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# Race Women: New Negro Politics and the Flowering of Radicalism at Bennett College, 1900–1945

JELANI M. FAVORS

*If there is one thing more than another which stands out in the present race situation in America, possibly it is that we have to-day a new Negro; a Negro who is very unlike the Negro of the past and whom it is very easy to misunderstand. . . . The fawning “hat-in-his-hand” Negro belongs to another generation; the alert, intelligent, capable, self-reliant Negro characterizes the present. The danger, and without doubt there is real danger, arises when we insist on treating the second as though he were still the first.*

Jay S. Stowell

*Methodist Adventures in Negro Education*, 1922

Hattie Bailey knew nothing of being timid. Elected as student government president of Bennett College in 1937, she was loquacious, brilliant, and driven. She did not arrive at Bennett that way. Hattie and her family lived in Pennsylvania, and her parents were concerned about sending her off to college in the South, even to a school in the more politically progressive Tar Heel State. She managed to convince them that her enrollment in the private black institution for women was for the best, and fondly recalled that she “learned to speak at Bennett.”<sup>1</sup> By the arrival of her senior year, she had a lot to say. In October 1937, she represented the “Bennett Belles” at the convening of the second National Negro Congress (NNC) held in Philadelphia.<sup>2</sup> The Communist-fronted organization, which actively recruited black

1. Hattie Bailey, telephone conversation with author, February 19, 2014.

2. “Head of Student Government Attends Congress,” *Bennett Banner* (student newspaper), October 1937.

college students, was founded at Howard University in 1935, and Howard faculty provided the ideological platform upon which the organization grew.<sup>3</sup> Hattie was in the company of 1,149 other attendees from across the country when the NNC met in the City of Brotherly Love. In Gunnar Myrdal's classic study *An American Dilemma*, the Swedish economist was off the mark in his assessment that "Nothing important happened" at that conference.<sup>4</sup> Hattie Bailey learned a great deal when she attended the meeting and returned to campus boldly announcing, "It is the genius of unity alone that can save the race." Two months later, Bailey united with her fellow Belles in leading a successful boycott against the white-owned downtown theaters for their decision to censor movie scenes that depicted whites and blacks as equals. Ironically, the theme of the youth session at the Philadelphia meeting was "How to Develop Youth Movements in the United States."<sup>5</sup>

It is clear to see how radical groups such as the NNC facilitated the politicization of scores of youth who joined the organization. Labor organizers, scholars, and activists were an integral part of the group's founding and deeply influenced the young people who attended the national and local meetings. However, evidence strongly suggests that students like Hattie were politically oriented by what cultural anthropologist Victor Turner would refer to as the "communitas" of black colleges.<sup>6</sup> Critical seeds of insurgency were disseminated among students like Hattie, which helped them find their voice and encouraged them to employ their time, talent, and efforts toward improving the social and political condition of the race. As the twentieth century unfolded, America retreated from constitutional amendments that should have upheld the civil and human rights of African Americans, further cementing what historian Rayford Logan identified as the nadir of race relations in the United States.<sup>7</sup> Nowhere was the problem more pressing than in the South,

3. Erik S. Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 115.

4. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1996), 818.

5. "Head of Student Government Attends Congress," *Bennett Banner*, October 1937.

6. I have borrowed the term "communitas" from the anthropologist Victor Turner, and recast his theories on communitas as a conceptual framework to describe the vital space that black colleges provided for their students. Turner argues that the Latin term "communitas" implies the practice of building "social relationships" as opposed to "an area of common living." Furthermore, Turner's theories on communitas highlight "symbolic rites of passage" that are transferred within an "open society," a development that Turner argues could not take place within a "closed society." For more on Turner's theories of communitas, see Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1969), 94–165.

7. Rayford Logan served as professor of history at Howard University from 1938 to 1965. He applied the term "nadir," or "the lowest point," in describing the violent aftermath of Reconstruction and the retreat from social and political legislation that originally upheld the rights of African Americans after the fall of slavery. See Rayford W. Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro: From Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997).



where a critical mass of African Americans were crushed under the weight of white supremacy and racial violence—a development that engendered little concern from most white Americans and conversely raised the stakes for African Americans in the Deep South, who waded into treacherous waters with every attempt to mobilize against Jim Crow.

This study argues that the open forms of dissent that define black colleges in the 1960s were not anomalies that instantaneously developed overnight. They were the by-products and legacies of racialized spaces that emboldened black youth to think of themselves as powerful change agents within a larger society that devalued and dismissed their contributions. In his landmark study *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois declared that “the South believed an educated Negro to be a dangerous Negro. And the South was not wholly wrong; for education among all kinds of men always has had, and always will have, an element of danger and revolution, of dissatisfaction and discontent.”<sup>8</sup> The abundance of quality studies on student activism within the modern civil rights movement has created the false perception that only overt militancy, punctuated by boycotts, sit-ins, marches, and riots that defiantly undermine the power structure, defines the true measure of subversive protests. Yet scholars of the long civil rights movement increasingly assert that such public displays were rare during the nadir of race relations, particularly in the South, where racial violence was deeply engrained in the day-to-day experiences and memories of blacks. And while some North Carolinians reveled in the moderately progressive reputation of the state in the early twentieth century, the haunting legacy of racial violence undermined any claim that the New South was new at all in regard to race relations.<sup>9</sup> As historian Claude Clegg argues, in spite of a reduction in public mob violence in the Tar Heel State, “legal lynchings” were just as effective in marginalizing black North Carolinians and maintaining a “pattern of white supremacy” that denigrated black lives in numerous ways.<sup>10</sup> Such realities called for creative measures in addressing and countering the ideology of white supremacy, and thus raise the question—what constitutes radicalism?

The New Negro era carved out new space for measuring and interpreting black militancy. Activists and union leaders on street corners in the North assailed the

8. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 20.

9. Pockets of moderation existed throughout the state of North Carolina. While many North Carolinians fancied themselves progressive on the race question, barriers that halted the progress of African Americans were very much intact, even within cities where local whites considered themselves relatively tolerant. Greensboro represented such a city. Its tortured past on race relations and its false notions of progressivism have been thoroughly documented in William Chafe’s classic study *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 42–70.

10. Claude A. Clegg III, *Troubled Ground: A Tale of Murder, Lynching, and Reckoning in the New South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), xviii.

ears of black migrants, who increasingly found their way to urban centers during the Great War. Black colleges located overwhelmingly in the South became centers for empowering black youth to articulate their goals of racial justice through prose—a strategy less risky than openly protesting injustice. Scholars, poets, novelists, and artists sharpened their intellectual swords as students at historically black colleges and represented a new generation prepared to combat white supremacy in ways that previous generations had not.<sup>11</sup> Black youth benefited from the intellectual environment and supportive space provided by these schools, among the most important cornerstones of the black liberation movement. Howard University dean Kelly Miller identified the critical mission of black college life when he declared in 1925 that “the primary need of the race is a philosophy of life, whereby hope, courage and ambition can be maintained amidst an environment which seems hostile and crushing . . . the national Negro university should supply this defensive philosophy.”<sup>12</sup> As a topic, the deployment of discourse and ideology to combat Jim Crow is less exciting than the explosive direct-action phase of the movement that defined the 1960s, yet numerous race leaders considered the work of students and faculty at black colleges essential in defending black lives and cultivating informed activists.

Du Bois joined a chorus of other black scholars and activists of the New Negro era when he observed the potential of a young, intelligent, and radicalized intelligentsia. The esteemed scholar declared, “If the college can pour into the coming age an American Negro who knows himself and his plight and how to protect himself and fight race prejudice, then the world of our dream will come and not otherwise.”<sup>13</sup> Other scholars were blunter in their evaluation. In assessing the need to stimulate activism among black college students, in 1923, Kelly Miller emphatically declared that there was “no problem that is more practical and pressing than this.” A year later, his colleague and Atlanta University sociologist E. Franklin Frazier shared his sentiments by stating that “the product of Negro education has become a spectator of civilization incapable of participation.”<sup>14</sup> The students were apparently

11. Historians William Banks and James N. Gregory have identified southern black colleges as an essential source for both the contributors and consumers of the art that emerged out of the Harlem Renaissance. See William M. Banks, *Black Intellectuals: Race and Responsibility in American Life* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1996), 93–100, and James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of Chapel Hill Press, 2005), 132–135.

12. Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 321–322.

13. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Education of Black People: Ten Critiques* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973), 101.

14. Sondra Kathryn Wilson, ed., *The Opportunity Reader: Stories, Poetry, and Essays from the Urban League's Opportunity Magazine* (New York: Random House, 1999), 415, 462.

listening. Beginning in 1923, students at various black college campuses across the South began speaking out on a wide range of issues. They decried the paternalism of white administrators, critiqued and demanded new curriculum offerings, and protested deplorable campus conditions.<sup>15</sup> Despite these rumblings of activism, most of the problems were related to campus life. College students residing below the Mason-Dixon Line rarely participated in off-campus protests. In this regard, they were no different from most black southerners. Decades of racial violence and institutionalized white supremacy had created psychological barriers among many African Americans, who hesitated to participate in overt protests.

Nevertheless, the radicalization of black college students in the years that preceded the modern civil rights movement is perhaps one of the most understated yet critically important developments in the history of the struggle for black liberation. As historian Kidada Williams notes in her brilliant study *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I*, the practice of “resisting violence discursively” during the nadir created generations of folks who were well equipped to resist in unconventional and subtle ways to protect their families, their careers, or their lives. Therefore “speech acts” and protest through writing became practical ways for black youths to release their angst and anger toward Jim Crow.<sup>16</sup> In doing so, many of them honed their skills of resistance with letters and editorials in the pages of black college newspapers, gave speeches before their peers at campus events, or debated the latest social and political developments of the New Negro era alongside their friends in classrooms or dormitories. The social relationships that were forged within the *communitas* of black colleges were deeply informed by race-conscious professors, news from the ongoing struggle for liberation that was regularly reported in campus newspapers, and a spirit of cultural nationalism that promoted black institutions. At Bennett College, the New Negro era produced several generations of women who responded to the challenges of white supremacy in various ways. As historian Glenda Gilmore emphasizes in her classic study of race and gender in North Carolina in the early twentieth century, the “uplift” mission of the black progressives created much more than an army of women who passively critiqued and addressed race-related issues from their elitist perch: “Upon graduation, black women teachers and activists shaped and reshaped strategies to outmaneuver the daily manifestations

15. See Herbert Aptheker, “The Negro College Student in the 1920s—Years of Preparation and Protest: An Introduction,” *Science and Society* 33 (Spring 1969): 150–167; Raymond Wolters, *The New Negro on Campus: Black College Rebellions of the 1920s* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975); and Ibram H. Rogers, *The Black Campus Movement: Black Students and the Racial Reconstitution of Higher Education, 1965–1972* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 29–49.

16. Kidada Williams, *They Left Great Marks on Me: African American Testimonies of Racial Violence from Emancipation to World War I* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 6.

of racism they encountered on their way to the front. . . . Sometimes they fought straightforwardly, sometimes covertly, the open, ugly faces of segregation, racial violence, and economic exclusion, and they tried to peel away white supremacy's thousand disguises as well."<sup>17</sup> The history of Bennett College during the New Negro era fully illustrates the flowering of radicalism in the years that preceded World War II, setting the stage for Greensboro's emergence as one of the most important movement centers of the twentieth century. Bennett women played a critical role in setting the stage for that movement.

Greensboro's Bennett College, founded in 1873 by the Methodist Episcopal Church and supported by the Freedmen's Aid and Southern Education Society, developed various forms of racial uplift during its first fifty years. Philanthropist Lyman Bennett donated \$10,000 to build the school, which was named Bennett Seminary in his honor. In 1889, Bennett was established as a college. The school's true introduction into the tense and troubled racial politics of the nadir took place with the appointment of its first black president, Rev. Charles N. Grandison, who became the headman of the fledgling institution. Grandison openly embraced black nationalism and strongly supported colonization back to Africa, an idea that had ebbed and flowed within the black imagination since the early nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup> Grandison's administration was critical in setting the political tone on campus. Several administrators who followed helped construct racialized spaces that gave students the nurturing and guidance they needed to navigate within a hostile white society. Dr. Jordan Chavis (1892–1905) assumed leadership shortly after Grandison's departure and promoted philosophies on education that resembled the teachings of W. E. B. Du Bois and his theories of the "talented tenth." Chavis's successor, Rev. Silas Peeler (1905–1913), embraced the teachings of Booker T. Washington by promoting racial solidarity and economic nationalism.<sup>19</sup> Three years before

17. Historian Stephanie Shaw's classic and definitive study on black women and their expanding roles in the freedom struggle illustrates that throughout the Progressive movement and beyond, black women were assigned gender roles that were strategically designed to "encourage achievement," transcend barriers of race, class, and sex, and link that success with community development. The history of Bennett women during the New Negro era further underscores this critical development. See Stephanie J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers during the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of Chapel Hill Press, 1996), 32.

18. Grandison recruited future black literary giant James Corrothers to Bennett as a young student and impressed the up-and-coming writer with his commitment to the black liberation struggle. For more on Grandison, his politics, and the early seeds of radicalism at Bennett, see Lorenzo J. Greene, *Selling Black History for Carter G. Woodson: A Diary, 1930–1933*, ed. Arvarh E. Strickland (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996), 68; August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880–1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), 67; and James Corrothers, *In Spite of the Handicap: An Autobiography* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1916), 101–118.

19. *Bennett Belle 1973* (yearbook) (Greensboro, N.C.: Students of Bennett College, 1973), Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.



assuming the leadership of Bennett, Peeler was selected as one of the key speakers at a conference held in Atlanta in 1902, "The United Negro: His Problems and His Progress."<sup>20</sup> By the time Peeler succeeded Chavis, he was so deeply influenced by the principles espoused by Washington that he established Bennett as one of the institutions in the Tuskegee Machine's extensive network of supporters. Upon the news of Washington's death in 1915, Bennett opened the doors to the black community of Greensboro, where hundreds gathered to memorialize the nation's most prominent race leader.<sup>21</sup>

Evidence illustrates that Peeler helped students develop race consciousness during his tenure at Bennett. He established literary organizations on campus, such as the Cornelian Ring and the Bennett Literary Society, that provided students with an open forum to debate social issues, engage in the latest articles and readings related to racial uplift, and affirm their sense of self.<sup>22</sup> Peeler, a disciple of Grandison, carried on his mentor's dream for a greater tie to the motherland when he rebooted the Samuel Crowther Friends of Africa Society on campus in 1913. Much like Grandison's original vision, the organization supported missionary work on the continent while simultaneously encouraging students to take pride in their African roots.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps most critical to the development of racial consciousness among students was the addition of African American history into the curriculum itself. Bennett College had already offered a course entitled *The American Negro* in 1915, the same year esteemed historian Carter G. Woodson founded the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History to highlight the historical contributions of the race. Among other things, the course required upperclassmen to engage in "organized efforts for improving the conditions of living and the social conditions of the American Negro."<sup>24</sup>

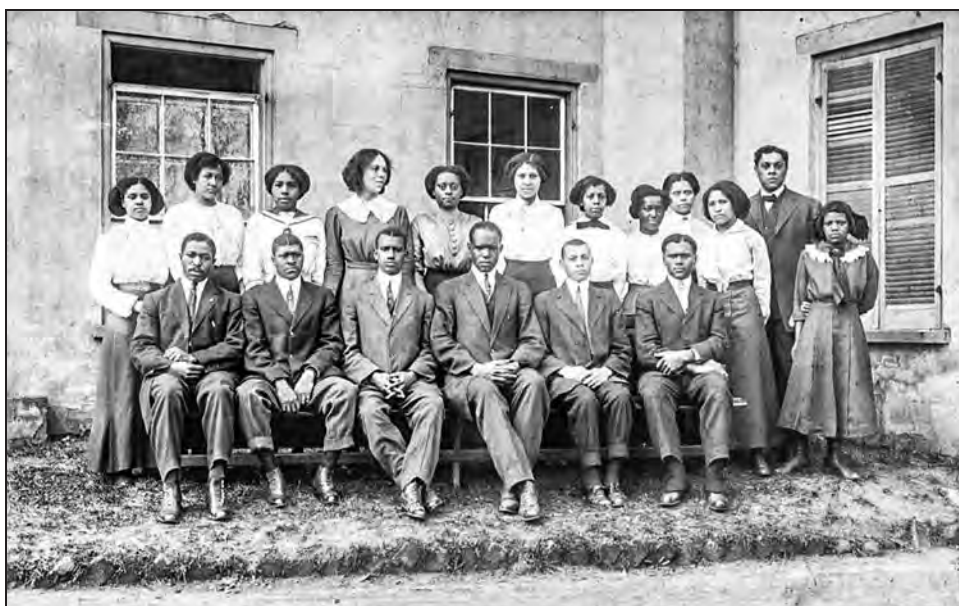
20. "The United Negro: His Problems and His Progress" (conference program), 1902, in Abraham H. Peeler Papers (hereinafter cited as Peeler Papers), Collection 142, series 7, folder 5, Greensboro History Museum Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

21. "Bennett Mourns Death of Race Leader: Tribute to His Efforts" (newspaper clipping), 1915, in Peeler Papers, series 12, folders 1, 4, Greensboro History Museum Archives.

22. Historian Wilson Jeremiah Moses documented the importance of literary societies to the advancement of black nationalism and other militant ideas. These societies were created as forms of entertainment as well as a means to politicize African American readers. They were particularly popular on black college campuses in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 198. For more information concerning the voracious appetite for reading that early black college students possessed, see Mollie E. Dunlap, "Recreational Reading of Negro College Students," *Journal of Negro Education* 2 (October 1933): 448-459. See also Hortense Powdermaker, *After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South* (New York: Viking Press, 1939), 320.

23. J. Ormond Wilson, "Stewart Missionary Foundation for Africa in Gammon Theological Seminary," in *Liberia*, no. 19 (November 1901): 7; *Bennett Belle* 1973, Bennett College Archives.

24. *Bennett Belle* 1973, Bennett College Archives.



Rev. Silas Peeler, president of Bennett College from 1905 to 1913 (standing, right), embraced the teachings of Booker T. Washington by promoting racial solidarity and economic nationalism. Peeler at Bennett College with male and female graduates, ca. 1905–1913. Unless otherwise specified, photographs are courtesy of the Thomas F. Holgate Library, Bennett College Archives, Greensboro, North Carolina.

Bennett's board of trustees likely sensed the problems associated with the growing zeal among educated blacks. They removed Peeler in 1913 for being too "aggressive" and "outspoken."<sup>25</sup> The board soon appointed Rev. Frank Trigg, who served as president from 1915 to 1926. Trigg's background is both intriguing and informative. A former slave from Virginia who lost his arm in a farming accident, Trigg displayed accommodationist values far beyond those of his predecessors. His appointment as Bennett's president overlapped with the rise of the New Negro in America, and he subsequently sought to suppress any semblance of militancy on campus. As historian Sarah Thuesen documents, "Black educational advancement hinged on keeping black 'agitation' at bay." In the wake of America's violent race riots in the Red Summer of 1919, Trigg banned the circulation of the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine on campus to maintain support from white benefactors.<sup>26</sup> While he was willing to bend campus policies to accommodate his overseers on the board of trustees, a more defiant generation of youth was preparing to emerge.

25. Ibid.

26. Sarah Caroline Thuesen, *Greater than Equal: African American Struggles for Schools and Citizenship in North Carolina, 1919–1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 20, 22.

The embers of Red Summer had barely cooled by the time Trigg left office in 1926. However, in that year, Bennett College made a critical pivot in its relatively short history by transitioning to a women's college.<sup>27</sup> Even prior to the opening of this new chapter, the campus was making its mark in the arena of educating black women. Rev. Wilbur Steele, who served as Bennett Seminary's principal from 1881 to 1889, briefly highlighted the advantages of educating women when he praised his former students' professional accomplishments. "Ten of these old students have been members of the General Conference, nine of them as delegates and nearly all of them as alternates," noted Steele. "As many more are nearly as notable in their communities and in the elevation of their race, not to mention as many of the girls."<sup>28</sup> By 1910, North Carolina far outpaced the nation in the number of bachelor of arts degrees awarded to African American women. Of the 168 degrees awarded in the state, Bennett had granted 71. The next highest total among southern states was Tennessee, which had awarded a total of 91 degrees.<sup>29</sup> As the era of the New Negro dawned, the question (at least in North Carolina) was not whether black women would benefit from increased opportunities for education, but whether that education would fit within the paradigm of black radicalism sweeping across the country. Bennett Belles, nurtured by the school's *communitas* and encouraged to develop a strong sense of self, were exposed to a steady stream of black scholars and activists who visited campus, many of whom openly denounced racial injustice. Armed with knowledge, these young women carefully considered where and when they might take bolder stands against Jim Crow and white supremacy. They also welcomed a new president who would politicize and train Bennett College students as agents for social and political change.

When David Dallas Jones was appointed to the Bennett presidency in 1927, he was returning home. Jones was born and raised in Greensboro and left his Dixie roots behind to pursue degrees at Wesleyan College and Columbia University. When he finally returned home to the Tar Heel State, he brought with him a background in racial reconciliation. Jones served on the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, based in Atlanta, a rather conservative organization that tiptoed around volatile issues

27. The school's transition to a women's college occurred largely as a result of its partnership with the Woman's Home Missionary Society, also affiliated with the Methodist Episcopal Church. Bennett was governed by the Board of Education and the Woman's Home Missionary Society, which had increased its influence through the domestic science department on campus. By 1926, with women already outnumbering men on campus by four to one, and the number of women enrolling in college across the nation steadily increasing, the decision was made to convert Bennett to a single-sex college. See James P. Brawley, *Two Centuries of Methodist Concern: Bondage, Freedom, and Education of Black People* (New York: Vantage Press, 1974), 162-164.

28. W. F. Steele, "A Work that Pays Big Dividends," *Epworth Herald* 15, no. 36, February 4, 1905. The *Epworth Herald* was the official organ of the Epworth League, a Methodist young adult organization.

29. Stephanie Y. Evans, *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954: An Intellectual History* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 43.



By 1910, North Carolina led the nation in the number of bachelor of arts degrees awarded to African American women. Of the 168 degrees awarded in the state by 1910, Bennett had granted 71. Members of the Bennett College student council, ca. 1920–1929.

of race instead of tackling them head on. The commission soon spread throughout the South, acting as a council of the enlightened, where cooler heads could prevail to deal with the percolating racial tension across the South. Jones was not alone in this venture. During the interwar period and beyond, several black college presidents were invited to participate in the various interracial commissions that were being established throughout the South. As historian Raymond Gavins observes, these organizations were created to “meliorate grievances and ease tensions,” but they were never designed to dismantle the racial hierarchy that imprisoned blacks in a permanent state of inequality.<sup>30</sup> Through their participation with the commissions, black college presidents such as Jones were welcome additions to a group that provided the illusion of gradualism, race cooperation, and peace—but Jones soon offered more than just a token nod toward the idea of black liberation.

30. Raymond Gavins, *The Perils and Prospects of Southern Black Leadership: Gordon Blaine Hancock, 1884–1970* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1977), 92. See also Mark Ellis, *Race Harmony and Black Progress: Jack Woofert and the Interracial Cooperation Movement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

For Jones, pursuing racial justice was the new family tradition. While David went off to attend college outside of North Carolina, his older brother, Robert Elijah Jones, graduated from Bennett and quickly emerged as a race leader in the arena of religion. Robert scaled the ranks of the Methodist Episcopal Church and was appointed as the church's first African American bishop. He was the chief editor of the *Southwestern Christian Advocate*, a news bulletin dedicated to covering the details of the black Methodist Church, and later founded the Gulfside Assembly in Waveland, Mississippi, one of the few retreat and vacation spaces for African Americans in the South. His younger brother, David, made sure that Robert would not be the only Jones brother engaged in uplifting the race. When David Dallas Jones took over at Bennett in 1927, he did so as the college was entering a new phase. It had just made the transition from a coeducational to a single-sex institution, and Jones welcomed the challenge of leading one of only two colleges in the country dedicated to serving African American women. As Jones stepped into his new role, he quickly exerted his brand of politics across campus and refused to soft-pedal his growing irritation with Jim Crow.

The president of Bennett deliberately passed his frustration with racial subjugation along to his students. He routinely informed the women of Bennett to avoid shopping in downtown stores that physically or verbally abused them, and, much to the chagrin of white laborers, he consistently hired black contractors to complete work around campus.<sup>31</sup> In the late 1920s, the black community called for a mass meeting at the nearby Trinity A.M.E. Zion Church to encourage patronage of home merchants instead of hostile white businesses that employed Jim Crow policies. Bennett students attended the meeting in considerable numbers, and a Bennett choir "enlivened" the crowd with a musical performance.<sup>32</sup>

As the nation struggled through the Great Depression, Jones continued cultivating a campus community where education and race consciousness worked hand in hand. Bennett women formed organizations such as the Phyllis Wheatley Literary Society and the Charlotte Hawkins Brown Club, where they debated topics such as "Will Education Solve the Race Problem?" Gladys Whitefield, a 1931 graduate of Bennett, noted that the presence of such forensic groups offered a "valuable educational service in that they quickly bring a student to measure her capacities and give the student an ambition to test and develop her powers . . . based on worthwhile knowledge of current history." By the end of the 1931 academic year, Bennett women also had organized the first student interracial movement on

31. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 20.

32. "Negro Mass Meeting Monday Night, 8:30" (newspaper clipping), ca. 1929-1930, Bennett College Scrapbook, Bennett College Archives.





In 1927, David Dallas Jones, with degrees from Wesleyan College and Columbia University, was appointed to the Bennett presidency. Jones cultivated a campus community where education and race consciousness worked hand in hand and encouraged Bennett students to resist racial subjugation. David Dallas Jones and Annie Merner Pfeiffer, ca. 1930–1939.

campus. They welcomed white student visitors from across the state and discussed topics such as education, health, and economics. However, one can only wonder, as students from Duke University, Elon College, and the University of North Carolina gathered on the quaint and lovely campus, whether more sensitive and controversial conversations on race surfaced among the youth as well.<sup>33</sup> What is certain is that Bennett students, influenced by the growing radicalism of the emerging Left during the depression years, were slowly fanning out into the surrounding communities

33. "The Phyllis Wheatley Literary Society of Bennett College for Women Presents the Freshman Oratorical Contest," March 19, 1931, Bennett College Scrapbook, Bennett College Archives; "Things Worth While," *Bennett Banner*, January 1931; "The Charlotte Hawkins Brown Literary Society," and "Student Inter-Racial Movement Started," *Bennett Banner*, May 1931, Bennett College Archives.

and leaving their impression upon those they encountered. Years later, when left-wing activist Junius Scales briefly left the all-white campus of the University of North Carolina in 1938 to attend an interracial student-labor conference in Durham, he was awestruck by the young Bennett Belle who boldly took a seat beside him for an integrated dinner in the basement of the local YMCA. Her name was Frances—the daughter of David Dallas Jones.<sup>34</sup>

Militant expressions increasingly surfaced in the campus newspaper, the *Bennett Banner*. Jones used his connections to bring politicians such as Illinois congressman Oscar De Priest and former NAACP head James Weldon Johnson to campus. Johnson delivered the spring commencement in 1934 and lectured students on “the stern conditions of life” they would face upon departing. But it was the nurturing they received at Bennett that taught them how to confront Jim Crow. In his first year as president, Jones introduced the Annual Home Making Institute. The yearly program trained young women in domestic responsibilities while fostering race consciousness and dissent. In May 1934, the women heard from Forrester Washington, the director of Negro Work with the Federal Emergency Relief Association, who suggested that an increasing number of blacks were escaping the bleak economic times by changing “religious faith, politics, and even breaking away from the color line.”<sup>35</sup> Such was the nature of college life at Bennett. One could enjoy playful banter with friends, learn about the best practices in domestic homemaking, and attend a stirring rally to defend the race all in a week’s time on campus.

Students were deeply influenced by those who worked within the *communitas*. They took in the political leanings of friends, the radical musings of faculty, and the visions of liberation crafted by administrators like Jones, a committed advocate of racial justice. In 1936, Jones joined together with a titan of black education, Mary McLeod Bethune, to protest the governing body of their respective schools—the Methodist Church. At a national convening of the church held in Columbus, Ohio, the organization enforced the color line to accommodate white attendees from their southern jurisdictions. Jones and Bethune walked out, leaving in their wake numerous black ministers who were too timid to challenge the Jim Crow policy embraced by their own church.<sup>36</sup> As historian Linda Brown contends, Jones diligently walked the tightrope of race relations. He was never reckless, but he delighted in provocation—a tactic he used more with his students than with the

34. Junius Irving Scales and Richard Nickson, *Cause at Heart: A Former Communist Remembers* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 60.

35. “Congressman De Priest Visits,” “Dr. Johnson Speaks at Bennett College,” “Eighth Home-Making Institute Week,” *Bennett Banner*, May 1934, Bennett College Archives.

36. “David Dallas Jones” (obituary), *Journal of Negro History* 41, no. 2 (April 1956): 179–181.

white establishment.<sup>37</sup> Jones understood the consequences of provoking local whites. Nevertheless, he also was heading an institution in which students were constantly drilled in the importance of citizenship and democracy—two constitutional rights that African Americans were categorically denied. Many local whites expected Jones and his students to be virtuous and docile and to comply with the laws of the land, thus serving as an example to poor and working-class blacks. But by 1937, they were disappointed to find that Jones's influence and his students' role in the growing struggle for black liberation culminated in a public protest of racism in the Jim Crow South.

One week before Hattie Bailey took the train to Philadelphia to represent Bennett College at the National Negro Congress, faculty members on campus were drilling students in the works of Du Bois, poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, and James Weldon Johnson during the school's weekly chapel sessions.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, Bennett students who took courses on black history frequently encountered examples of black dignity and accomplishment. In 1937, the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC) was formed as an offshoot of the NNC to encourage race consciousness and to continue "fighting against racism and . . . achieving political and cultural progress."<sup>39</sup> These ideals and experiences reinforced the growth and development of Bennett women, and it was not surprising that students demanded that Theater Owners of North Carolina and South Carolina Incorporated reverse its new policy to cut out film scenes in which blacks and whites were portrayed as equal.

The scene that triggered consternation and panic among the collective of white theater owners was frivolous by most standards and was so heavily draped in minstrelsy and racial caricature that it is surprising that theater owners, such as Greensboro's Montgomery S. Hill, were not pacified by the overt racial stereotypes pictured in the film. Yet it also played to the public's warped fascination with the racial politics of the era. The movie, *Ali Baba Goes to Town*, featured vaudeville and minstrel-era star Eddie Cantor, who plays a young drifter who finds his way onto a movie set, eventually taking a small role in the production. The directors of the film provide Cantor, who is suffering from a injury, with painkillers that soon induce him into a dreamlike state, where he hallucinates about taking an even larger role in the film set in the fanciful world of *Arabian Nights*. It is here that the racial absurdities embedded and portrayed within a specific scene invoked the fear of Montgomery Hill and his fellow theater owners.

37. Linda Beatrice Brown, *The Long Walk: The Story of the Presidency of Willa B. Player at Bennett College* (Greensboro, N.C.: Bennett College, 1998), 160–161.

38. "Interesting Chapel Programs Given," *Bennett Banner*, October 1937.

39. Robert Cohen, *When the Old Left Was Young: Student Radicals and America's First Mass Student Movement, 1929–1941* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 223.



In 1937, Theater Owners of North Carolina and South Carolina Incorporated instituted a policy to cut out film scenes in which blacks and whites were portrayed as equal. When *Ali Baba Goes to Town* opened in Greensboro, theater owner Montgomery Hill deliberately cut a scene in which black vaudeville dancing star Jeni LeGon appears onstage with Eddie Cantor, who dons minstrel-era blackface for a musical number entitled “Swing Is Here to Stay.” Bennett students were outraged that LeGon’s commanding and virtuoso tap dance scene was cut. Durham’s *Carolina Times* reported that one thousand students joined a boycott of the theater. Film still featuring Jeni LeGon, with Eddie Cantor in blackface to her left, from *Ali Baba Goes to Town*, released October 29, 1937, distributed by 20th Century Fox.

Cantor, eager to speak the “swing” language of the Sultan’s all-black musicians who are conveniently and idly lying about the palace grounds, quickly dons minstrel-era blackface and transitions into a musical number entitled “Swing is Here to Stay.” Enter black vaudeville dancing star Jeni LeGon, who descends the stage stairs wearing a grass skirt and performing a commanding and virtuoso tap number in which she flows effortlessly across the stage, stoking the desire and approval of Cantor. For southern white theater owners, this proved to be too much. Had LeGon exhibited a typical minstrel-era shuffling routine that failed to display her full prowess and genius as a performer, perhaps their anger and fears would have been mitigated. From their perspective, such mastery and talent was reserved for the likes of Eleanor Powell or Ginger Rogers, the most prominent white female dance stars of their era. “The negro in the southern theaters as a character will always be accepted,” declared Hill. Yet not only was LeGon’s character not subservient or submissive enough, but the real crime was that she shared the stage with Cantor, who fawned

and followed her every graceful move. "People will always resent," continued Hill, "a mixed chorus or any chorus where a negro and a white person appear, as it were, on the same plane." This scene was deliberately cut from the Greensboro showing, drawing the ire and protest of Bennett students, who chafed at the thought of black excellence being censored to appease those who catered to white supremacist sensibilities. Ironically, one of the dominant concerns at the three-day conference of southern theater owners was the threat of federal regulation of their industry and how "communists sought to use the screen for propaganda."<sup>40</sup>

News announcing the theater company's decision spread quickly among the Belles and students attending the larger and historically black North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State College, located directly across the street from Bennett. The *Carolina Times*, a black Durham newspaper serving citizens across the state, reported that one thousand students joined in the boycott. It also reported that the North Carolina Inter-Racial Committee had also registered a stern protest with Theater Owners of North Carolina and South Carolina Incorporated—a move that showed David Dallas Jones was working behind the scenes.<sup>41</sup> Jones's daughter Frances, who would go on one year later to inspire Junius Scales as they shared dinner at a student-labor conference, was a freshman at Bennett during the boycott and chief organizer of the uprising. The theater company soon capitulated to the students' demands and ran Hollywood productions unedited.

Of course, boycotting a theater company for scenes that damaged the black psyche was a small step compared with direct action protests that targeted policies barring black communities from basic civil and human rights. Those types of overt protests were still over two decades away. However, what the women of Bennett demonstrated was the power of the *communitas* that surrounded them and their resolve to tackle larger issues that belittled their humanity. With the boycott, Jones displayed his willingness to nullify the unofficial social contract between him and the white city fathers of Greensboro. The peace they expected Jones to uphold had not been broken; the boycotts were indeed nonviolent. However, the women of Bennett defiantly broke the public silence on Jim Crow with great dignity and grace. Jones unequivocally stood behind them.

40. "Meeting of Theater Owners Opens Today," *Greensboro Daily News*, December 5, 1937; "Federal Regulation of Movies Opposed," *Greensboro Daily News*, December 7, 1937; "Hill Addresses Theater Group," *Greensboro Record*, December 7, 1937; "Resolution Adopted by Theater Owners," *Greensboro Daily News*, December 8, 1937; Lorraine Ahearn, "'37 Boycott Was Ahead of Its Time," *Greensboro News and Record*, February 3, 1994. For more on the legacy of Jeni LeGon and the plot and background of the film *Ali Baba Goes to Town*, see Nadine George-Graves, "Identity Politics and Political Will: Jeni LeGon Living in a Great Big Way," in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics*, ed. Rebekah J. Kowal, Gerald Siegmund, and Randy Martin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 511–535.

41. "Greensboro Theater Boycotted by A&T and Bennett Students," *Durham Carolina Times*, January 15, 1938. The *Carolina Times* reported that "one thousand students joined in the boycott." It is not clear whether the number referred to signed pledges or indicated widespread picketing.



Following the boycott of 1937, Frances Jones learned that her father was targeted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and was visited by agents who “tried to force him to get us to stop.”<sup>42</sup> The FBI did not typically conduct surveillance in small southern cities and devoted most of its resources to fighting radicalism in northern cities. There, black urban enclaves provided enough shelter from racial violence that supporters of the labor and Pan-Africanist movements could speak out freely against racial injustice. Moreover, the type of work unfolding at historically black colleges such as Bennett was viewed as largely benign. Historian Theodore Kornweibel Jr. notes that even New Negro era moderates “must have been inhibited by the fact that the Bureau had no tolerance for civil rights advocacy.”<sup>43</sup> While activists of the New Negro era who were associated with black colleges were acutely aware of the scrutiny and even danger they faced in openly questioning the power structure, they were afforded a certain measure of stealth—a fact that many, but not all, used to their advantage. Bennett women were not stockpiling weapons, openly courting communism, or repudiating capitalism on street corners. Nevertheless, as seeds of rebellion were planted in their campus culture, they, along with scores of other black college students across the South, would eventually become the shock troops that catalyzed the movement to dismantle Jim Crow. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and his army of agents, who focused on the more overt threats of militancy during the New Negro era, completely overlooked the second curriculum and its role in radicalizing generations of students during the interwar years. The Bennett-led boycott of 1937 dissolved after students found a suitable resolution; however, Jones continued to cultivate an environment that generated political consciousness and activist impulses among his students.

Bennett students had long prepared for such a protest. The New Negro politics of the era had firmly shaped their worldview, and they helped to lead thousands of youth in a public display of dissent. Administrators like Jones could never publicly admit to the fact that the rebellion resulted directly from the *communitas* he had helped to shape. But his fingerprints were all over the protest that was unlike anything the South had seen from black college youth.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the 1937 boycott brought forth a groundswell of support from heavily politicized youth across the city,

42. Rita Liberti, “‘We Were Ladies, We Just Played Like Boys’: African American Women and Competitive Basketball at Bennett College, 1928–42,” in Patrick B. Miller ed., *The Sporting World of the Modern South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 160.

43. Theodore Kornweibel Jr., *Seeing Red: Federal Campaigns against Black Militancy, 1919–1925* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 66.

44. Most of the demonstrations that transpired at black colleges in the years prior to the Bennett boycott focused on internal campus issues. Students protested white paternalism, poor campus conditions, and infantilizing social policies that severely curbed their freedoms. Bennett College was unique in staging off-campus protests and a boycott that focused on Jim Crow policies and white supremacy.

confirming that Greensboro had the potential to host massive student-led protests. Students like Harriet Bailey returned to campus with dispatches from the burgeoning black labor movement in the North. Frances Jones organized boots on the ground to take down the offensive policies of Theater Owners of North Carolina and South Carolina Incorporated. The women of Bennett College were clearly dissatisfied with the status quo and prepared to protest white supremacy as they encountered it.

To politicize his students, Jones exposed them to faculty who were intrinsically linked to the growing civil rights movement. In an article published in the *Association of American Colleges Bulletin*, Jones specifically outlined the “cultural obligations” of faculty teaching at historically black colleges and noted that one of their chief roles was to empower their students to tackle social and political problems. Jones did not believe faculty should act as passive coconspirators in this struggle; instead, he envisioned them as hands-on players in the full-court press against Jim Crow. “Perhaps in our day we shall see a decisive struggle and perhaps the ‘coming victory’ of culture as we understand it in our democratic land,” declared Jones. “At least you may be sure we Negro teachers greatly desire to become a part of the force which struggles to bring about this victory.”

The faculty that Jones assembled at Bennett did not stray from that course. When Frances Jones organized the boycott of the local theater, she not only leaned on her father to support her efforts, but she also received counsel from Bennett faculty such as Willa Player and nationally known music composer Robert Nathaniel Dett. The former would play a vital role in the liberation movement as the future president of Bennett. Only three years before the boycott, William Edward Farrison, a formidable professor of English, was corresponding with W. E. B. Du Bois as he sought to rally youth and adults across the state to join the NAACP. “Let me say that I am very deeply interested in the youth movement,” wrote Farrison. “As plans for the movement go forward, I shall greatly appreciate being informed concerning them, and also to give whatever help I may be able to give in the making of them.” Farrison continued to be a force for change on Bennett’s campus as he influenced countless women to take up the fight against Jim Crow. As the New Negro era gave way to New Deal activism, the faculty of Bennett continued to heed Jones’s call to advance the movement.<sup>45</sup>

President Jones increasingly used his position of influence to publicly laud the strides and contributions women were making to the fledgling freedom struggle.

45. David Dallas Jones, “Cultural Obligations of the Faculty in a Negro Liberal Arts College,” *Association of American Colleges Bulletin* 25 (March 1939); Writings of Dr. David Dallas Jones Folder, Alumni Issue—Writings, box 21, David Dallas Jones Papers (hereinafter cited as Jones Papers), Bennett College Archives; William Edward Farrison to W. E. B. Du Bois, March 3, 1934, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312), Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

Shortly after the boycott, Jones was a guest on a nationally syndicated radio show called *Wings Over Jordan*. Based out of Cleveland, Ohio, *Wings Over Jordan* featured a choir of the same name and served as a platform through which various leaders of the black community addressed issues of interest to African Americans. Students reported that “the campus chest swelled ten additional inches after hearing President Jones’ talk.”<sup>46</sup> The mother of the show’s founder, Rev. Glenn Settle, was an alumna of Bennett, and thus Jones was a frequent guest. His use of radio to advance the causes of the freedom movement soon trickled down to his students. As America entered yet another global conflict on behalf of freedom and democracy, students at Bennett prepared a communication blitzkrieg of their own in support of freedom and democracy for African Americans.

In an age in which radio was still the primary method by which information and entertainment were disseminated, the radio program at Bennett College was remarkably successful. The women of Bennett took to the airwaves to deliver the same uplifting and edifying messages they received as students. The program, *Bennett College on the Air*, aired on radio station WBIG (We Believe in Greensboro). It is astonishing and indicative of the moderate politics of the city that WBIG was Greensboro’s first radio station, with its content and primary market focus on the larger white community.<sup>47</sup> The student program lasted only fifteen minutes, but the women of Bennett packed their show full of inspiration. They hoped to establish a counternarrative that commended the contributions of African Americans. A transcript from one show apprising the audience of the importance of Carter G. Woodson’s Negro History Week reads:

Mr. Woodson . . . felt that the colored group here in America needed something for its own internal racial growth. They thought that as people learned more about the achievements of the Negro, this would help destroy some of the misconceptions about his native ability, which seem to exist, even among Negroes. They hoped that learning about the Negro, both in the past and present, would prove an inspiration to colored people everywhere.<sup>48</sup>

46. “Campus Commentary,” *Bennett Banner*, December 1938; “Radio Show Chronicled Blacks’ Harsh Realities,” NPR Music, March 3, 2008, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=87780799>; Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Africana: Arts and Letters: An A-to-Z Reference of Writers, Musicians, and Artists of the African American Experience* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2005), 581–582.

47. WBIG first went on the air in 1926. In the 1930s, WBIG was owned and operated by the Jefferson Standard Life Insurance Company and became a CBS radio affiliate. The radio station provided on-air space to North Carolina A&T as well. How officials of Bennett and A&T negotiated airtime with the station’s owners is unclear and perhaps speaks more to the relatively progressive nature of the city. The city’s first black-owned and -operated radio station, WEAL, would not broadcast until 1962. For more on the history of WBIG, see Gayle Hicks Fripp, *Greensboro: A Chosen Center: An Illustrated History* (Sun Valley, Calif.: American Historical Press, 2001) and Jeffrey L. Rodengen and Richard F. Hubbard, *Jefferson Pilot Financial, 1903–2003: A Century of Excellence* (Fort Lauderdale, Fla.: Write Stuff Enterprises, 2003).

48. Reports of Bennett College Press Board, Public Relations–Purchases folder, box 15, Jones Papers.



Beginning in the 1940s, Bennett students broadcast a fifteen-minute radio program on Greensboro's radio station WBIG. They delivered uplifting messages that commended the contributions of African Americans and discussed topics such as Carter G. Woodson's Negro History Week and courses on "Negro History" offered at Bennett. Bennett students broadcasting radio program, ca. 1940-1949.

The Bennett students in charge of the program, Carol Lynn Booker and Cassandra Moore, discussed Frances Johnson's course on "Negro History" that was offered at Bennett and informed the audience about resources that were available through the campus library. The young women also promoted a modest pamphlet on the history of the "American Negro," entitled "America's Tenth Man: A Brief Survey of the Negro's Part in American History," evidence of Jones's influence on the content of the radio production. The Commission on Interracial Cooperation, the very organization in which Jones was a founding member, published the document.

Black colleges such as Bennett sought to fortify the self-esteem of black youth through cultural nationalism and a counternarrative that celebrated the achievements of African Americans. Decades later, at the height of the civil rights movement, Freedom Schools established in Mississippi to nurture black youth adopted into their curriculums the same concepts of civic education and race consciousness that

black colleges had offered for years.<sup>49</sup> As products of a more radical New Negro era, this particular generation of Bennett College women saw no need to hide their intentions, nor were they under any pressure to do so from their administration. Students were encouraged to share their lessons as far as the airwaves would take them. The radio program ensured that they could reach fellow citizens across the city and the nearby rural areas, and more importantly, disseminate a message to young and old alike that illustrated the beauty and power embodied in the black experience.

The radio program also provided a platform for black women's voices. Radio was then, as it still is largely today, a male-dominated industry that provided little room for female voices or on-air personalities. It was highly unusual for women in the 1930s and 1940s to write their own scripts and produce their own shows, but Bennett students shattered whatever notions the listening public had about who should be given on-air publicity or what topics should be broached. On one broadcast in which Bennett students were recognizing Negro History Week, their "Great Names in History" segment featured African American women who had served as powerful change agents in American history: Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Phyllis Wheatley, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Marian Anderson. Their Negro History class instructor for that semester, John Hope Franklin, surely must have been proud of his students.<sup>50</sup> In 1947, just two years after witnessing his students promote African American history on the Greensboro airwaves, he finished a manuscript that would become a seminal contribution to the field, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*.

The influences of such developments were far-reaching. As Bennett students were exposed to visiting scholars and molded by the women and men who were essential to their vibrant *communitas*, they were empowered to carry the gospel of social justice and equality with them into the communities they were charged to serve. One such example is Eva De Journette, who matriculated at Bennett and by 1942 had made her way to Greenville, South Carolina, where she started a teaching

49. The Freedom Schools were an outgrowth of the Freedom Summer Project sponsored by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1964. The Freedom Schools combined elements of a curriculum that had long since existed in many historically black colleges. Black college students were exposed to a *communitas* that heavily emphasized race consciousness, and much like students at the Freedom Schools, they were often provided with opportunities to hone their leadership skills and envision and practice participatory democracy through mock elections, student government, and various campus organizations. Countless students and alumni would utilize their exposure to the second curriculum to fuel both collective and individual demands for black equality. For more on the Freedom Schools, see Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995); and William Sturkey and Jon N. Hale, eds., *To Write in the Light of Freedom: The Newspapers of the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Schools* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015).

50. "Bennett College on the Air," February 16, 1945, Folder—Public Relations-Radio, box 14, Jones Papers.



career in math and science at Greenville Colored High School. At Bennett, she had worked on the radio series, serving as an announcer and working behind the boards by “operating the control station.” Most importantly, De Journette also developed “The Negro Too Has Achieved” segment of the Bennett radio show. She remained dedicated to the work even after graduating, and volunteered to continue writing the script for the show, “send[ing] it in each week before the deadline set by the Federal Communications Commission.” When she arrived in South Carolina, she was determined to continue the training in cultural nationalism she received at Bennett. She was invited to launch a replica of the “The Negro Too Has Achieved” at radio station WGTC in Greenville.<sup>51</sup> De Journette’s calls for racial solidarity and democracy were in lockstep with the increasing radicalism of black America during World War II.

David Jones also took to the local airwaves, rallying the African American community, promoting movement activity, and enlisting the support of all those who were interested in reshaping American democracy. Jones urged allegiance to black institutions and encouraged his listeners to become stewards of cultural nationalism by backing churches, schools, and black-owned businesses. Jones believed it was essential to preserve black institutions dedicated to improving the social, political, and economic conditions confronting African Americans. “Let us make history by building, through loyalty and co-operation, a firm foundation on which tomorrow’s generations may advance even further than we have come,” he implored. Jones, unlike other college presidents whose future employment was tied to the funds of white southern legislators, openly embraced activist organizations and spoke freely and publicly of the need to support organizations such as the NAACP and the Urban League. In a local radio address in 1942, Jones encouraged his listeners to join both organizations: “We can contribute financially to their upkeep and we can give some of our free time to the furtherance of their aims and objectives in our particular communities.” Jones concluded his on-air comments by urging his listeners to support black media and to celebrate Negro History Week. “For information and for inspiration, we owe this to ourselves,” he declared.<sup>52</sup>

The Second World War was a watershed moment in the struggle for black liberation. The *Bennett Banner* was brimming with stories that illustrated students’ determination to address social inequality, and the campus buzzed with activity that focused on the emerging movement. A “Summer Institute,” the Home Defense Workshop in Community Leadership, was held on campus in 1942. One of its goals was to work toward creating “a world where the walls of racial prejudice and

51. “Bennett Graduate Originates Radio Program,” *Bennett Banner*, March 1942.

52. “Negro Americans,” Folder—Public Relations Purchases, Report of Bennett College Press Board, box 15, Jones Papers.



In 1944, a student interracial conference, cosponsored by Bennett and Greensboro College, was held in Greensboro. Delegates at the conference pledged to fight to end segregation in North Carolina's public transportation system. Bennett Belles, nurtured by the school's *communitas*, carefully considered where and when they might take bolder stands against Jim Crow and white supremacy. Discussion group in Bennett College student union, ca. 1940-1949.

intolerance will not exist." The senior class of 1944 voted the Supreme Court's decision to overturn the Texas white primary in the landmark case *Smith v. Allwright* as the most important news story of that year. A "Student Interracial Conference" was held in Greensboro and cosponsored by Bennett and Greensboro College, a single-sex school for white females. The conference, which hosted delegates from thirty-four colleges in North Carolina and Virginia, reached its peak when a resolution was drafted that pledged students' dedication to end segregation in North Carolina's public transportation. But the topic most often discussed was democracy. It was debated in class discussions, addressed by visiting speakers, and frequently mentioned in editorials in the Bennett student newspaper. The consensus was that America had failed to extend it fully and fairly to blacks.<sup>53</sup>

The women of Bennett took their cue from Jones, who highlighted the paradox of America again claiming to fight a war to preserve freedom and democracy while depriving its own citizens of those rights. Jones's speech, "The Negro and the Postwar World," delivered before the Institute of Human Relations at Greensboro's Woman's College of the University of North Carolina, displayed the political radicalism that increasingly defined him as a social agitator. "It would be amusing if it were not so tragic how little the Negro's situation is understood," Jones declared.

53. "Plans for Summer Institute Announced," *Bennett Banner*, March 1942; "Recent Supreme Court Ruling in the Texas Primary Case Has Far Reaching Political Possibilities," *Bennett Banner*, April 1944; "Student Interracial Conference Held," *Bennett Banner*, November 1944.

"We are segregated, we are separated, and yet that very separation causes us to be sensitive to the ideas which are rampant in the world. And when our great leaders talk of the worth of individuals, the struggle for freedom and democracy, those ideas penetrate into our sphere of life and we are fired with the hope that it may mean that these rights and privileges shall be extended to all people."<sup>54</sup> Not all of his peers shared Jones's view of the struggles and contradictions that framed the daily lives of blacks throughout the country. Tensions in black communities mounted when African American veterans returned home from the war. These veterans were ready to aggressively pursue their rights at home and strongly encouraged those on the front lines of the war for justice and democracy to fight Jim Crow segregation.

Jones's counterpart fifty-four miles east at the historically black and state-controlled North Carolina College for Negroes in Durham adopted a position that was diametrically opposed to Jones's. James E. Shepard, president of the state's second-largest black college, was clearly not a public firebrand. Unlike Jones, Shepard used the radio airwaves to caution against unlimited freedom for African Americans, arguing in a national debate against Langston Hughes that "unqualified freedom" could be a dangerous outcome.<sup>55</sup> Many black elites did not share Shepard's assessment, but a growing militancy in black America meant that African Americans were faced with uncomfortable choices. Battle lines were being drawn between those who supported Shepard's cautious, accommodationist approach and those who spoke out boldly and unequivocally against white supremacy, like David Dallas Jones.

The social and political commentary in the *Bennett Banner* during the Second World War reflects the growing support for civil rights organizing and public protests against Jim Crow. Raymond Gavins chronicled this transformation, noting that NAACP operatives such as Roy Wilkins sensed a surge in wartime radicalism in the Tar Heel State, with Greensboro having the fourth-highest membership among NAACP chapters, just slightly behind Raleigh.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, the political climate of the city had as much to do with an increase in public expressions of dissent, as did the changing mind-set of black youth. As historian William Chafe documents in *Civilities and Civil Rights*, Greensboro's culture of moderation enticed black youths,

54. "The Negro and the Postwar World," *Christian Advocate*, September 16, 1943, Folder-Writings of Dr. David Dallas Jones, box 21, Jones Papers.

55. Sarah Thuesen does an excellent job in exposing the public and covert ways in which black college administrators, particularly those who were heads of state-controlled institutions, handled the growing movement. While Shepard was known for adopting a public persona that was conservative, he also facilitated the growth of radicalism and militancy on his campus by giving limited but all-important space for the debate, discussion, and implementation of activist ideals. See Sarah Thuesen, *Greater than Equal*, 118-126.

56. Raymond Gavins, "The NAACP in North Carolina during the Age of Segregation," in *New Directions in Civil Rights Studies*, ed. Armstead L. Robinson and Patricia Sullivan (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1991), 105-125.

who were revitalized by the burgeoning movement to take more risks with breaking the color line. There were no great barriers to African American voting, and the city had made tremendous strides toward voter registration in the 1940s that resulted in the election of the first black city councilman in 1951.<sup>57</sup> However, the public spectacle of breaking Jim Crow policies was still taboo.

During the war, Bennett had formed a Contemporary Affairs Committee to keep students informed on current issues connected with the war effort and local politics, but some students still complained of apathy on campus and publicly questioned the commitment of their fellow Belles. "What are your ideas and opinions concerning our national problems—our race problems?" wrote one disgruntled student. Although Bennett administrators decided to dedicate one day out of the week for discussions of "current events and history" in chapel, apparently some students were not as tuned in or invigorated as their peers had hoped they would be.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps they disliked the mandatory daily chapel sessions or, like many young people, were indifferent to world events. A few Bennett women, however, including Valena E. Minor, editor of the student newspaper, attempted to stoke the fires of dissent in their fellow students.

Minor was the daughter of Norman Minor, a prominent and legendary Cleveland, Ohio, lawyer who was known for his toughness as a prosecutor. She brought that same work ethic and tenacity to campus as a student leader and the editor of the *Bennett Banner*. In January 1943, Minor wrote an editorial, "Through the Eyes of a New America," that sharply condemned Jim Crow but also criticized those who were unprepared to protest against the American caste system. Her upbringing in the Midwest had insulated her from the more demeaning public policies that defined life in Dixie, but living in the Tar Heel State exposed her to the realities of life under Jim Crow. The tone of the editorial made it unclear whether she actually experienced the events she described or whether she was satirizing white supremacy. Her opening salvo, aimed at students who neglected to become politically engaged, was inflammatory to say the least. "Hail cohorts of Hitler!" wrote Minor. "You brandish your swastika most effectively. No, no, my 'friend,' why do you turn to look at your neighbor? . . . You, dear compatriots, are the most obvious evidence of fifth columning I've seen in a long time. Yet you rest smug assured of the fact that no

57. William Chafe illustrates the role that black colleges played in ushering forth a new era of black political empowerment in the city of Greensboro. Randolph Blackwell, a graduate of North Carolina A&T, which is located only a few blocks from Bennett, was instrumental in helping to turn out the African American vote. Additionally, F. A. Mayfield, a former professor at A&T, made one of the first major runs at election to city office in 1947. Although Mayfield did not win, his success at netting 25 percent of the total votes cast gave African Americans in the city the boost of confidence they needed to believe that change was inevitable. See Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 24–28.

58. "How Much Do You Know?" *Bennett Banner*, October 1942.

F.B.I. can ever harm you. Irony . . . how funny.” Minor juxtaposed Nazism and Jim Crow, as did other detractors of white supremacy in the New Negro era.<sup>59</sup> She went on to describe a bus ride in which she or a fictional character lodged a small personal protest against the unjust policies of segregation. Never had a writer within the pages of the *Bennett Banner* written such an acerbic, yet witty denunciation of America’s racial shortcomings.

Toward the end of her editorial, Minor turned her attention to the countless African Americans who were sidelined by fear or apathy—a reality that became a hallmark of the civil rights movement to come. African Americans who were psychologically conditioned to accept their own denigration, or feared the injurious and often violent backlash that accompanied overt protests, marveled at conscientious objectors of Jim Crow. They boldly drank out of “white only” fountains, stubbornly took their seats in “white only” sections of restaurants, or in the case of the person represented in Minor’s editorial, refused to comply with segregation on public transportation. Some members of the black community who vowed to uphold the color line frowned upon or even threatened these “trouble makers.” The defiant bus rider in Minor’s editorial encountered “giggles” from those who thought her foolish to challenge what they believed to be the sacrosanct policies of the Jim Crow South. Minor admonished them by leaning upon her teachings from Bennett. “I can’t be too critical of the attitude you take,” she declared. “It’s engrained in you—this fear of the “superior race.” But stand up for your rights—and stand by those who do stand up for your rights if you can’t stand up for them yourself. . . . The next time you’re in a similar situation, think twice before you sniggle . . . and then be PROUD to be a Negro.” In a final rhetorical flourish targeting white supremacy, she warned, “You’ll see hundreds more like me, Hitlerites,” declared Minor. “Maybe they can make Americans out of you yet.”<sup>60</sup>

Minor was a graduating senior the year she wrote the explosive piece for the *Bennett Banner*. As editor of the paper, she had the latitude to publish what she wanted, but most importantly, she had benefited from four years within a communitas that nurtured her sense of self and emboldened her to use the power of print media to express her frustration with American racism. The era of the New Negro ended, replaced by a growing radicalism during World War II, and students like Minor were the by-product of that nexus. History has seldom recorded their names or venerated their deeds, but scores of young women and men who were

59. For more on the increased comparison of Jim Crow and Nazism before and during World War II, see Carol Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 8–58, and Johnpeter Horst Grill and Robert L. Jenkins, “The Nazis and the American South in the 1930s: A Mirror Image?” *Journal of Southern History* 58 (November 1992): 667–694.

60. Valena E. Minor, “Editorially Speaking,” *Bennett Banner*, January 1943.





Valena E. Minor, editor of the student newspaper *Bennett Banner*, frequently denounced Jim Crow segregation and white supremacy in her editorials. Upon graduating from Bennett, Minor returned to her hometown of Cleveland, Ohio, married a bandleader, and began a long and prominent career in local radio at station WABQ. Photograph of Valena Minor Williams, 1962, courtesy of Michael Schwartz Library, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, Ohio.

exposed to environments like Bennett entered their respective communities as race women and race men and used that foundation to nurture, mold, and produce the student activists of the 1960s, who would soon reshape American democracy and transform a nation. Upon graduating from Bennett, Minor returned to her hometown of Cleveland, married a local bandleader, and kicked off a long and prominent career in local radio. She became a fixture at station WABQ and later helped to launch the Community Action for Youth, a Cleveland-based organization dedicated to providing job training and social services for the city's poor.

Lois Taylor joined the Bennett College staff in 1941 as the "publicity director" and became integral in the rise of the radio program that broadcast across Greensboro. Her presence strengthened the campus's commitment to utilizing the press in what was both a media blitz against Jim Crow and a propaganda

campaign targeting white and black southerners. In a paper she delivered on air at WBIG, Taylor outlined the responsibilities and goals of the Associated Negro Press (ANP), a national news agency founded by Claude Barnett in 1919 that was dedicated to covering newsworthy events about black America that the mainstream white press routinely ignored. Newspapers such as the *Bennett Banner* depended upon the ANP to feed stories to the campus community concerning the progress, achievements, and obstructions that African Americans continued to face. "They have been important factors in the education of our people," noted Taylor. The ANP had been essential "in the development of racial pride, racial consciousness, and whatever spirit of cohesiveness our group possesses."<sup>61</sup> For years, students such as Valena Minor emulated the writing styles of those journalists they admired from the *Chicago Defender*, the *Baltimore Afro-American*, and the *Pittsburgh Courier*. They carved out their own space for the "race beat" within the *Bennett Banner* and strengthened their hand by hosting their own local radio show.<sup>62</sup> During World War II, the *Banner* displayed key moments of radicalism that heightened toward the end of the war.

The beginning of the spring semester of 1944 was especially active. The Woman's Division of Christian Service, an extension of the Methodist Church, invited David Jones to a seminar on "Christianity and the Race Problem," which was to culminate in a conference called "Racism and World Order." Jones was invited because the conference organizers knew he would not only be a vital asset in presenting his expertise on the subject, but also disseminate what he learned at the conference among his students and across the airwaves to the Greensboro community.<sup>63</sup> As Jones prepared for the conference, he also arranged a spectacular lineup for the upcoming Negro History Week festivities. The celebration that year demonstrated that Bennett no longer promoted race consciousness simply through improving students' self-esteem or bolstering them with hollow platitudes.

Jones saw Negro History Week as an opportunity to lay out a blueprint for liberation, infused with racial pride and imbued with marching orders from luminaries within the field. Indeed, the black lecture circuit was a prominent fixture on almost every black college campus and featured heavy hitters in civil rights, academics, and entertainment. As a virtual who's who of the black experience streamed through campus, students could rest assured that they were learning from speakers who were

61. Lois Taylor, "The American Negro Press," Folder-Reports of Bennett College Press Board, box 15, Jones Papers.

62. For more on the Associated Negro Press and the role of black media during the civil rights movement, see Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007).

63. J. D. Bragg to David Dallas Jones, February 5, 1944, Jones to Bragg, February 10, 1944, both in Folder-Church Board of Mission and Church Extension of the Methodist Church, Correspondence (1943-1947), box 4, Jones Papers.



In 1942, Bennett's Contemporary Affairs Committee brought activist, NAACP representative, and community organizer Ella Baker to campus to address the student body. Baker not only promoted the work of the NAACP, she also rallied the young women to envision themselves as agents of change. Portrait of Ella Baker in the 1940s from the Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

highly accomplished experts in their fields, who shared the same dreams of freedom that fueled the collective imaginations of Bennett women. The *Banner* reported that historian John Hope Franklin returned to campus and delivered a timely lecture on "The Negro Soldier—A Century of Gallant Fighting." Students undoubtedly took special pride in the contributions that African American soldiers were making to the war effort. Franklin was also interviewed on the Bennett radio program.<sup>64</sup> But it was the climax of that week's celebration that ultimately stood out and fully exhibited the type of *communitas* that David Dallas Jones was constructing in Greensboro.

Bennett's Contemporary Affairs Committee brought a representative of the NAACP to campus they believed could effectively communicate with students. Activist and community organizer Ella Baker had been with the NAACP for only

64. "Negro History Week Celebrated on Campus," *Bennett Banner*, February 1944.

two years when she arrived on Bennett's campus in 1942 to address the student body. As a 1927 graduate of historically black Shaw University in Raleigh, she was aware of the vital space she occupied at Bennett. At various times, her own matriculation at Shaw had been punctuated with both a charge to serve and a hint of militancy that sharpened her commitment to become involved with the struggle for African American liberation. In her speech, Baker not only promoted the work of the NAACP, but also "captured the attention of the audience" and rallied the young women to envision themselves as change agents. She had previously captured the attention of Bennett's headman. Jones first encountered Baker as he traveled the professional circuit in New York in the late 1920s, and, according to Baker, the two had met on more than one occasion. Impressed, Jones offered Baker a teaching appointment at Bennett, which the young activist turned down to pursue hands-on opportunities in community organizing that more closely aligned with her interest in direct action. By the time Baker took a job with the NAACP, her reputation as a firebrand for justice and unconventional womanhood most likely drew Jones to her once again, as he approved her invitation to speak on campus. Baker's critical thinking, tenacity, and her knack for finding calm amid the storm became endearing qualities that would draw young revolutionaries to her in the fateful years to come.<sup>65</sup>

Blacks in America continued to denounce the United States for its hypocritical embrace of Jim Crow and white supremacy while it fought a war to uphold the principles of democracy. But they also prepared to use activism, litigation, and broad pressure on the federal government to achieve equal opportunities and first-class citizenship. Several developments after the war heightened African Americans' expectations and sense of urgency. Under pressure from labor leader A. Phillip Randolph, President Franklin Roosevelt capitulated to the demands for fair hiring in the defense industries, and the *Pittsburgh Courier's* Double V Campaign was widely promoted and embraced. Much like the burden borne by Jackie Robinson, the first African American to integrate major league baseball, black youth attending black colleges were drilled in a dress rehearsal for the fruits of democracy. There were rules to the game, expectations and benchmarks that blacks placed on themselves, along with a grave responsibility to be paragons of virtue, respect, and excellence as they prepared for the personal and professional opportunities that awaited them in a post-segregated world. African Americans would succeed only if the young people who broke the color line could prove they were as sharp and talented as any of

65. Ibid.; Ella Baker, interview by Casey Hayden and Sue Thrasher, New York, April 19, 1977, Interview G-0008, Series G-Southern Women, Oral Histories of the American South, Southern Oral History Program, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. For more on Baker's contributions to the freedom movement and her matriculation and orientation at Shaw University, see Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of Chapel Hill Press, 2003).

their white competitors. Like athletes such as Robinson and heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis, those first entrants into professional positions usually reserved for whites carried a special burden to represent the race. At Bennett, this ritual of self-preparedness manifested itself in the “Can You Hold Your Job” campaign.

Founded in 1943 by the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), the “Can You Hold Your Job” campaign was half instruction and half pep talk. As African American women increasingly entered various industries during World War II, the NCNW saw an opportunity to help advance the careers of black women. In her study on African American women and wartime industries in Richmond and Detroit, Megan Taylor Shockley largely frames the “Hold Your Job” campaign as a top-down exercise tantamount to Negro clubwomen lecturing working-class black women on how to keep their jobs without exposing their cultural deficiencies, such as not being “clean, courteous, punctual, and affable.”<sup>66</sup> Bennett College interpreted events differently. An editorial submitted to the *Bennett Banner* extolled the importance of the campaign, stating that “Negro women . . . have proven themselves capable of competing with women of other races whether the task be a skilled or unskilled one. In many instances they have proved themselves superior.”<sup>67</sup> The stories published by the *Banner* emphasized less classism and more solidarity among black women. The editorial went on to confront attacks against *all* “Negro women,” not just those from a specific class. Moreover, the writer pointed out that the real enemy toward black female progress in the workplace was prejudice based on “misconceptions” and ignorance. The writer criticized those within the white power structure who projected stereotypical and racist images of blacks as lazy, unskilled, and worthless. Generations of both working- and middle-class blacks understood that the Urban League’s old mantra “Last Hired, First Fired” resulted from race hatred. They knew that white supervisors would continue to punish them in the workplace, regardless of their contributions on the job or their class status within the black community.<sup>68</sup>

Bennett Belles also wielded the pen to assess and protest gender roles during the war. While the Home Making Institute on campus promoted the virtues of domesticity, it also fostered an environment in which Bennett students studied the most pressing social issues of their time. The Home Making Institute in 1944 held a seminar called “Health and Nutrition, Child Care and Problems of Youth, and the

66. Megan Taylor Shockley, “We, Too, Are Americans”: *African American Women in Detroit and Richmond, 1940-54* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 60-62.

67. “Editorially Speaking,” *Bennett Banner*, May 1944.

68. For more on the plight of working African American women during World War II and the Urban League’s “Last Hired, First Fired” slogan, see Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *To Ask for an Equal Chance: African Americans in the Great Depression* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2009) and Karen Tucker Anderson, “Last Hired, First Fired: Black Women Workers during World War II,” *Journal of American History* 69 (June 1982): 82-97.



Employment of Women.”<sup>69</sup> The latter subject triggered a passionate response from student reporter Alice Holloway. “There are those who claim that it is the patriotic duty of women to relinquish these jobs to our returning service men,” wrote Holloway in an editorial published in the *Banner*. “No one wants to be unpatriotic; this is equally true for men as for women. But patriotism ceases to be a virtue when defined in such an undemocratic term as economic enslavement.”<sup>70</sup> Holloway’s powerful prose illustrates that Bennett women were acutely aware of sexist ideals that marginalized their lives, and they pushed back against the idea of vacating advancements made by African American women during the war effort. As women like Holloway exited institutions such as Bennett, they were prepared to shatter the historic barriers erected by race, class, and gender. After graduating from Bennett, Holloway moved to Rochester, New York, where she became a pioneering leader in the field of education, serving as the city’s first African American vice-principal and principal of elementary schools. She was later “recognized as an energetic champion for the school children of New York State,” helped to oversee the integration of the school system in Rochester, and played a vital role in establishing Monroe Community College, founded in 1961 and located in downtown Rochester.<sup>71</sup> Holloway’s life is indicative of how Bennett prepared its students to excel in the face of prodigious challenges, and it taught them how they could serve as change agents within their own communities.

While Holloway used her pen to criticize restrictions against women in the workplace, other Belles sought practical ways to protest the color line. In the fall semester of 1944, Bennett hosted an interracial conference that welcomed thirty-four different colleges to campus to address “religion, race, brotherhood, and constructive action.” Cosponsored by Greensboro College, the three-day conference brought in Atlanta University-based sociologist Ira Reid as one of its principal speakers. Reid, who took over the editorial duties of Du Bois’s new journal *Phylon* after Du Bois stepped down, was influential in pushing the students to think critically about how they could protest the color line. Students broke out into separate workshops and seminars, and as the energy of the conference rose, they resolved to continue their efforts in interracial fellowship. Moreover, although students did not immediately engage in large-scale protests, the conference laid the groundwork for future integrated coalitions that would be far more productive in inspiring students to speak out against injustice.<sup>72</sup> The *Banner* reported that the “climax of the meeting was reached when a

69. “Homemaking Institute Presents Interesting Problems,” *Bennett Banner*, May 1944.

70. “Editorial,” *Bennett Banner*, May 1944.

71. Barbara Seals Nevergold and Peggy Brooks Bertram, *Uncrowned Queens: African American Women Community Builders of Western New York*, 3 vols. to date (Buffalo, N.Y.: Uncrowned Queens Publishing, 2003), 2:100.

72. For more on the Student Interracial Ministry that evolved in the early 1960s, see David P. Cline, “Revolution and Reconciliation: The Student Interracial Ministry, Liberal Protestantism, and the Civil Rights Movement, 1960–1970” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2010).

resolution was presented stating that this conference would go on record as resolved to work conscientiously to eliminate segregation in the transportation system of North Carolina.”<sup>73</sup> The conference also revealed the shortcomings and deep divide in how students attending predominately white colleges were taught to think about the future of race relations. While liberal white youth were open to the idea of temporary fellowship, they were less optimistic about the postwar world. North Carolina’s black newspaper, the *Carolinian*, distributed to major cities across the state, polled a group of white students who attended the conference on the question “do you think the Negro will ever achieve a status equal to that of the white man in America?” Students attending “Woman’s College,” which was later renamed the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, responded overwhelmingly in the negative, with ten-to-three odds that it would never happen. *Bennett Banner* reporter Oriol Ann Banks curtly retorted, “What do you think about that Bennett girls?”<sup>74</sup>

Bennett students continued to make overtures toward white college students, even though many were pessimistic about racial progress. When William and Mary College suspended its campus newspaper because Marilyn Kaemmerle, the student editor, wrote a piece that argued African Americans should be recognized as equals and admitted to the private Virginia college, the school shut down the campus newspaper and promptly removed Kaemmerle from her position. The staff of the *Bennett Banner* responded by extending an invitation to Kaemmerle to join the *Banner* as a guest writer. “Miss Kaemmerle’s editorial expressing a belief in racial assimilation as a future possibility violates no superior interest in a democracy,” wrote *Banner* staff reporter Betty Powers. “If Miss Kaemmerle’s editorial is in violation of State interests, all writings on the issue, whether pro or con, should be in violation.” Editorials such as Powers’s demonstrate that Bennett students were observing racial commentary across the country and building high hopes for a postwar America that would usher in true democracy.<sup>75</sup>

Bennett’s vibrant *communitas* bolstered its students’ sense of self and sharpened their increasingly radicalized view of American politics. In early 1945, the monthly vesper meeting hosted American Civil Liberties Union founder Roger Baldwin, who declared to his captive audience that “the time will eventually come when America will actually practice that kind of democracy she now professes.” Such assertions were at the heart of the *Bennett Banner* staff’s invitation to Kaemmerle to join them after her unceremonious and undemocratic removal from her position at William and Mary.<sup>76</sup>

73. “Student Interracial Conference Held,” *Bennett Banner*, November 1944.

74. Oriol Ann Banks, “Woman’s College Carries Extra in the Carolinian,” *Bennett Banner*, December 1944.

75. “Deposed ‘Flat Hat’ Editor Invited to Join Banner Staff as Guest Writer” and “Freedom of Speech and Freedom of the Press,” *Bennett Banner*, February 1945.

76. “Crockett, Crane, Baldwin and Butterfield Vesper Speakers,” *Bennett Banner*, February 1945.



The *Bennett Banner* regularly featured stories that illustrated students' determination to address social inequality. The newspaper's social and political commentary during World War II reflected the growing support for civil rights organizing and public protests against Jim Crow. *Bennett Banner* staff, ca. 1940–1949.

However, it was the vesper speaker in March of 1945 that best illustrates how vitally important black colleges such as Bennett were in providing a forum for dissenting voices. Rev. Vernon Johns, described as an eccentric, an iconoclast, a prophet, and the father of the modern civil rights movement, arrived on campus with a growing reputation among southerners looking to break through the color line. Johns broke the mold of the conventional southern black preacher and was known as much for his photographic memory of the Bible and classic literature as he was for entering pulpits with muddy boots “and mix match socks.” At various times, Johns was an itinerant minister, traveling the countryside proclaiming God’s word and unabashedly addressing the evils of white supremacy to those bold enough to extend to him an invitation to preach. He simultaneously inspired awe in his listeners and kept conservatives of all races on edge—having no clue what the radical clergyman would say or do next.

Historian Taylor Branch notes that as Johns traveled the college lecture circuit, “University officials would answer a summons to his ‘office’ only to find him at a

phone booth in the bus station.” It is unclear whether David Dallas Jones was ever invited to one of Johns’s famous summits at the bus depot, but his arrival on campus was surely a grand experience for the Belles of Bennett College. While there is no text record of the speech he delivered at Bennett, less than two months before his arrival, he spoke at an Emancipation Day celebration in Charlottesville, Virginia, that sheds light on the eccentric spiritual revolutionary who was making waves throughout the South. “For almost a century now we have been celebrating our Emancipation when, in reality, our Emancipation has not been won,” decried Johns. “A Negro who calls these conditions in which we live freedom does not deserve to be free. He has disqualified himself for freedom in one of two ways: either by not desiring freedom or else by not knowing what freedom is.” Such speeches were indicative of Vernon Johns’s brand of politics, and his teachings were in lockstep with Jones’s own radical views and his career work as a race man at Bennett. Two years later, Johns was invited to become the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, and he remained in that position until a newly minted Ph.D. out of Boston University replaced him—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>77</sup>

As the war ended, campus visitors such as Johns made the women of Bennett even more conscious of the burdens and social responsibility that awaited them. Would America live up to the democracy that thousands of G.I.s gave their lives to defend? The answer came quickly. News stories emerged of black soldiers being lynched, bludgeoned, and castrated, often while still in uniform. The country exploded in race riots as defiant blacks, who were determined to challenge Jim Crow, competed with whites for postwar jobs. The women of Bennett, along with African Americans across the country, were hopeful that new government initiatives would narrow the employment gap between whites and blacks. But Bennett Belles were aware that race-baiting southern politicians had long perfected the bigoted undertones of “states’ rights” to funnel job opportunities and beneficial New Deal policies away from black Americans. Acknowledging this reality, they supported both the NAACP and the Fair Employment Practice Committee (FEPC), an office established by the federal government in 1941 to ameliorate racism and injustice in the workplace.<sup>78</sup> Toward the end of 1944, numerous southern politicians worked feverishly to dismantle the FEPC, preparing for the returning black veterans who joined their fellow laborers in demanding fair treatment and access to the numerous postwar jobs and emerging boom-time industries. During its brief shelf life, the FEPC had

77. Ibid.; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1988), 10; “At Home, 1944-1948,” in Patrick Louis Cooney, “The Life and Times of the Prophet Vernon Johns: Father of the Civil Rights Movement” (1998), <http://www.vernonjohns.org/tcal001/vjtofc.html>.

78. Racial violence and social tension swept across the country during World War II and heightened as the war drew to a close. For more on this phenomenon and how black war veterans were often targeted by racial pogroms, as well as how African Americans rallied to the cause of the Fair Employment Practice Committee,

achieved modest gains on behalf of African Americans, but by 1945, the die was cast. Powerful southern congressmen decided to choke off funding for the FEPC, branding those who supported the waning program as “Communists, pinks, Reds, and other offbrands of American citizenship.”<sup>79</sup> Indeed, support to eliminate the FEPC was broad among southern conservatives, leading historian John Egerton to conclude “Practically every Southerner in Congress except the maverick Floridian, Claude Pepper, detested the very idea of the FEPC.” In both houses, senators and representatives alike filibustered, undercut, and worked aggressively to defund most initiatives associated with eliminating the color line in postwar employment.<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless, the FEPC did not go without a fight. The black press launched a last-minute effort to salvage the committee, and David Dallas Jones’s good friend Mary McLeod Bethune, along with NAACP head Walter White, personally lobbied President Roosevelt in an effort to rescue the FEPC. The latter development may have directly drafted Bennett’s campus into the fight.

In April 1945, the editorial staff of the *Bennett Banner* asked students, “What should Negroes do to crystalize gains made in employment during the war?” The responses that flooded in to the *Banner* office reflect the radicalism of Bennett women and their desire to help the cause. Student Dorothy Walker urged African Americans to “exert power” through the unions. Student Cassandra Moore called for “support of pressure groups such as the F.E.P.C., N.A.A.C.P, and other groups whose aim is to secure economic freedom for all regardless of race, color, or creed.” Student Doris Newland echoed that sentiment by arguing that unwavering support for the FEPC “will make Negro dreams in this war a reality after the war.” In all, the *Banner* published the testimonies of eight different Belles who wrote to the student paper to express their support of the FEPC.<sup>81</sup> While southern legislators worked tirelessly to eliminate all postwar benefits for African Americans, their actions had a twofold effect. First, their commitment to bigotry galvanized a new generation of

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see Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); Daniel Kryder, *Divided Arsenal: Race and the American State during World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Charles D. Chamberlain, *Victory at Home: Manpower and Race in the American South during World War II* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003); Jennifer E. Brooks, *Defining the Peace: World War II Veterans, Race, and the Remaking of Southern Political Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); David Welky, *Marching across the Color Line: A. Philip Randolph and Civil Rights in the World War II Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2006); and Merl E. Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement: The President’s Committee on Fair Employment Practice, 1941–1946* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991).

79. “Communists, pinks, Reds, and other off brands of American citizenship” comes from Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White*, 5.

80. John Egerton, *Speak Now against the Day: The Generation before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1995), 413.

81. “Inquiring Reporter,” *Bennett Banner*, April 1945.

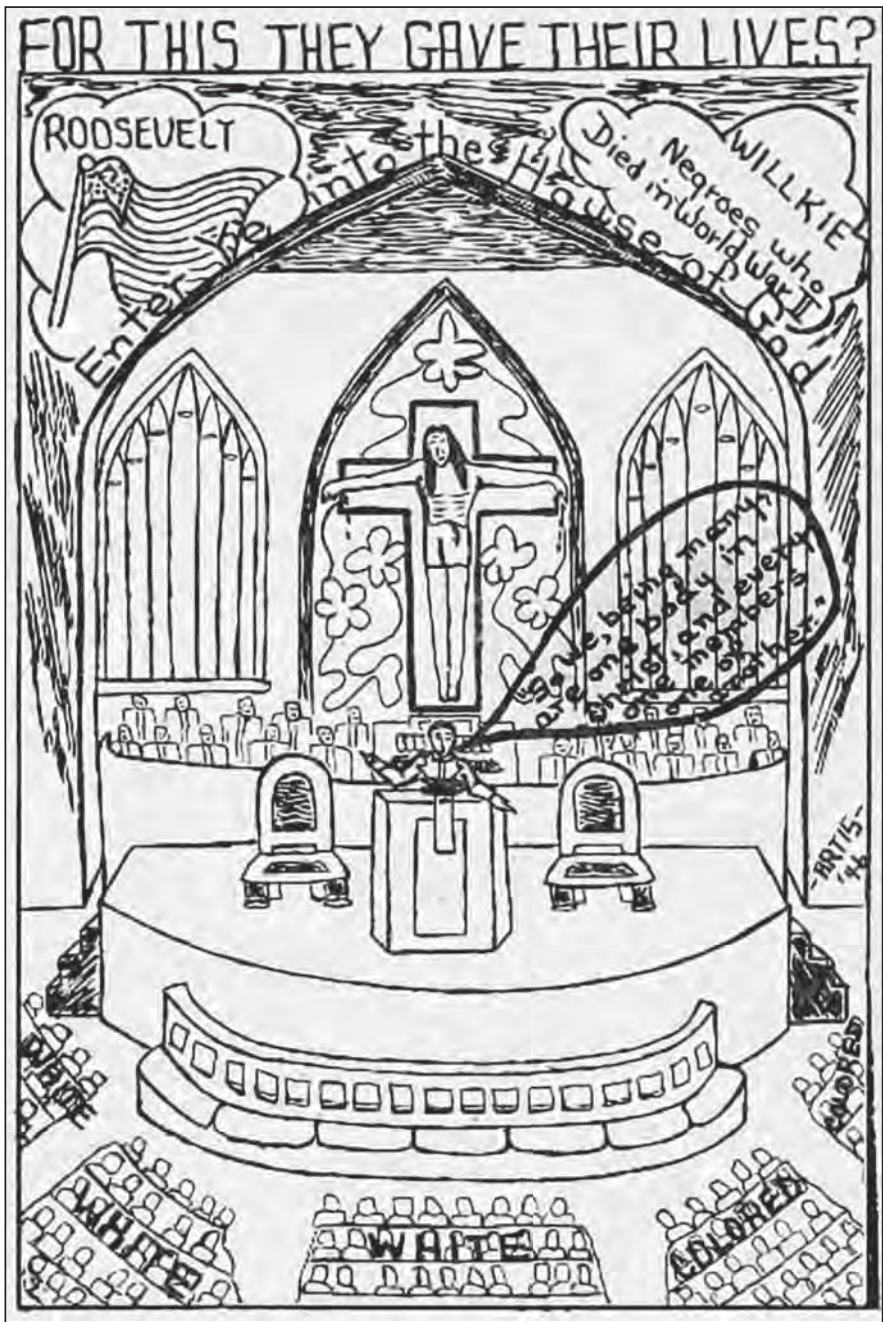


youth who were increasingly emboldened to confront the race hatred that enveloped the nation. Second, they mocked the notion that the war had been fought in part to make democracy a reality for all of humanity. As America settled into a post-atomic world fraught with glaring contradictions, these two developments dovetailed perfectly into the formation of an insurgency brewing on black college campuses such as Bennett. Historian Merl Reed appropriately concludes, "it appears that though the FEPC lost ground in the summer of 1945, the civil rights movement may have strengthened."<sup>82</sup>

Solidarity against Jim Crow intensified at Bennett during the fall of 1945. Another campus survey found widespread and enthusiastic support for establishing an official NAACP chapter on campus, and one was formed shortly thereafter. Bennett women understood that any doors or barriers impeding black progress would only be breached or shattered by the "disinherited masses." Warning shots that signaled a growing sense of radicalism abounded in the Bennett press. In the editorial "Where Do We Go from Here?" one Bennett Belle asked an urgent question: "Will [America] remember that the true road to peace is paved with actions rather than sentiment, and that before she can set herself up as an example of true democracy, there must be peace in her own land among all races and creeds of her own people?" Bennett continued to host a steady stream of activists and noted leaders who stoked the fires of militancy among the students. Max Yergan, a far-left-leaning activist who cofounded the Council on African Affairs alongside well-known activist and entertainer Paul Robeson, addressed the student body in November of 1945 and boldly denounced imperialism. He also informed the women of Bennett that the coming wars of independence throughout the African diaspora would catalyze the modern civil rights movement. Yergan declared that "the people of Africa and the rest of the colonial world are restless, refusing to continue to accept circumstances imposed upon them." In that same month, the students also heard from renowned educator President Benjamin E. Mays of Morehouse College, who employed the same rhetoric that was simultaneously inspiring a young sophomore enrolled at Morehouse—Martin Luther King Jr.: "Perhaps the atomic bomb may frighten man to his senses, rid races of their arrogance and false pride, and develop integrity among nations, doing for humanity what the gospel of Jesus Christ has not done for nineteen hundred years." Bennett students found his comments "startling," but they soon had their own run-in with churchgoing southerners that reinforced Mays's bold claims.<sup>83</sup>

82. Reed, *Seedtime for the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, 172.

83. "Where Do We Go from Here?" and "The Inquiring Reporter," *Bennett Banner*, October 1945; Martin Luther King Jr., "Nobel Lecture: The Quest for Peace and Justice," December 11, 1964; "Yergan Denounces Imperialism," and "Nothing but Good Will Can Save America—Mays Proclaims," *Bennett Banner*, November 1945.



In November 1945, several Bennett students responded to an invitation to attend a service at the West Market Street Baptist Church. They were appalled when ushers roped them off in a segregated section away from the white congregation. Bennett student Betty Ann Artis wrote a letter to the editor of the *Bennett Banner* describing her experience at that service. Her letter and cartoon satirizing segregation were published in the November 1945 *Bennett Banner*. The cartoon depicts the minister speaking to a segregated congregation, saying, “So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and everyone members one of another.”

Bennett students were not only mocking America's feigned embrace and hollow proclamations of democracy; they also began to question its claims as a Christian nation. When several students responded to an invitation to attend a service at the West Market Street Baptist Church in November 1945, they were disgusted as the ushers roped them off in a segregated section away from the white congregation. According to one student, embracing segregation in a house of worship revealed "the existing inconsistency and discrepancy in religion which seems to be no more than a 'spoken' practice." Editorials in the *Banner* sharply condemned the West Market Street Baptist Church congregation, and a cartoon satirized and ridiculed the idea of segregation in a church that proselytized Christian brotherhood and love for all mankind. However, no students left the church in protest. It is unclear whether the Bennett women who attended church that day yielded to the pressure to uphold decorum and grace in a public place of worship or whether they, like so many others, were not yet ready to display a collective show of force against Jim Crow policies. But the *Bennett Banner* afforded them a vitally important space to express their angst and frustration with white supremacy—a cathartic alternative and a mild yet significant form of protest that foreshadowed the flowering of radicalism that would become more militant in later years.<sup>84</sup>

Black veterans returned home not only maimed by the emotional and physical scars of war; many of them were also deeply disturbed by the intractable nature of white supremacy. The New Negro militancy of the 1920s and 1930s and calls for a "double victory" following World War II created scores of race women and men who unapologetically embraced their heritage that America had attempted to undermine. Young people prepared to confront a government that failed to uphold their civil and human rights by carefully studying the Constitution. Black colleges such as Bennett drilled young women in a daily ritual of idealism, cultural nationalism, and race consciousness, and the results of such training produced considerable fruit for the liberation movement. In December 1945, one Bennett student warned:

In conclusion, of this one thing I am certain—the problem will never be solved until it is attacked directly and without fear. Democracy can never be a full-pledged practice until America uses her national strength to denounce "tyrannical idealists" and publicly abide by a "democratic way of life." Unless men become united in one accord, strive to build on a foundation of just equality, and use intelligent foresight to encompass the breach of segregation and discrimination; America's future is doubtful.<sup>85</sup>

84. "And You Call This Christianity" and "Opinion," *Bennett Banner*, November 1945.

85. "Minorities—A Challenge to American Democracy," *Bennett Banner*, December 1945.

Bennett Belles in the New Negro and postwar eras astutely critiqued white supremacy and even found ways to challenge white America's prevailing beliefs of racial superiority through their radio program and their student newspaper. These efforts soon gave way to direct action that sought to aggressively dismantle Jim Crow and refashion American democracy.

The race women of Bennett College were among the forerunners of the modern civil rights movement, and David Dallas Jones played a large role in their politicization. Jones channeled the activists' energies from the New Negro era directly into Bennett, and for the next twenty-five years, he crafted young women who were vital change agents in the struggle for black liberation. Bennett students became more emboldened with the shifting political currents, resulting in peaceful public protests and personal acts of defiance. The relatively progressive culture of Greensboro provided space for more aggressive forms of social disobedience—including the student-led sit-ins at the Woolworth department store, which would galvanize the movement in 1960. The theater boycott of the late 1930s or the Bennett College radio program probably would not have succeeded in areas of the South more hostile to blacks. Furthermore, the communitas/racialized space of Bennett College heightened the political consciousness of scores of women and sharpened their abilities to articulate their goals for achieving freedom and democracy for all African Americans. Jones and his students helped lay the groundwork for the early freedom movement and cultivated a space that became a focal point for local activism during the struggles that lay ahead. David Dallas Jones stepped down from the presidency of Bennett in 1955 as a result of health problems and passed the leadership torch to Willa Player, the first African American woman to serve as president of the institution. Player continued to cultivate Bennett into a seedbed for activism and played a prominent role in the iconic civil rights protests that emerged just five years later.

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