her leadership the NAACP held a number of conferences about racism with the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Blacks and the Min-

isterial Alliance. Not limiting her efforts to the NAACP, she sat on the Durham Alcohol Board of Control for fifteen years — first black member — making policy decisions surrounding such issues as legal drinking-age limits. She chaired the programming committee for the National Council for Black Women, worked with her church as president of the Missionary Society, and was a member of Church Women United. Robinson looked back on her participation, saying, “I have tried my best. I think I have played a great part in trying to eliminate racism. I think I have accomplished something.”<sup>56</sup> Florine Robinson certainly accomplished “something.” She not only showed black women that they could preside over influential organizations but also helped to make people aware that racism and discrimination still existed and must be fought until it was effectively eliminated. A number of women agreed with Robinson’s sentiments about discrimination. Many worked through biracial organizations to increase communications between different cultures.

In 1996, Betty McNair, who was a friend of Florine Robinson’s, had not lived in Durham very long, but she had joined the ranks of the other politically active black females who were trying to create a better future for everyone. Her prime interest was in family and children, a central theme of black women. She worked through Alpha Kappa Alpha to serve the community. For example, “Each year, we give a scholarship to black women going to college. We do things like the soup kitchen [and] we contribute money to other organizations such as NAACP. Sometimes we have workshops on some of the common illnesses and problems of blacks.”

McNair had also been president of Church Women United for a year. The Durham chapter, established in 1973, began and remained a biracial organization that focused on aiding the women and children in the community and the world. McNair identified Church Women United as an “ecumenical movement composed of Christian women of all nationalities, ages, and denominations.”<sup>57</sup> It promoted interaction through helping those less fortunate, for example, helping communities around the world to procure clean water and healthy living conditions. In Durham it encouraged multicultural worship and designated spring and fall days for the celebration of unity and multiculturalism.

Faye Mayo, another Robinson friend, a strong fighter for the rights of handicapped people, also wanted to eliminate discrimination. She had been active in the Durham civil rights struggle and had continued her activism. A middle-school guidance counselor, Mayo tried to maintain a keen involvement in the community. With her students, she organized programs that reconstructed the civil rights fight to teach them about their history. She collected a number of little-known articles that document historical moments pertinent to the African-Americans of Durham. She assembled several poster boards as visual displays to present to her students, creating past events that showed a portion of history in which she had participated.

Her experience as a protester for civil rights combined with that as a mother drove Mayo to the fight for the handicapped. When her daughter, who was born autistic, reached school age, no Durham school offered programs for the autistic or classes for special-needs children. A concerned parent, Mayo began to battle for implementation of autistic classes in the schools. “I [had] gone to the school board to get better services because we have a daughter that is handicapped. I guess I have been very outspoken in speaking for the handicapped. Now I think they have about six classes from elementary to high school.”

Despite her maternal identity, Mayo continued working in other areas. She attended meetings of the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People and took part in the

polls, saying, "I still go to the polls and handle work on the polls. I [also] do telephoning for the precincts. So I guess once you start out, you just find yourself just going and still fighting. Some of it's personal; some of it's with an organization."<sup>58</sup>

All these women fought silently and outwardly as members of organizations. But it was usually personal circumstances that propelled them into politics. Unfortunately, "individuals are all too often treated as if they are cut off from their community environment and examined as if in a vacuum." Black women's community and familial environments are essential elements of their identity, and when assessing black women's political ventures, one must take all factors into account. Regardless of the limitations these women endured, they continued to fight; the "legacy of struggle suggests that African-American culture generally, and black women's culture in particular, provide potent alternative interpretations" to politics.<sup>59</sup>

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## Conclusion

"The black woman in the American political arena has dared to be different, despite a history of legal, social, and economic obstacles to her inclusion in the American polity. The twin legacies of racism and sexism . . . have shaped the focus and extent of their involvement in the political process in our country."<sup>60</sup>

Black women in Durham have gone through a dynamic political transition since the civil rights period. Their *modus operandi* has gone from a community-based secondary role in the black struggle for equality to asserting themselves in all areas of formal politics. During the civil rights era, these women played a supportive role because societal restrictions limited the cooperation of blacks. Although their role at the time was less visible, it was nevertheless important. One must remember that as the foundation and support for the movement, they were instrumental in initiating political change for Durham.

With many legal discriminatory barriers lifted, the black women became a vital force in every area of life. They remained mothers, wives, sisters, and community leaders, but they expanded their roles, becoming presidents and vice presidents of business organizations as well as such community groups as the NAACP. They ventured out to become City Council members, school board chairperson, district court judges, and senators. They still "run" the local organizations and bring to Durham's political structure their alternative perspectives, which offer a new and unique approach to politics.

Their cultural experiences formed black women's political consciousness. Blacks have endured the inequities of racial discrimination, and within their prescribed social sphere, the women gained firsthand knowledge of discrepancies and were motivated to implement change. Their disenfranchisement from the civil rights struggle and the feminist movement helped them formulate their approaches. They have become extremely sensitive and aware of the issues surrounding poverty as well as those of limited employment and discrimination. The intersection of gender and race further enhanced their awareness of and desire for change. Cynthia Brown said, "It is so difficult for me to separate out what I believe intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally about what we bring to the table any time as African-American women."<sup>61</sup> Their identity as black persons who have experienced Jim Crow and economic inequity made them politically active. Their desire to secure a better future for their children and their community also contributed to their political astuteness. It is frequently true that when one studies the politics of a group

“individuals are all too often treated as if they are cut off from their community environment and examined as if they live in a vacuum.”<sup>62</sup>

Black women in Durham have been and are still community oriented. Their family and community involvement generated their cognizance of the need for equal educational opportunities and efficient government services. As mothers who have either experienced poverty or know those who have, black women are concerned with the welfare of children, which they consider an avenue for uplifting the race. As they assume powerful political positions, their everyday experiences and issues accompany them. As they express the concerns and agendas of elected officials, they deal with issues that both their white and black male and their white female colleagues do not often address. Black women, with their unique perspective, began to fill the gaps in the political structure with a diverse point of view. Their twofold identity is attributable to their experiences as women and blacks. Because they understand the issues confronting disadvantaged communities, they created a space in which the voices of blacks, women, and other minorities are heard. Their accomplishments and presence in the political structure of Durham have not only empowered all black people but encouraged other black women to reach for the higher stations in life.

No matter what point in the history of black women is observed, one finds that their political participation has always been significant and important to the success of the black community. With the recognition of their political identity, the definitions of politics and history must be expanded to include the black women's vital life force in American society. Black women, who have not always had the legal right to participate in the political structure, have been almost exclusively grassroots oriented. Grassroots politics should not be assigned to the margins because its leaders play an important role in the political life of the black community as well as the larger American community. The progress and accomplishments of the black women of Durham — as well as other areas — suggest that they need not occupy fourth-class status. If political condition is measured by amount of influence in the decision-making process, Durham's black women deserve a much higher standing in society. ❀

*First and foremost, I thank God for giving me the strength to complete my thesis. I am grateful to the incredible women who took time out of their busy schedules for interviews, hoping I have done justice to their extraordinary accomplishments. I appreciate the assistance of the people who helped me with revisions, suggestions, and valuable criticism. Finally, I offer a special thank-you to my patient roommates, who encouraged me throughout this project.*

## Appendix A

### Interviews

Ann Atwater, March 4, 1996  
Mary Ann Black, March 25, 1996  
Cynthia Brown, March 1, 1996  
Willa Bryant, March 6, 1996  
Josephine Clement, February 23, 1996  
Betty Copeland, March 9, 1996  
Debra Giles, February 29, 1996  
Beverly Washington Jones, February 15, 1996  
Elaine O'Neal Lee, March 5, 1996  
Jeanne Lucas, March 19, 1996  
Betty McNair, March 7, 1996  
Faye Mayo, March 21, 1996  
Florine Robinson, March 4, 1996  
Mozelle Robinson, March 18, 1996  
Elna Spaulding, February 23, 1996  
Margaret Turner, March 19, 1996  
Virginia Williams, February 23, 1996

## Appendix B

### Questionnaire

1. How would you describe the civil rights struggle in Durham?
2. Who were the leaders of the African-American community in Durham at the time?
3. What issues were of most importance to African-Americans during this period?
4. Were African-American women part of this movement and what type of role did they play?
5. What organizations were African-American women a part of at this time? What type of role did they play in these organizations?
6. Many social scientists have found that throughout the civil rights movement African-American women played a back role to African-American men. Was this the case in Durham and do you think that there was a reason for that?
7. Would you say that African-American women in Durham were concerned with improving the social, economic, and political status of the African-American community?
8. Would you say that the political actions of African-American women have had an impact on the African-American community?
9. How would you gauge the impact of African-American women during this time on the larger Durham community? Great or insignificant?
10. What kind of things were you a part of at that time?
11. In the post-civil rights period until the present, have the activities of African-American women changed? How so?
12. What women have been involved since the civil rights movement?
13. What organizations are they part of today?
14. I know that today many African-American women sit on the school board and various other political boards. Do you think there is a reason for this? Also, what do you think these women bring to these institutions?
15. Are African-American women today concerned with improving the social, economic, and political status of the African-American community?
16. Have their political actions had an impact and how would you rate it?
17. How has the Durham community benefited from their actions?
18. What kind of things have you been doing? What things have you tried to accomplish or change in Durham? How do you think your actions have impacted the community?
19. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about African-American women in Durham?

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## Notes

1. For further explanation of the unique identity of black women owing to the intersection of race and gender, see Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
2. Delores P. Aldridge, "African-American Women in the Economic Marketplace," *Journal of Black Studies* 21 (1989): 130.
3. The political power structure in America, in its usual descending order, places white males at the top followed by white women, black men, and finally black women. Therefore, in the political structure, black women have been fourth-class citizens because of their race and gender.
4. Full documentation of all data and transcripts of interviews is available at the Duke University Department of African and African-American Studies
5. Margaret Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), and William Keech, *The Impact of Black Voting* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1968).
6. Interview with Josephine Clement, February 23, 1996, in Durham, where all interviews took place.
7. North Carolina Mayors' Cooperating Committee (hereafter NCMCC), *North Carolina and the Negro* (Raleigh: State College Print Shop, 1964).
8. I learned about the significance of the railroad tracks from Durham residents with whom I spoke. I also saw the contrast while driving around the city, especially near the old East End school near Holloway Street.
9. NCMCC, *North Carolina and the Negro*, 71.
10. Interview with Faye Mayo, March 21, 1996.
11. Interview with Debra Giles, February 29, 1996.
12. Pauli Murray, *Autobiography of a Black Activist, Feminist, Lawyer, Priest, and Poet* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 108.
13. Walter Weare, *Black Business in the New South: A Social History of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1973), 4.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid..
16. Interview with Elaine O'Neal Lee, March 5, 1996.
17. Weare, *Black Business in the New South*, 4.
18. Lee interview.
19. NCMCC, *North Carolina and the Negro*, 62, 67. For more information on the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Negroes, see Weare, *Black Business in the New South*, 240–251.
20. Keech, *The Impact of Negro Voting*, 85.
21. Interview with Virginia Williams, February 23, 1996.
22. Mayo interview.
23. NCMCC, *North Carolina and the Negro*, 264.
24. Interview with Beverly Washington Jones, February 15, 1996.
25. Giles interview.
26. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 132.
27. Interview with Betty Copeland, March 9, 1996.
28. Weare, *Black Business in the New South*, 240.
29. Clement interview.
30. Carlene Young, "Psychodynamics of Coping and Survival of the African-American Female in a Changing World," *Journal of Black Studies* 20 (1989): 123–143.
31. Williams interview.
32. Interview with Elna Spaulding, February 23, 1996.
33. Interview with Ann Atwater, March 4, 1996.
34. Robert Staples, *The Black Woman in America: Sex, Marriage, and the Family* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall Publishers, 1973), 11.
35. Interview with Margaret Turner, March 19, 1996.

36. Beverly Jones, "Working in Tobacco: An Oral History of Durham's Tobacco Factory Workers," pamphlet (Durham: North Carolina Central University History Department, 1988), 11.
37. Turner interview.
38. Williams interview.
39. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 115.
40. Clement interview.
41. Ibid.
42. Keech, *The Impact of Negro Voting*, ch. 1.
43. Clement interview.
44. Giles interview.
45. Interview with Willa Bryant, March 6, 1996.
46. Copeland interview.
47. Interview with Mary Ann Black, March 25, 1996.
48. Interview with Mozelle Robinson, March 18, 1996.
49. Interview with Jeanne Lucas, March 19, 1996.
50. Lee interview.
51. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 10.
52. Lee interview.
53. Jones interview.
54. Interview with Cynthia Brown, March 1, 1996.
55. Atwater interview.
56. Interview with Florine Robinson, March 4, 1996.
57. Interview with Betty McNair, March 7, 1996.
58. Mayo interview.
59. Lee interview.
60. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 12.
61. Brown interview.
62. Sheila Harmon-Martin, "Black Women in Politics: A Research Note," in Hanes Walton, Jr., ed., *Black Politics and Black Political Behavior* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1994), 209.