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# Dignity in Life and Death: Undertaker Clarie Collins Harvey and Black Women's Entrepreneurial Activism

by Crystal R. Sanders

On May 4, 1961, thirteen Freedom Riders departed Washington, D.C. on two buses determined to test southern compliance with *Boynton v. Virginia* (1960)—the United States Supreme Court decision that declared state laws requiring segregation in interstate travel unconstitutional. The first riders—many of them members of the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE)—expected to arrive in New Orleans thirteen days later, but mob violence necessitated a change of plans. Klansmen in Anniston, Alabama, firebombed the first of the two buses and viciously beat the passengers on the second bus, which had arrived an hour later on May 14, 1961. The riders' injuries prevented them from continuing on the trip, but other representatives from CORE and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) vowed to continue the rides. Reinforcement riders, traveling on both Trailways and Greyhound buses, entered Mississippi on May 24 escorted by the state highway patrol and the National Guard. As expected, Jackson police officers arrested the daring lot immediately after black riders attempted to use the whites-only facilities at the bus station. Two days later, the Freedom Riders stood trial in city court where a judge found all of them guilty of disturbing the peace. Twenty-two of the riders chose to serve their thirty-nine day jail terms rather than seek bond or pay the two hundred dollar fine. They hoped that remaining in jail would make segregation an even more expensive practice.<sup>1</sup>

Among those monitoring the May 26 courtroom proceedings was Emma Clarie Collins Harvey, secretary of the General Board of Christian Social Concerns of the Methodist Church and owner of one of the oldest black funeral homes in Mississippi. Harvey attended at the urging of Charles F. Golden, a black bishop in the Methodist Church. Golden wanted a church member to witness the trial because those arrested included several area ministers, and he wanted a firsthand account of the clergy's welfare. Harvey noticed that several of the female defendants shivered in the courtroom because they were cold. She knew that if the activists intended to remain in jail rather than post bond, they needed proper clothing

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<sup>1</sup> "5 'Freedom' Riders Post Bond; Freed," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 28, 1961. For more on the Freedom Rides, see Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

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and other personal items. Harvey arranged for her pastor to deliver a few of her own sweaters to the jail that evening since only lawyers and clergy had access to those arrested. The undertaker's concern, however, did not stop there. On Sunday morning, May 28, Harvey, drawing on her business connections, telephoned the pastors of three of the leading black churches in Jackson and asked them to take up offerings during their regular worship services so that she could buy more items for the jailed Freedom Riders.<sup>2</sup>

At the moment that Harvey asked pastors to take up collections, she openly identified herself as a supporter of the Freedom Riders. With funeral home vehicles at her disposal, she could avoid public transportation, and thus, had no reason other than an abiding faith in humanity's equality to inject herself into a segregation challenge that was fraught with mob violence and even disavowed by some local black institutions and prominent civil rights leaders. For example, the *Jackson Advocate*, the largest circulating black newspaper in Mississippi, claimed that the Freedom Rider campaign was "doing more harm than good." Mississippi NAACP Field Secretary Medgar Evers told reporters that he "hoped the Freedom Riders would postpone their trip to Jackson" because it was "too dangerous."<sup>3</sup> Yet Harvey pooled resources to support the initial riders and established Womanpower Unlimited, a women's group that collected toiletries and other articles to help the hundreds of additional Freedom Riders who streamed into Jackson throughout the summer and chose jail instead of bail. Long after the riders desegregated interstate bus travel, Harvey continued to use the resources at her disposal through her well-established family business to disseminate information about civil rights boycotts, provide meeting space for civil rights strategy sessions, and to lobby powerful whites for meaningful social and political changes.<sup>4</sup>

The undertaker's actions compel scholars to consider more closely the intersections among business history, black women's history, and the history of the African American freedom struggle. Over the last thirty years, scholars have uncovered the critical roles that black women played in the African American freedom struggle.<sup>5</sup> For example, historian Darlene Clark Hine found that black women used "economic nationalism" during the Great Depression to ensure that black consumers only patronized those businesses that did not practice employment discrimination. Sociologist Belinda Robnett explored black women organizers' inconspicuous "bridge leadership" that drew on social networks and connected local ground troops to

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<sup>2</sup> Transcript, Clarie Collins Harvey interview with John Dittmer, April 21, 1981, Jackson, Mississippi, 25-27, box 10, folder 9, Clarie Collins Harvey Papers, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, LA, hereinafter cited as CCH, Amistad.

<sup>3</sup> Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 255, 333.

<sup>4</sup> "Story of Womanpower Unlimited," box 63, folder 8, CCH Amistad. Historian Tiyi M. Morris has written an impressive study on Womanpower Unlimited. See Morris, *Womanpower Unlimited and the Black Freedom Struggle in Mississippi* (Athens: University of Georgia, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Juliet Walker and Tiffany Gill are two scholars who have considered these intersections. See Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009) and Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in the Beauty Industry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

national freedom campaigns throughout the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>6</sup>

In Mississippi, especially, black women occupied important roles in the state's freedom struggle independently of men. Women such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Unita Blackwell, Victoria Gray, Annie Devine, Joyce Ladner, and a host of others led sit-ins to dismantle segregation in public accommodations and organized voter registration campaigns. Charles Payne found that in the 1960s-era Mississippi Delta, black women canvassed more than men, showed up more often at mass meetings, and more frequently attempted to register to vote. Thus, black women have been at the forefront of the struggle to improve black life in the Magnolia State.<sup>7</sup>

Despite black women's visibility in recent African American freedom struggle scholarship, the unique ways in which black women entrepreneurs transformed business activity into woman-led racial uplift activities continues to be understudied.<sup>8</sup> Entrepreneurship, and the economic independence that it provided, became a tool by which many black women worked to dismantle white supremacy. For example, Madame C. J. Walker developed a successful line of beauty and hair products for black women in 1905. She used the wealth gained from her business to weaken racial discrimination by making donations to civil rights organizations. In 1919, she pledged the largest gift ever made to the NAACP and earmarked her

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<sup>6</sup> For example, see Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 129-145; Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long?: African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Rhonda Y. Williams, *The Politics of Public Housing: Black Women's Struggles Against Urban Inequality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Annelise Orleck, *Storming Caesars Palace: How Black Mothers Sought Their Own War on Poverty* (New York: Beacon Press, 2006); Lisa Levenstein, *A Movement Without Marches: African American Women and the Politics of Poverty in Postwar Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Unita Blackwell with JoAnne Prichard Morris, *Barefootin': Life Lessons from the Road to Freedom* (New York: Crown, 2006); Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Dell, 1992); Vicki Crawford, "African American Women in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party," in *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement*, Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin, eds., (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 121-138; Charles Payne, *I've Got The Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 265-283.

<sup>8</sup> One notable exception is historian Tiffany Gill's work on black beauticians. See Tiffany M. Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics: African American Women's Activism in The Beauty Industry* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010). Gill found that black beauticians transformed seemingly apolitical beauty salons into sites of social, political, and economic activism. These independent businesswomen supported African American freedom struggles in a variety of ways including distributing political literature to clients and challenging the racial composition of cosmetology governing boards. Other studies on black women entrepreneurs include A'Leia Bundles, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madame C. J. Walker* (New York: Scribner, 2001); Elsa Barkley Brown, "Womanist Consciousness: Maggie Lena Walker and the Independent Order of Saint Luke," *Signs* 14 (Spring 1989): 610-633; Gertrude Woodruff Marlowe, *A Right Worthy Grand Mission: Maggie Lena Walker and the Quest for Black Economic Empowerment* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 2003).

donation to benefit the group's nationwide anti-lynching campaign. Additionally, Walker employed hundreds of black women as traveling sales agents and declared that she expected her employees to take the lead "not only in operating a successful business, but in every movement in the interest of our colored citizenship."<sup>9</sup> Walker understood the links between entrepreneurship and racial advancement. Similarly, Vera Pigeo, a Clarksdale, Mississippi, beautician, used her economic independence as a hair salon owner to co-found a local chapter of the NAACP in 1951 and encourage African Americans to register to vote. She not only gave her clients voter registration forms to complete while she styled their hair, but also, she allowed her salon to double as the location of a voter registration class.<sup>10</sup> Both Walker and Pigeo's economic independence as business owners facilitated their political work. For most of the twentieth century, segregationists used economic reprisals to curtail black activism. When African American public school teacher Gladys Noel Bates sued the state of Mississippi for salary discrimination against black educators in 1948, the local school board fired her and her teacher husband. Likewise, when sharecropper Fannie Lou Hamer attempted to register to vote in 1962, W. D. Marlow, a segregationist plantation owner, fired and displaced Hamer and her husband.<sup>11</sup> Those who were free from the economic reprisals of local white supremacists could more easily challenge the status quo.

The vital role of black women entrepreneurs in the African American freedom struggle has received very limited scholarly interest despite the relative political freedom that business ownership afforded black women. This lack of research is partly because "historical assessments of black business activities have remained at the periphery of American scholarship."<sup>12</sup> Moreover, women are rarely explored in business histories because for far too long, the history of business has been gendered a male enterprise. One scholar even defined business as the "school of manhood," suggesting that women did not possess the ambition and competitiveness necessary to pursue entrepreneurship. To the contrary, we know that beginning in the colonial era, large numbers of women in the United States owned and operated businesses

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<sup>9</sup> Gill, *Beauty Shop Politics*, 31.

<sup>10</sup> Francoise Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale: The Black Freedom Struggle in the Mississippi Delta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 35, 137.

<sup>12</sup> Walker, *The History of Black Business in America*, xvii. Business historian Juliet E. K. Walker has published extensively on black business history. See, for example, Walker, *Free Frank: A Black Pioneer on the Antebellum Frontier* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1983); Walker, "Racism, Slavery, and Free Enterprise: Black Entrepreneurship in the United States Before the Civil War," *Business History Review* 60 (Autumn 1986): 343-382; Walker, *Encyclopedia of African American Business History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999). Also of note: John N. Ingham and Lynne B. Feldman, *African American Business Leaders: A Biographical Dictionary* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994); Robert E. Weems, Jr., *Black Business in the Black Metropolis: The Chicago Metropolitan Assurance Company, 1925-1985* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1996); Weems, *Business in Black and White: American Presidents and Black Entrepreneurs in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

including restaurants, brothels, hotels, and millinery shops.<sup>13</sup>

This essay examines Clarie Collins Harvey's business and political activities to understand black women's entrepreneurial activism. The author defines entrepreneurial activism as the use of a self-owned business, its resources and professional networks, to further larger political and social goals. Entrepreneurial activism can be organic and independent of the work of institutionalized organizations, or it can aid established local and national groups. It requires the entrepreneur to be a risk-taker, being firm in his or her convictions and ready to manage the consequences of uncertainty. Clarie Collins Harvey used her mortuary enterprises and the financial freedom they provided to challenge racial discrimination and create ways to increase women's participation in political activities. Her funeral home served as a meeting location for civil rights gatherings, her business vehicles transported activists, and her economic independence from the local white power structure afforded her the freedom to publicly back the Freedom Rides.<sup>14</sup> Harvey's brand of entrepreneurial activism is especially significant because she forged a cross-class organizing tradition that prioritized cooperation among women of various backgrounds. In the process, she became one of the most influential black women in the United States in the 1960s.

Business has long played a role in the African American freedom struggle. In 1900—nine years before the NAACP's founding—Booker T. Washington created the National Negro Business League as a way to champion racial advancement. Washington asserted that black economic development was the key to ending racial discrimination so his organization worked to promote commercial development among African Americans. The League, which operated through state and local chapters, included black business owners and other professionals.<sup>15</sup> Entrepreneurship provided black business owners with a higher degree of financial freedom than was average. It was no coincidence that many of the most outspoken black activists in Mississippi were entrepreneurs. State NAACP President Aaron Henry owned a pharmacy in Clarksdale. Amzie Moore of Cleveland operated a gas station that also served as a meeting place for civil rights workers. Gilbert Mason ran his

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<sup>13</sup> For more on women's exclusion from business histories, see Wendy Gamber, "A Gendered Enterprise: Placing Nineteenth-Century Businesswomen in History," *Business History Review* 72 (Summer 1998): 188-218.

<sup>14</sup> While black businesswomen certainly deserve more attention, Clarie Collins Harvey's activism also suggests that we more seriously consider how black women's employment in a host of different occupations facilitated or hindered their political activities. For example, Jo Ann Gibson Robinson, a black professor at Alabama State College, appropriated her employer's mimeograph machine in 1955 and created over 17,000 leaflets that she distributed in black communities to raise awareness about the impending Montgomery bus boycott. Surprisingly, employment at a state-supported institution of higher education in the South could and did further movement activities in the 1960s. Thus, Harvey was not an anomaly in transforming her day job into an opportunity to engage in political work. There is a historical pattern of black women's race work intersecting with their paid labor. For more on Robinson, see *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> For more on the National Negro Business League, see John H. Burrows, *The Necessity of Myth: A History of the National Negro Business League* (Auburn, AL: Hickory Hill Press, 1988).

own medical practice in Biloxi.<sup>16</sup> The businesses provided all three men, who were leaders during the civil rights era, with some protection from white economic reprisals. Not all black business owners, however, took up the cause of racial equality. Many were reluctant to participate out of fear of bodily harm, fear of alienating white consumers, or apathy. Entrepreneurial activists purposefully combined their business dealings with their quest for social justice despite the consequences. For women entrepreneurial activists, their businesses paved the way for them to organize independently of men.

Clarie Collins Harvey was born on November 27, 1916, in Meridian, Mississippi. In the same year as her birth, her parents, Malachi and Mary Rayford Collins, established Hall and Collins Funeral Home in Hattiesburg, the first black-owned funeral home to service the area's black population. The Collins' mortuary business allowed the Collinses to shelter their only child from the harsh realities of Jim Crow. Harvey recalled "growing up middle-class, I never rode the trolley cars nor buses until I'd go away in the summer to places like Chicago and New York. . . then you rode integrated." When Harvey matriculated at Spelman College in Atlanta, she sat in the front of a streetcar and was chided by classmates for disregarding segregation laws. She explained to her peers that she was unfamiliar with streetcar protocol because, in Mississippi, she had always had access to some form of private transportation through her family's funeral home.<sup>17</sup> Malachi and Mary Collins used private cars to avoid exposing their daughter to humiliation at the hands of racist conductors.

Yet undertaking could not protect a young Clarie Collins from all forms of racism. She witnessed her father and his business partner, E. W. Hall, take turns sleeping inside the funeral home with shotguns to protect their investment from white funeral directors who constantly threatened the men. In addition to the intimidation, these competitors passed out leaflets in black neighborhoods that read, "don't patronize those niggers. We can give you better service." Such terrorism at the hands of white undertakers during the age of Jim Crow demonstrates that despite the intimate contact between provider and consumer in the mortuary business, some white undertakers sought black clients. Klansmen also did their part to drive Collins and Hall out of business, often racing their cars in front of the funeral home late at night.<sup>18</sup>

Undeterred by harassment, Malachi Collins expanded his mortuary business in 1924 when he relocated to Jackson and purchased the G. F. Frazier Undertaking Company for \$14,000. Collins paid \$5,000 (equivalent to \$68,463 in 2014) down on his new investment, a sizeable amount of cash for anyone at the time—black or white. The new establishment, Frazier and Collins Funeral Home, was located in

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<sup>16</sup> Aaron Henry with Constance Curry, *Aaron Henry: The Fire Ever Burning* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000); Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 29-31, 43-4; Gilbert Mason with James Patterson Smith, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots: A Black Doctor's Civil Rights Struggle* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

<sup>17</sup> Transcript, Harvey interview with Dittmer, 6-7.

<sup>18</sup> Transcript, Harvey interview with Dittmer, 8.

the heart of Jackson's black business district on Farish Street. Collins kept the name Frazier since an undertaker's success was based largely on popularity, and Collins was not a well-known name in Jackson.<sup>19</sup> In 1925, Collins founded the Collins Burial Association, which guaranteed its paying members dignified funeral rites rather than paupers' graves. Poor black Mississippians who desired the respect and pomp in death that segregation hindered them from having in life made burial associations popular and profitable enterprises.<sup>20</sup>

Malachi Collins modeled entrepreneurial activism for his daughter. He and three other men founded the Jackson chapter of the NAACP in 1926. The funeral home oftentimes served as the location for chapter meetings.<sup>21</sup> The Jackson NAACP founders once prevented a lynching by having the accused quietly escorted from a jail cell to a train leaving the state.<sup>22</sup> Collins could take part in such activity because he catered to a black clientele and had very limited financial dealings with white Mississippians. Thus, losing his job or being thrown off a plantation were not possible reprisals.<sup>23</sup>

The black mortuary enterprise was big business in the first third of the twentieth century. The number of African American undertakers increased from 231 in 1890 to 2,946 in 1930.<sup>24</sup> For many in African American communities, a funeral was "the last consolation that life had to offer," in a world constrained by segregation and black disfranchisement. Thus, relatives of the deceased usually spared no expense to offer their loved one the dignity in death that was so often denied in life because of white supremacy. Frazier and Collins Funeral Home flourished and in the late 1930s, the family paid \$17,000 cash to construct a larger business facility.<sup>25</sup>

The success of the Collins family businesses afforded Clarie Collins access to the best educational institutions. She entered Spelman after graduating from the high school department of Tougaloo College and completing her freshman year there. The young woman set her sights on becoming a doctor but a college professor implored her to study business in anticipation of her future inheritance. Heeding that advice, she received a bachelor's degree in economics in 1937 and immediately returned home where she worked with her parents in the family enterprises.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> "Chattel Deed," October 18, 1924, box 1, folder 30, Collins Funeral Home Records, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, LA, hereinafter cited as CFH, Amistad; "Frazier and Collins Funeral Home Observes 50th Anniversary," *Jackson Daily News*, December 17, 1953; <http://www.westegg.com/inflation/infl.cgi>.

<sup>20</sup> Suzanne E. Smith, *To Serve the Living: Funeral Directors and the African American Way of Death* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), 40-42.

<sup>21</sup> Mortuary Consecration Service Program, September 25, 1966, box 4, folder 9, CFH, Amistad.

<sup>22</sup> Clarice T. Campbell and Oscar A. Rogers, Mississippi, *The View from Tougaloo*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1979), 186.

<sup>23</sup> Transcript, Harvey interview with Dittmer, 6.

<sup>24</sup> Walker, *Encyclopedia of African American Business History*, 255.

<sup>25</sup> Walker, *Encyclopedia of African American Business History*, 255; Transcript, Harvey interview with Dittmer, 9-10; "Congratulatory Issue for Frazier and Collins," *The Mississippi Enterprise*, May 13, 1939.

<sup>26</sup> Grambling College Commencement Address: "So Much More," August 1, 1974, box 67, folder 5, CCH, Amistad.



Back in Jackson, Collins quickly took on more day-to-day responsibilities at the funeral home because her father was quite ill. Although he was listed as owner and manager of the establishment, she and her mother actually ran the business and, within seven months of being home, Collins's name was listed on the letterhead as funeral directress.<sup>27</sup> During the summer of 1939, she escaped her work obligations long enough to travel to Amsterdam as a Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) delegate to the World Conference of Christian Youth, the only black delegate in the thirty-five-person contingent.

Collins's first time abroad proved to be life changing. Both of her parents were living, and she was engaged to a young businessman when she boarded the ship for Amsterdam. When she returned home in August, her father was dead and she had called off her engagement.<sup>28</sup> While in Europe, Clarie Collins met Martin Harvey, Jr., a minister who served as the national director of Christian Education for the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. The two began dating after they returned stateside and would marry four years later. Clairie's father died before she could tell him about her new suitor.<sup>29</sup> Malachi Collins's death meant that Clairie and her mother became the owners of the funeral home and burial association in Jackson, as well as the funeral home in Hattiesburg.<sup>30</sup>

Determined to carry out her father's legacy, Clairie succeeded him as state executive secretary of the Mississippi Funeral Directors and Embalmers (later Morticians) Association, which was the state's professional organization for black morticians.<sup>31</sup> In 1942, she completed studies at Indiana College of Mortuary Science in Indianapolis, where she was one of three black students and the only black woman in her graduating class of approximately forty students. She became the first black woman licensed to practice embalming in Mississippi.<sup>32</sup> The budding entrepreneur later attended Columbia University where she received a master's degree in personnel administration.

As the co-owner of two of the oldest black funeral homes in the Deep South, Harvey did not depend on reputation alone to ensure financial success. She was active in several civic groups including Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Jackson's Central United Methodist Church, the city's Mary Church Terrell Literary Club, and the Mississippi State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs. Such social affiliations were important for funeral directors who wanted to increase business without appearing to capitalize on human grief. Harvey was a keen businesswoman who used innovative practices to connect with her consumer market and make her business

<sup>27</sup> Collins Funeral Home Letterhead, box 1, folder, 1 CFH, Amistad.

<sup>28</sup> Transcript, Clarie Collins Harvey interview with Robert Penn Warren, 1964, Louis B. Nunn Center for Oral History, 2, University of Kentucky Libraries, Lexington, KY; transcript, Harvey interview with Dittmer, 13-14.

<sup>29</sup> Transcript, Harvey interview with Dittmer, 13.

<sup>30</sup> Letter to Mary Collins from Clarie Collins, February 15, 1949, box 1, folder 4, CFH, Amistad.

<sup>31</sup> Clarie Collins Harvey's Address at the 46th Annual Session of the Mississippi Funeral Directors and Morticians Association, box 1, folder 26, CFH, Amistad.

<sup>32</sup> "Frazier and Collins Funeral Home Observes 50th Anniversary," *Jackson Daily News*, December 17, 1953.

a household name. In black communities, she regularly distributed calendars that advertised her businesses and that paid homage to famous black Americans or to local black schools. Even this small marketing technique had political undertones. Curricula in Mississippi's black public schools usually neglected black history and discouraged intellectual curiosity. Textbooks stereotyped African Americans as "buffoons," or "faithful darkies."<sup>33</sup> Harvey's funeral home calendars, in contrast, celebrated black history and black achievements. She also held annual Christmas parties for burial association members where she distributed gifts to entice attendees to continue paying their dues.<sup>34</sup> These kinds of activities shored up support for the business.

Clarie Harvey's marketing strategy succeeded, and Frazier and Collins Funeral Home celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1953.<sup>35</sup> To commemorate the occasion, Harvey wrote to black and white businesses across the country, including clothing manufacturer Champion and publication giant Johnson Publishing Company, soliciting advertisements for the business's anniversary souvenir book. More than 1,000 people attended the anniversary celebration where T. R. M. Howard, a noted physician, businessman, and activist from Mound Bayou, gave the keynote address.<sup>36</sup> In the early fifties, Howard had sponsored a "Don't Buy Gas Where You Can't Use The Rest Room" campaign to protest racial discrimination in public accommodations—an economic boycott that preceded the Montgomery bus boycott. Two years before the funeral home's golden anniversary, Howard created the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL), which promoted black business ownership and political assertiveness. Howard mentored a host of black activists including Mississippi NAACP Field Secretary Medgar Evers, Mississippi NAACP President Aaron Henry, and Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party leader Fannie Lou Hamer.<sup>37</sup>

The undertaker's decision to have T. R. M. Howard headline the anniversary celebration was a deployment of entrepreneurial activism. Harvey ensured that black Mississippians came in contact with a no-holds-barred civil rights activist who motivated black crowds with political speeches. As late as 1954, Mississippi's thirteen black-majority counties netted a combined fourteen votes in that year's elections.<sup>38</sup> Fear, rather than voter apathy, kept African Americans from the polls. That same fear kept many from attending NAACP meetings. Yet Harvey, under

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<sup>33</sup> Rebecca Miller Davis, "The Three R's—Reading, 'Riting, and Race: The Evolution of Race in Mississippi History Textbooks, 1900-1995," *Journal of Mississippi History*, Vol. LXXII, No. 1 (Spring 2010), 5-6; Fannie Lou Hamer, *To Praise Our Bridges: An Autobiography* (KIPCO, 1967), 327-328.

<sup>34</sup> Assorted Funeral Home Material, box 4, folder 3, CFH, Amistad.

<sup>35</sup> The anniversary celebration commemorated the establishment of G. F. Frazier Undertaking Company in 1903. Thus, in 1953, Frazier and Collins Funeral Home celebrated fifty years of service.

<sup>36</sup> See correspondence, box 1, folder 7, CFH, Amistad; "Program, Frazier and Collins Funeral Home 50th Anniversary Service of Thanksgiving," box 4, folder 5, CFH, Amistad.

<sup>37</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 32-33; David Beito and Linda Royster Beito, *Black Maverick: T. R. M. Howard's Fight for Civil Rights and Economic Power* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

<sup>38</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 26.

the guise of funeral home business, fostered interactions between cautious black Mississippians and a radical black political leader. By the late 1950s, Harvey had dropped the name Frazier from the official business title. Collins Funeral Home became the new name.

Harvey often used the funeral home to disseminate information about the Magnolia State's growing civil rights movement. She penned a bi-monthly funeral home newsletter and distributed it to a significant proportion of Jackson's black community. The newsletter was called *The Producer*, and it kept black Jacksonians informed of local freedom struggle events. The circular announced when Major League Baseball trailblazer Jackie Robinson was to appear at the Masonic Temple to raise money for the Jackson NAACP Freedom Fund. She also used the funeral home newsletter to keep her clientele up to date about the proceedings of the 1958 federal *Darby v. Daniel* voting rights case that brought NAACP Legal Defense Fund attorney Constance Baker Motley to Mississippi. In those legal proceedings, a black Mississippian unsuccessfully challenged the state law requiring voter registrants to interpret a section of the state constitution to the satisfaction of the registrar.<sup>39</sup>

The undertaker's commitment to civil rights proved especially important when visible and sustained movement activity began in her state. In March 1961, nine students from the historically black Tougaloo College staged a sit-in at the whites-only Jackson public library. Although Jackson police arrested the students for allegedly breaching the peace, chaos did not erupt in the capital city until law enforcement officials attacked innocent black bystanders who had assembled to watch the trial of the Tougaloo Nine. The officers' actions caused many black adults—who had never before openly supported civil rights demonstrations—to join with the students and directly fight racial discrimination through sit-ins and protests at Jackson parks, pools, and other public places.<sup>40</sup> Harvey supported the newfound militancy by praising the Tougaloo students in her funeral home newsletter. She also urged readers to participate in local protests, conducting themselves with "dignity and without hatred or fear."<sup>41</sup>

Freedom Riders arrived in Jackson on May 24, 1961, and pre-empted the activism initiated by the Tougaloo students. Over the course of the summer, more than three hundred riders came into Jackson, challenged racial segregation in interstate bus travel, and summarily endured arrest and jail time. Harvey had attended the trial for the first group of riders and saw firsthand that the Mississippi penal system did not provide, or in some cases, purposefully withheld, clothing and toiletries from the activists. After sending a few of her sweaters to the jail to encourage the activists on their first night incarcerated, Harvey solicited funds from three local churches. Black congregants collectively gave \$175 on the spot, and Harvey used the donations to purchase clothing, stamps, stationery, toothbrushes, and deodorant,

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<sup>39</sup> *The Producer*, January 15, 1958, and September 15, 1958, box 5, folder 1, CFH, Amistad.

<sup>40</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*, 87-89.

<sup>41</sup> *The Producer*, July 15, 1961, box 5, folder 4, CFH, Amistad.

which she had her pastor deliver to the jail the following day.<sup>42</sup>

On Monday, May 29, 1961, one day after asking local pastors to take up offerings on behalf of the Freedom Riders, Harvey called a special meeting of black women at the Central United Methodist Church in Jackson and founded Womanpower Unlimited. Her wide connections across the city made the meeting possible. The well-known undertaker later wrote that the significance of the group's name "lies in the inner, divine power of each woman. . . this power is unlimited because it is God's power and there are no limits to God." Harvey had created a way for black women to engage collectively in social activism apart from mainstream civil rights organizations. Within one month, Womanpower Unlimited raised over \$450 to buy personal items for the 131 riders held in Mississippi prisons.<sup>43</sup>

It became more difficult for the Womanpower Unlimited members to get supplies to the Freedom Riders after they were transferred from the Jackson jail to Parchman Penitentiary, a maximum security prison known for inhumane treatment located in Sunflower County in the Delta. Still committed to boosting morale, Harvey and other women ensured that the jailed activists had home-cooked meals and clean clothing awaiting them upon release. They even drove Freedom Riders to local beauty shops and barbers for grooming assistance after they completed their jail sentences. One rider recalled that the women did "whatever was necessary to help us feel and look like human beings again."<sup>44</sup>

Womanpower Unlimited's membership consisted of all ranks of black women who, like Harvey, desired to challenge white supremacy. While the undertaker served as president of the group, A. M. E. Logan, a traveling cosmetics saleswoman and longtime NAACP member, acted as executive secretary. Neither Logan nor her husband, who worked for the Illinois Central Railroad, depended on local white employers for their livelihood, so she could support the Freedom Riders with less fear of economic or physical intimidation. Other Womanpower Unlimited members whose names appeared in press releases and articles included Thelma Sanders, a Jackson boutique owner and the wife of a retired educator, and Aurelia Young, a Jackson State College (now Jackson State University) professor and the wife of a local civil rights attorney. Many black women who worked directly for white Mississippians also joined Womanpower Unlimited, but they were less likely to be publicly associated with the group because of the possible reprisals. White supremacists routinely used intimidation, violence, and job termination against anyone rumored to be participating in movement activities. White public school officials fired a black public school teacher in Centreville, Mississippi, for mentioning fourteen-year-old Emmett Till's murder in the classroom. Roxie Meredith, a public school cafeteria worker, lost her job after her adult son desegregated the University of Mississippi. The latter example demonstrated that anyone who agitated for civil rights placed

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<sup>42</sup> Transcript, Clarie Collins Harvey interview with Gordon Henderson, August 5, 1965, 15, Special Collections, Millsaps College, Jackson, MS.

<sup>43</sup> Memorandum re: Freedom Riders, June 25, 1961, box 63, folder 1, CCH, Amistad.

<sup>44</sup> "Freedom Riders Speak for Themselves," 23, online document at [http://www.crmvet.org/riders/news\\_letters.pdf](http://www.crmvet.org/riders/news_letters.pdf).

his or her entire family at risk.<sup>45</sup>

The real threat of reprisals made it imperative that someone free of local white employers serve as the public face of Womanpower Unlimited, an organization that included over three hundred women. Thus, Clarie Harvey represented the organization in public gatherings and in official correspondence since she owned her own businesses and courted an African American consumer market. The undertaker's entrepreneurship allowed her to publicly support the Freedom Riders. She recalled that black women who worked as domestics in white homes "would see you somewhere and walk up to you and put money in your hand and say, 'I know you'll put it in the right place.'"<sup>46</sup> These women understood that Harvey had less to lose economically and could therefore forsake individual anonymity.

Womanpower Unlimited continued to provide support in the fight against Jim Crow after the last Freedom Riders left the state. The women distributed copies of the Mississippi state constitution in black communities so that potential voter registrants could study the document in the comfort of their own homes. Womanpower members raised funds so that black students in McComb who had been expelled from the local public school because of their civil rights work could resume their education in the high school department of the private Campbell College, an African Methodist Episcopal (AME) school in Jackson. In 1964, the women provided new school clothes to black children who desegregated previously all-white public schools in Jackson. Additionally, Womanpower Unlimited provided the families of the children with food and other badly needed items including a wheelchair in one instance.<sup>47</sup> In all of these cases, Clarie Collins Harvey acted as the public face of the anonymous group organizing. Her occupation gave her the freedom to do so.

Clarie Harvey understood that there were few limits to white supremacy's reach. NAACP leader Medgar Evers's assassination in June 1963 proved that segregationists would continue to use deadly violence to maintain the status quo. Harvey had worked with Evers when it was neither popular nor prudent to do so. On the night that he died, he had spoken at a "poorly attended" mass meeting with Harvey present. Given their long-term working relationship and Harvey's unwavering support for Evers's work, it was only fitting that Collins Funeral Home handled his homegoing arrangements. Harvey oversaw the civil rights martyr's funeral at the Jackson Masonic Temple, which drew 5,000 mourners. After the funeral, attendees marched back to Collins Funeral Home where Evers's body lay until Harvey accompanied the remains to Washington, D.C. for burial in Arlington

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<sup>45</sup> Memorandum re: Freedom Riders, June 25, 1961, box 63, folder 1, CCH, Amistad; Letter from David Loring Richards, September 15, 1961, box 1, folder 16, CCH, Amistad; Steven D. Classen, *Watching Jim Crow: The Struggles Over Mississippi TV, 1955-1969* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 162-163.

<sup>46</sup> Transcript, Harvey interview with Dittmer, 28.

<sup>47</sup> Memorandum to Pastors, Churches, Clubs, Fraternities, and Sororities from Clarie Collins Harvey, September 10, 1964, box 63, folder 1, CCH, Amistad; Letter to Jean Fairfax from Clarie Collins Harvey, October 26, 1964, box 1, folder 22, CCH, Amistad.

National Cemetery.<sup>48</sup>

While one of Mississippi's most vocal civil rights leaders was dead, there was still much work to be done. Harvey continued her own brand of activism through the funeral home. In her business's first newsletter after Evers's assassination, Harvey urged her readers not to grow weary in the face of violence. She pushed for black Mississippians to continue supporting the selective buying campaign and only patronize businesses that hired black workers and treated black customers with respect. In the funeral home newsletters, Harvey also insisted that all black Mississippians attempt to register to vote.

The newsletters also reveal internal tensions surrounding Harvey's entrepreneurial activism. Not all Collins Funeral Home employees believed that it was appropriate for the undertaker to combine politics and preparation of the dead. Harvey recalled that some staff would say "I don't see why she doesn't see about her families—relatives of the deceased—instead of running around doing this or that, she just wants her name in the paper."<sup>49</sup> She responded to the employee criticism with the power of her pen in the business newsletter. "In all of these matters, we expect Collins Funeral Home and Burial Association staff and agents to be 100% behind this struggle for freedom to make a better life now in Jackson for ourselves and our children and their children." Harvey went full speed ahead with her political activities. She indirectly responded to naysayers by concluding one business newsletter with an Abraham Lincoln quote: "to sin by silence when they should protest makes cowards of men."<sup>50</sup>

Despite grumbling among funeral home staff, the female undertaker continued to find ways to organize women and use her business to undergird the freedom struggle. This time, she brought together black and white middle-class women from eight different states with the aim of traversing racial divides during Mississippi's tense 1964 Freedom Summer. In March 1964, Harvey attended an Atlanta meeting convened by Dorothy Height, president of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW), and Polly Cowan, a white woman who was a member of the Citizens Committee for the Children of New York and a longtime social activist. Upper middle-class black and white women representing the NCNW, the YWCA, the National Council of Catholic Women, the National Council of Jewish Women, and Church Women United attended the meeting and discussed ways that the national organizations could address racial problems in their respective communities. Harvey, herself an NCNW life member and delegate, addressed the assembled group, informing them of the planned 1964 Freedom Summer that was to bring hundreds of northern students into Mississippi to conduct voter registration drives. She asked the northern women who were present at the meeting to visit her state during Freedom Summer and "act as a calming influence—a ministry of presence." No doubt Harvey was thinking about how influential Womanpower Unlimited had

<sup>48</sup> Smith, *To Serve the Living*, 139-140.

<sup>49</sup> Transcript, Harvey interview with Dittmer, 28.

<sup>50</sup> *The Producer*, July 15, 1963, box 5, folder 6, CFH, Amistad.

been in inconspicuously supporting the Freedom Rides when she solicited assistance from prominent northern women. Her suggestion at the Atlanta meeting became Wednesdays in Mississippi, an experiment that brought teams of northern white and black women to Jackson weekly where they engaged in dialogue with their southern counterparts and took part in activities aimed at improving race relations.<sup>51</sup>

Wednesdays in Mississippi proved to be another women-led political initiative that brought women of various backgrounds together. White and black women from eight northern states representing Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish faiths opened lines of communication with their southern counterparts. The group included the wife of a former New Jersey governor and the wife of the head of the Associated Negro Press, but because of the threat of reprisals, the women participated anonymously.<sup>52</sup> After visiting Freedom Schools, northern women met in small groups with southern women where they reported what they observed. The goal of the meetings was to allay southern white fears about civil rights. While not always successful in breaking down white supremacist ideology, Wednesdays in Mississippi fostered dialogue among disparate groups. Conversations over coffee and Danish pastries appeared to be routine women's gatherings, but the encounters went a long way in getting prominent white women in Jackson to begin to think differently about the fight for freedom that was taking place in their backyard. If these women could be convinced that Freedom Summer was not a communist invasion and that African Americans deserved respect as their equals, then Wednesdays in Mississippi had made significant contributions to the ongoing freedom struggle.

Harvey used her funeral home business to further the work of Wednesdays in Mississippi. Even though the women involved in the interracial initiative were members of the educated and affluent "Cadillac crowd," it was too dangerous for them to meet openly. In 1964 Mississippi, it was even precarious for northern white women to meet with southern white women. One white Jacksonian who bravely invited her northern white counterparts into her home for a Wednesdays in Mississippi meeting "nervously drew all the curtains" before serving coffee. She explained, "if my husband or anyone sees me here having coffee with northern white women, I'd be finished." Harvey, while fully aware of the social norms that she transgressed, invited black and white women from the North and the South to her funeral home where they clandestinely met and discussed what they had heard and witnessed.<sup>53</sup> The funeral home that had served as a meeting place for NAACP meetings in the thirties once again functioned as a safe space out of the purview of segregationists. Wednesdays in Mississippi participants were so successful in secretly meeting that the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, a tax-supported espionage agency created by the Mississippi legislature in 1956 to preserve segregation, had little

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<sup>51</sup> Debbie Z. Harwell, "Wednesdays in Mississippi: Uniting Women across Regional and Racial Lines, Summer 1964," *Journal of Southern History* 76 (August 2010): 617-654; Dorothy Height, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates: A Memoir* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), 165-166.

<sup>52</sup> Harwell, "Wednesdays in Mississippi," 632-633, 640.

<sup>53</sup> Lottie Joiner, "Down in the Delta," *Crisis* (March/April 2002), 32, 35; Susan Goodwillie Stedman phone interview with author, May 15, 2012.

information on the group.<sup>54</sup>

With the funeral home as the conduit, Clarie Harvey continued to be a player in the African American freedom struggle long after the 1964 Freedom Summer. The business's fleet of vehicles became indispensable to activists during the 1966 Meredith March Against Fear. The Meredith March began on June 4, 1966, when James Meredith, who had desegregated the University of Mississippi four years earlier, began a 220-mile walk from Memphis to Jackson. On day two of the trek, a white sniper shot Meredith prompting a coalition of civil rights organizations including SNCC, the Congress of Racial Equality, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to continue the march in his place. In Greenwood, state troopers fired tear gas and attacked 2,500 marchers. A journalist on the scene reported that law enforcement "came stomping in behind the gas, gunbutting and kicking men, women, and children." As she had done before, Harvey stepped in to support the movement. She sent her funeral home hearses to Canton where black physicians set up a triage clinic. The vehicles transported injured activists to both the makeshift treatment center and the hospital.<sup>55</sup>

Clarie Harvey's entrepreneurial activism even dictated how she spent business profits. In 1968, she closed the funeral home's account with Sears and Roebuck and sold the company's stock held by the Collins Pensions Fund. In explaining her actions to Sears executives, she wrote, "the company has become wealthy from the dollars of poor people and yet the racist practices of your local manager prevent recognition of their basic needs for human dignity and job opportunities."<sup>56</sup> Harvey's brand of activism necessitated that the funeral home patronize only those businesses that recognized African Americans' humanity and equality.

After the high tide of the civil rights movement, Harvey's funeral home, and the stature, influence, leadership, and visibility that it provided her, opened doors for her to traverse racial and class lines and bring about meaningful changes. In 1971, she became the national president of Church Women United (CWU) at the organization's Triennial Assembly in Wichita, Kansas. As the head of the ecumenical Christian group, Harvey led over thirty million women representing Protestant, Catholic, and Greek Orthodox denominations. Historian Bettye Collier-Thomas asserted that Harvey's election as the first black and the first southern president made her "the most influential black woman in America." As she had done through Womanpower Unlimited and Wednesdays in Mississippi, she found ways to facilitate women's mobilization against racism. She used her presidency and the many speaking engagements that came with it to initiate difficult conversations. In one address she declared, "Many black middle-class women are disillusioned with church integration. Second-class churchmanship is the order of the day, as whites

<sup>54</sup> Harwell, "Wednesdays in Mississippi," 640, footnote 39.

<sup>55</sup> John Dittmer, *The Good Doctors: The Medical Committee for Human Rights and the Struggle for Social Justice in Health Care* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009), 153-154.

<sup>56</sup> Tiyi Morris, "Clarie Collins Harvey: the Transformative Vision of a World Citizen," *Journal of African American Studies*, (September 12, 2012): 283-284.



insist on integration on terms they dictate.”<sup>57</sup> In making what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called “the most segregated hour in Christian America” the concern of the all-women’s organization, Harvey demonstrated that she believed women had the ability to change the racial status quo in their places of worship.

At the time that Harvey assumed leadership of Church Women United, she was the sole owner of the funeral homes and insurance company because her mother, Mary Collins, had passed away in September 1970. Holding fast to Collins’s instructions, Harvey continued to do business with the white-owned insurance company that had sold the Collins family automobile insurance for their funeral home’s fleet of vehicles during an earlier time when racism in both public and private sectors hindered black entrepreneurs. She recalled, “mother told me, ‘I want you to always have some insurance with them because when nobody else would cover us, they did.’”<sup>58</sup> Entrepreneurial activism required risk-taking; Harvey risked profits to remain loyal to the original insurance firm despite the availability of several competing firms in later years. The strength of her political convictions took precedence over the bottom line.

Community leaders noticed Harvey’s strategic and successful performance as a business owner. In 1973, Millsaps College, a private institution in Jackson affiliated with the United Methodist Church, selected the undertaker as its first black trustee in school history. Notwithstanding Harvey’s Methodist background and impressive church work, the appointment in many ways was a result of her entrepreneurial activism. She provided the institution with a link to the ongoing freedom struggle in Jackson and throughout the state. Additionally, Harvey’s presence signaled to prospective students of color that Millsaps had a growing interest in diversity. In her capacity as a Millsaps trustee, she advocated for the recruitment and retention of black students and urged the institution to divest from South Africa. In one letter to school administrators, she asserted that “Millsaps College is doing a great disservice to all Millsaps students and members of the Millsaps community when it continues to fail to employ blacks as faculty and administrators.” At that time, the college had one black faculty member and no black administrators. On another occasion, Harvey wrote the Millsaps president and queried, “what leadership are you giving to increasing black student enrollment, creating the campus environment that makes minority students really feel a part of total college life?”<sup>59</sup>

The businesswoman’s critique of Millsaps’ lack of diversity demonstrated that she was unwilling to be a silent trustee. She understood that her local celebrity as a black woman undertaker and activist brought the institution attention from black communities that had no other affiliation to Millsaps. When appropriate,

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<sup>57</sup> “Significant Happenings in the Life of the Harveys,” box 12, folder 2, CCH, Amistad; “1st Black Woman Also 1st Southerner to Head Church Women United,” *Jet*, May 20, 1971, 15; Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women* (New York: Knopf, 2010), 469.

<sup>58</sup> Transcript, Harvey interview with Dittmer, 9.

<sup>59</sup> Letter to Clay Lee from Clarie Collins Harvey, February 23, 1981, box 67, folder 21, CCH, Amistad; Letter to George H. Harmon from Clarie Collins Harvey, September 6, 1984, box 67, folder 22, CCH, Amistad.

she also addressed global issues in her role as trustee. As colleges and universities throughout the country divested from South Africa in protest of apartheid, Harvey urged Millsaps to do the same in light of the school's "Christian responsibility as investors."<sup>60</sup> Thus, her membership on the board was a double-edged sword. Her presence helped the college fulfill its desire to participate in the 1970s national trend of diversifying places of work and learning; at the same time, her board membership gave her a platform from which to critique institutional policies that she found problematic.

At the time of her death in 1995, Harvey had built Collins Funeral Home and Collins Burial Insurance Company into multi-million dollar businesses.<sup>61</sup> Although her enterprises were competitively profitable, what is more compelling is the civil rights work that pivoted on these business dealings. Entrepreneurial activism provides a lens by which historians can explore the actions of both the owner-operators of small business organizations and the top-level management of large firms. Where extant records do not allow for inquiry about price, output, production, or distribution, consideration of the business's relationship with external political forces becomes a viable study. Entrepreneurial activism thus provides a new mode of inquiry to consider black business activities. While it is logical that economically independent African American business owners who served black clientele had greater autonomy to participate in civil rights activities, the unique ways in which black women entrepreneurs transformed financial freedom into women-led racial uplift activities deserves more inquiry. With the funeral home as both a shield and a catalyst, Clarie Harvey devised innovative ways to improve her community.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Letter from Clarie Collins Harvey, November 14, 1981, box 67, folder 22, CCH, Amistad; Letter to Clarie Collins Harvey from James B. Campbell, February 10, 1977, box 67, folder 20, CCH, Amistad.

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.amistadresearchcenter.org/archon/?p=creators/creator&id=350>.

<sup>62</sup> On May 26, 1995, Clarie Collins Harvey died after a brief illness. Harvey's funeral home that strove to give African Americans dignity in life and death continues to be an important institution in Jackson's black community.

