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“YOURS FOR FREEDOM”: THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF CIVIL RIGHTS LEADER VICTORIA GRAY ADAMS

by

Meridian Pinkerton McDaniel

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Sciences
and the School of Humanities
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the life and legacy of Victoria Gray Adams (1926-2006) is key to appreciating the role of middle-aged African-American women activists in Mississippi during the Civil Rights Movement. Born and raised in Palmers Crossing, a self-sustaining black community just south of Hattiesburg. Her upbringing fostered pride and a sense of independence in herself as a black person, which eventually influenced her efforts to inspire the local community's involvement in the movement. Her participation and remarkable leadership in various Civil Rights groups helped solidify her role as a local, state, and national leader. The roles she held throughout her life made her one of the most significant political leaders to emerge from Hattiesburg and the state of Mississippi.

Civil Rights Movement history focuses on leaders that were either in their twenties with no children of their own or elder leaders whose children were already grown and out of the house. Adams fell into neither group but instead belonged to a group of leaders who were in their thirties and forties. This thesis highlights the leadership and life of Victoria Gray Adams, who was remarkable for her independence, organizing skill, and high-profile Civil Rights activism. Throughout Adams's life, she pushed for black self-determination by helping those around her gain the knowledge, skills, and support to improve their lives and their communities.

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DEDICATION

I'd like to dedicate this thesis to all of the people who have supported me throughout this process. To my mom and dad, thank you for always being there to hear me rant and rave about the issues and successes while writing this thesis. To my grandmother and grandfather, thank you for being my biggest cheerleaders throughout this entire process and for always wanting to know about Mrs. Adams's life. Special shout out to my grandmother for helping me make out Mrs. Adams's cursive handwriting in her many handwritten documents. To my roommates Hannah, Allyson, and Jeff—thank you for putting up with my antics and always being there to listen to me about all of the crazy ideas. To my best friend Madison for always being my personal editor and lecturing me on my grammar, especially passive voice and repetitive word use, thank you for helping make my writing so much better. To Jordan for being my best friend in the history world, thank you for all the laughs and for being there with me all the way from the moment the project was conceived until now. To my friends Michael, Bryce, Hector, Morgan, and Abby—thank you for always being there and making this process joyful.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AAWC	Afro-American Women's Club
CDGM	Child Development Group of Mississippi
CEP	Citizenship Education Program
COFO	Council of Federated Organizations
DOJ	Department of Justice
MDAH	Mississippi Department of Archives and History
MFDP	Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NCC	National Council of Churches
SCEF	Southern Conference Educational Fund
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
USM	University of Southern Mississippi
USM-COHCH	University of Southern Mississippi- Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage
VSU	Virginia State University

CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

Victoria Jackson Gray Adams is best known for her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement throughout Hattiesburg, Mississippi.[1] Her participation and leadership in major civil rights groups, including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Mississippi's own Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), helped solidify her role as a statewide leader. In 1964, she was one of the first two black Mississippi women to run for national office with her Senate campaign against incumbent U.S. Senator John Stennis.[2]

Following the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's (MFDP) emergence, Gray's efforts alongside Fannie Lou Hamer and Annie Devine at the 1964 Democratic National Convention at Atlantic City launched her into the national spotlight. She later became one of the three MFDP challengers of the 1965 Congressional Challenge, when she, Devine, and Hamer challenged the election results of the 1964 Congressional election. Following the failure of the Congressional Challenge, Adams continued her work as the State Supervisor in Mississippi for SCLC's Citizenship Education Program and joined the board of the Child Development Group of Mississippi Head Start program. Adams dabbled in the Black Power Movement in 1967 before moving to Thailand with her family in 1968. Later in her life, Adams became a real estate agent with the goal of

[1] Victoria Jackson Gray Adams was known as Victoria Jackson before her first marriage to Tony Gray in the 1950s. She maintained the name Victoria Jackson Gray, even after her divorce from Gray, until her second marriage to Reuben Earnest Adams Jr. in 1966.Throughout this thesis, I will keep her name as she would have been referred to at the time.

[2] "Congressional Candidates Spur Deep South Registration Drives," *The Student Voice*, April 28, 1964, Volume 5 No. 9, SNCC-SV. Fannie Lou Hamer also ran for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives in the same Democratic primary as Adams in 1964.

aiding black families in purchasing homes, rather than continuing to rent, so that they would be able to own and invest in property.

At all levels, Adams's activism helped give momentum to the long struggle for black freedom in America. This engagement made her one of the most significant political leaders, male or female, black or white, to emerge from Hattiesburg. In a historical narrative that has been dominated by men, women such as Adams have largely been overlooked. Recent historiography has begun to examine the role of women more closely within the Civil Rights Movement, pushing our understanding of the actors of the Movement beyond the national narratives centered on male leaders like Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Women leaders, such as Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer, have received increasing attention as historians look more closely at the diverse experiences of women in the Movement. This thesis will build on these studies by highlighting the leadership and life of Adams, a woman who I argue was remarkable for her independence, organizing skill, and high-profile Civil Rights activism. Throughout Adams's life, she pushed for black self-determination by helping those around her gain the knowledge, skills, and support to improve their lives and their communities.

However, even while Adams was a remarkable leader and an independent woman, her activism was circumscribed by her role as a mother. This other role that Adams held in her personal life makes her representative of middle-aged women activists with children at home, an important but understudied demographic in Civil Rights Movement historiography. Adams's childrearing demands meant that she was unable to have the same freedoms as other leaders—women who were either young and unmarried

without children, elder women whose children were already out of the house, and men who did not face the same gendered expectations to care for children.

The years preceding Adams's initial participation in the Civil Rights Movement laid the groundwork for the various roles she would eventually play in the fight for black freedom. She was born in 1926, and her mother died when she was only three. Her father decided to let his parents raise her as he moved North to take an industrial job in Detroit, Michigan. Her upbringing by grandparents in Palmers Crossing, an all-black rural community just five miles south of Hattiesburg, instilled independence in her from a young age. She was raised alongside two boys, her brother and cousin, on the farm her grandparents owned and was expected to hold her own and work as much as the boys. Palmers Crossing was a town that was largely independent from white intervention, which instilled a sense of black self-determination in its residents as many felt that they could do things on their own. Many in Palmers Crossing owned their own land and were protective over the blackness of the town and felt especially betrayed when a white merchant came into town.[3] Adams's grandparents also instilled racial pride in her. When she first recognized the inequality of segregation as a young child, she told her grandmother that she wished they were white so they could be rich. Her grandmother replied, "Victoria, you don't have to be white to be rich."[4]

[3] Victoria Gray Adams, interview by Charles Bolton, June 5, 1999, in Hattiesburg, MS, transcript, the University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, Hattiesburg, MS, available online at https://usm.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USM_INST/dvterf/alma991014205579105566, 2-3.

[4] Bolton/Adams, Interview, USM-COHCH, 7.

Young Victoria Jackson learned to be independent in herself, despite the challenges she faced because of her race and gender. She briefly was a teacher and then married a U.S. Army soldier in the early 1950s and moved with him to Germany where she adopted her eldest daughter, Georgie, and gave birth to two boys, Tony Jr., and Cecil. Upon moving back to Washington D.C., Gray divorced her husband and moved back home. Following WWII, the Civil Rights activism of the Forrest County NAACP laid the groundwork for Hattiesburg to become a hotbed for the Movement. When Victoria Jackson Gray came back to Hattiesburg, in the late 1950s, she walked into a transformed city.

Upon her return, Gray opened a branch of a black cosmetics company named Beauty Queen Cosmetics. She sold products door to door and later recruited twenty-six other South Mississippi black women to sell products door to door. In 1962, while managing her small business, she helped two SNCC workers, Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes, gain a foothold and launch SNCC's direct action efforts in Hattiesburg. She attended a training to become a Citizenship Education Program (CEP) teacher, put on by SCLC, and returned to Hattiesburg to hold citizenship classes. She became the State Supervisor in Mississippi for the CEP, closed her business, and joined the Movement full time in 1963.

Gray then took a major role in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement. She helped found the MFDP, an alternative political party to the “regular” Mississippi Democratic Party. She attended the challenge of the 1964 Democratic National Convention at Atlantic City and attempted to run for U.S. Congress, only to be denied, and participated in the Congressional Challenge alongside Fannie Lou Hamer and Annie Devine. She

continued to work for black self-determination within the CEP, CDGM, and the Black Power Movement domestically. Meanwhile, in 1966 she married her second husband, Reuben Earnest Adams, and later gave birth to her third son. Two years later, she moved to Thailand for four years until returning to Virginia in 1972. When Adams and her family returned to the United States, she continued her activism in other ways. She helped organize other military wives in Virginia, became a real estate agent, and served as a campus minister at Virginia State University. In the 1990s, she returned to Mississippi with her son to teach a course on the Civil Rights Movement at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg. In 2006, Adams passed away at the age of 79 due to complications from lung cancer.

Early in 1968, Adams found herself in a conundrum. She could either continue her activism in Mississippi or move her family to Thailand to be with her husband during his military service. She was already juggling major roles and responsibilities in multiple organizations. She felt that if she left to be with her family, she would be abandoning her hard work, but she also felt that her loyalties were with her immediate family. She faced a loaded decision between her activism and her family. She discussed the problem with many people that she trusted—her husband, her extended family in Hattiesburg, and fellow activists of the Civil Rights Movement.

Adams picked up the phone and called Ella Baker, who was a mentor to countless Civil Rights Movement activists, a member of SCLC, and the founder of the SNCC. They discussed Adams's dilemma, working to figure out where her loyalties lied. Adams explained that her husband did not want to leave the country again without his family and how torn she felt over the decision. Baker responded, "Mrs. Gray [sic], we do—we have

different things that we are called to do at different points in our journey. Right now, you're being called to be with your family, so I would say to you go without regrets. There'll be plenty to do here when you get back."[5] So, Adams decided to leave Mississippi and move to Thailand with her husband and children. Once there, she utilized her activism against racism and rallied other black parents into a Parent Teacher Association to channel their outrage over biased teaching. Upon returning to the United States, her activism slowed but continued.

This major life decision that Adams made in 1968 was one of the most important in her life. Though the scale of this decision was larger than ever before, Adams was faced with choosing between her family and her activism time and time again during the 1960s. Sometimes she would have to pick one over the other, such as her decision in 1968. Other times, she found ways to compromise and balance her family and activism together. Nevertheless, Adams had to make crucial decisions throughout her life that impacted both sides of her life.

A closer analysis of Victoria Gray Adams allows scholars to understand the motivations of a black, single mother who returned to Mississippi following her divorce to create a stable life for her family. But this was just the beginning of Adams's story. Her return to Mississippi signified the beginning of a new chapter in her life defined by self-employment, community work, and, eventually, high-profile activism. Through it all, Adams's independent spirit and belief in black self-determination fueled her work.

[5] Victoria Gray Adams, interview by Racine Tucker Hamilton, October 12, 2004, in Petersburg, VA, transcript, History Makers Archive, available online at https://da.thehistorymakers.org/storiesForBio;ID=A2004.098, 35.

Adams's life allows us to understand the complexities of black women's activism during the Civil Rights Movement.

Middle-aged women were often the ones who made much of the Civil Rights Movement work possible. Often, they were the ones supporting the Movement locally, while also mothering their biological children and "other mothering" people in the community.[6] Biological motherhood (or "bloodmother[ing]," as black feminist scholar Patricia Collins calls it), which was one of the most important things to Adams, is the mothering of children that the woman gave birth to and raises.[7] "Othermothers" are women who assist biological mothers in the raising and care of children. They are usually other women in the community such as family members like grandmothers or aunts, extended family members like cousins, or other community women such as neighbors or church members.[8] In Adams's life, she experienced othermothers in a multitude of fashions. She was "othermothered" by her grandmother who raised her and by elder women mentoring her, such as Septima Clark and Ella Baker. She herself was an "othermother" as a mentor to women in the Movement and to the children and other community members that attended the citizenship classes she ran in Hattiesburg.

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[6] Patricia Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Routledge: New York, 1991), 119, and Tiyi Morris, *Womanpower Unlimited and the Black Freedom Struggle in Mississippi* (Athens: University of Georgia Press), 3–7.

[7] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 119-123. Per Collins, women who adopted children are considered othermothers. However, while Adams adopted her eldest child, Georgie, she treated her just as if she had given birth to her. In this thesis, I will treat Adams's relationship with Georgie as a relationship of a biological mother ("bloodmother") and not as an othermother.

[8] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 119-120.

Middle-aged women were the infrastructure that kept the Civil Rights Movement alive.[9] Adams's experiences as an independent and remarkable leader defy the traditional image of civil rights activists that has been laid out by prominent historians. She does not fit in with the group of black and white activists fresh out of college without spouses or children, such as those in SNCC, nor does she fit in with the group of black activists that were older with their children out of the house.[10] Since she does not fit in with the two major groups that are examined in the historiography of Civil Rights Movement history, it is fitting to expand our understanding of the complexities of the activism of women in the Movement. Adams's life is an example of someone who broke the mold that historians have created for middle-aged women during the Civil Rights Movement, as she juggled domestic and activist duties.

Historians' dramatic shift to a grassroots view of the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s laid the groundwork for understanding the impact of black Mississippi women activists. With their comprehensive studies of Mississippi, Charles Payne and John Dittmer started to challenge the typical methods of examining the Movement. They began to analyze the lives of local citizens, shifting the focus from national figures to everyday people who helped sustain the Movement in the South. In his book *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*, John Dittmer examined

[9] Morris, *Womanpower Unlimited and the Black Struggle in Mississippi*, , 3-4. Charles Payne, "Men Led, but Women Organized: Movement Participation of Women in the Mississippi Delta," in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965*, paperback edition, eds. Vicki Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 1-12.

[10] See Dittmer, *Local People*, 183; Douglas McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

everyday Mississippians and how their role tremendously impacted the Movement.[11] He pointed out that critical local figures in Mississippi—such as Medgar Evers, C.C. Bryant, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Adams—tied into the greater Movement in Mississippi and the nation.

Charles Payne's book *I've Got the Light of Freedom,* asserted that while men were the leadership within the Movement, women were the foundation as they were the organizers of the Movement.[12] Adams defied these constraints as an "organizer" since she evolved into a formal leader with her founding of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and later challenges at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City and 1965 Congressional Challenge.

Almost simultaneously, other scholars began to spotlight women's contributions to the Movement. A 1990 collection of essays in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941–1965*, edited by Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods, analyzed the specific role of women within the Civil Rights Movement.[13] The essays examined black women in two categories: "Trailblazers," who were the women that initiated specific events within the Movement, and then "Torchbearers," who continued to push for the reforms. While some women were either "Trailblazers" or "Torchbearers," others functioned as both. Adams was able to work in both ways as she led the charge in Hattiesburg with her CEP classes,

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[11] Dittmer, *Local People*.

[12] Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*: *The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

[13] The paperback edition came out in 1993. See Crawford et. al., *Women in the Civil Rights Movement*.

continued voter registration efforts when SNCC left the area, and served as a founding member of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

Within the edited volume, Vicki Crawford's essay, "African American Women in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party," argued that marginalized groups of women in the Civil Rights Movement were often overshadowed by male counterparts.[14] She focused especially on the key leaders in the MFDP: Fannie Lou Hamer, Annie Devine, and Adams. These three women were not the typical leaders from organizations like the NAACP and SCLC, as all three were women and not ministers. Crawford also stressed the importance of "indigenous," or locally developed black women's leadership that sustained the Movement. Crawford's analysis of the MFDP and of importance of black women leaders in the Movement is influential to this thesis as ideas of class, race, and gender were all major considerations when understanding Adams's life and her decisions. The Movement was sustained by methods of leadership and organizing different than that of "formal leadership" usually found in analyses of male leaders in the Movement.

Written a few years after Crawford's, Dittmer's, and Payne's books, Belinda Robnett's book *How Long, How Long? African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* put women at the center of her analysis of their involvement in the Civil Rights Movement, exploring their leadership styles and how they differed from their male counterparts.[15] Robnett argued that "an effective movement cannot be built on

[14] Vicki Crawford, "African American women in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party," in *Sisters in the Struggle: African-American Women in the Civil Rights-African American Power Movement*, eds. Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 135

[15] Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

exclusion," meaning that the Civil Rights Movement (and even future movements of the African American community) could not exclude women, or even other groups of people based on religion, sexual orientation, or class.[16] Robnett examined the division of leadership within the South between "formal" and "informal" leaders within various communities. Robnett identified local women activists as "bridge leaders" who performed the processes of recruitment, mobilization, and sustenance of the Movement.[17] Throughout the Civil Rights Movement, men and women had different avenues to power, as the typical route for men was through traditional roles in black church leadership, much like the path that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. took.

Women were not afforded the same leadership track as men. Women tended to hold Civil Rights leadership roles based on their communities and within grassroots activism. They used their communities' ties to "bridge" the national social movement and their community together. Robnett examined bridge leadership within political spheres but stopped short in examining how it affected women in their personal lives. While Adams was certainty a bridge between the local community and national movement, she did not serve as a bridge throughout her entire activist career. As she developed her leadership and evolved into a remarkable leader, she was not as much a bridge leader anymore as she was a main leader in the MFDP. This thesis will also build upon Robnett's work on black women's leadership in the political sphere by including a

[16] Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, 208.

[17] Robnett, *How Long? How Long?*, 19.

consideration of personal sphere. Since Adams's immediate family was such an important factor in her life, it is fitting to understand how her concern for it impacted her activism.

There have been tremendous biographies on women leaders in Civil Rights organizations written through the years, and they have offered a deeper understanding of women leaders' Movement lives. Published just three years after *How Long? How Long?,* Chana Kai Lee's *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* explored how Hamer's personal life impacted her leadership styles in the various organizations she was involved with through Mississippi's black freedom struggle.[18] Lee focused on Hamer's various life experiences—from growing up poor and sharecropping to working with SNCC in rural areas to Hamer's health issues. She also explored Hamer's relationships with white women during the Movement. Such relationships were complicated and nuanced as Hamer supported integration but was still concerned about relationships between white women and black men. Lee highlighted the experiences of black women during the Civil Rights Movement, especially poor rural black women, when Civil Rights history still tended to focus on men and elite women.

Lee's model of examining personal life experiences and their impact on how Hamer shaped her activism is especially useful to my thesis. She thoroughly examined Hamer's relationship with her children. Hamer adopted her daughters following a forced hysterectomy at the age of forty-four and although her children were adopted, she treated them as if they were her own biological children.[19] Hamer, like Adams, was protective

[18] Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

[19] Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 22.

over her family, and her personal life was just as important as her political life. Building upon Lee's inclusion of Hamer's personal moments and struggles, this thesis will include and acknowledge Adams's personal life and struggles that she had with her family.

A few years later, Barbara Ransby's *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* documented the political life story of one of the Movement's most important national leaders. Baker not only helped found both SCLC and SNCC but also dealt with sexism that was present in both organizations and mentored several black activists across the South.[20] Ransby specifically positioned Baker as a middle-class, middle-aged woman and stressed these factors in Baker's life and how her class and age impacted her remarkable activism. The mentorship that Baker exhibited was that of an othermother relationship with her mentees—including young SNCC activists.[21]

Ransby's biography of Baker remained grounded in the political sphere as Baker herself kept much of her personal life and immediate family life quiet. Ransby did explore Baker's childhood in depth, though. Her mother was one of her biggest role models, showing Baker independence and teaching her Baptist traditions. Adams and Baker were similar in this aspect as both had upbringings that instilled independence and a sense of black self-determination. Building upon Ransby's biography of Baker's remarkable leadership, I will examine Adams's life in a similar fashion that explores the ways that Adams's upbringing and her independence impacted her activism.

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[20] Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

[21] Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, 240-241.

Another prominent biography of a woman leader was Katherine Charron's *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark,* which explored Septima Clark's life and the impact she made on citizenship teaching programs that spread throughout the South during the 1960s.[22] Septima Clark's model for the Citizenship Education Program was successfully implemented throughout the South, where local women would be trained in teaching concepts surrounding citizenship such as voting rights, the Constitution, and how to read and write. Charron explored her life in the context of the "long Civil Rights Movement" and how women like her operated during the Civil Rights Movement. Due to sexism within organizations like SCLC, much of the everyday organizing was left up to local women, like Clark.

Charron's biography examined how Clark as an activist dealt with sexism within the various organizations and programs. Adams was like Clark in that both women were extremely independent and dealt with sexism throughout their entire journeys as black women activist leaders. While Adams and Clark had different paths, both were fiercely independent women who fought to better their communities and the lives of other black people. Building upon Charron's work on Septima Clark, this thesis will explore how Adams worked with male counterparts throughout her career as an activist and how she fought for those in her community in any way that she could.

More recently, historians have started to write about lesser-known women, such as Vera Pigee from Clarksdale, Mississippi. Françoise N. Hamlin's *Crossroads at Clarksdale: The Black Freedom Struggle in the Mississippi Delta after WWII* advances

[22] Katherine Charron, *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

the understanding of the Movement in Clarksdale, Mississippi, examining both Vera Pigee and Aaron Henry.[23] Vera Pigee's involvement in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) helped push integration and voting rights in the city of Clarksdale, Mississippi. Hamlin explains the dynamics between female leaders and male leaders in the context of Pigee and Henry. Throughout *Crossroads at Clarksdale,* Hamlin focuses on Pigee's relationship with those in her community. Her mentorship of others in her community and her hard work as a local leader in Clarksdale, Mississippi is like that work of Adams early in her activist career. Building upon Hamlin's work in *Crossroads at Clarksdale* about Pigee's remarkable leadership, Adams's mentorship to many young women in local areas of Mississippi and those in her own community will be examined thoroughly.

Deanna M. Gillespie's recent book *The Citizenship Education Program and Black Women's Political Culture* follows the creation and maintenance of the Citizenship Education Program and the importance of black women citizenship teachers in the 1960s.[24] The CEP aimed to help community members register to vote and be prepared for potential literacy questions they would face. The program prepared the adult students by learning how to interpret the U.S. Constitution, learning to read and write, and general citizenship skills. Gillespie follows the various black women throughout the South that implemented the CEP in their communities, foreshadowing many of the local leaders of the Civil Rights Movement.

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[23] Françoise N. Hamlin, *Crossroads at Clarksdale: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Mississippi Delta after WWII* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

[24] Deanna M. Gillespie, *The Citizenship Education Program and Black Women's Political Culture* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2021).

The program and its training were vital to Victoria Gray Adams's rise to leadership in Hattiesburg, MS, in the early 1960s. The training Adams received from Septima Clark and the rest of the CEP staff helped catapult her into the spotlight in Hattiesburg, which later led to her statewide leadership. The CEP played an essential role in supporting local women leaders and their struggle for freedom across the South. Gillespie asserts that local women sustained the Movement through their efforts at CEP schools, and that their roles made them othermothers to the community they worked in. Adams helped to organize locally in her early portions of her activism, especially in Hattiesburg. While she was the State Supervisor for the Citizenship Education Program, she tapped local women who she felt would be great teachers for their respective towns and communities. Building upon this work, my thesis centers this demographic of black women who sustained the Movement at a local level.

Adams also broke norms as a global black woman activist. Following her exit from Mississippi when she moved her family to Thailand for her military husband, she continued to organize. Keisha N. Blain and Tiffany M. Gill's recent edited collection, *To Turn the Whole World Over: Black women and Internationalism,* challenges the male-centric narrative of black internationalism and puts the focus on black women, especially those involved in SNCC.[25] One essay focuses on SNCC members Fannie Lou Hamer and Dona Richards's trip to Guinea in 1964 following Guinea's independence from France in 1958 to strengthen a transnational black activist network.

[25] Keisha N Blain and Tiffany M Gill, *To Turn the Whole World Over: Black Women and Internationalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019).

Adams's work is like many of the women included in the essays in this collection as her work moved to a new country in the late 1960s and early 1970s. However, her transnational activism was remarkable in that it took place in Thailand, an area of the world not typically associated with the African diaspora. While in Thailand, Adams took it upon herself to others organize against racism towards black children within the base schools, even though her children were not involved in the school. She also mentored many of the mothers and fathers. Adams's later life outside of the United States (though living on base) continues her tradition of being an activist wherever she landed in order to empower black people to demand change.

This project's archival materials facilitate a deep examination of Adams's life. The USM Archives and Collections (USM) are home to the Joseph and Nancy Ellin Freedom Summer Collection. This collection includes letters, papers, and documents from a married couple from the North, who aided many Civil Rights workers in Hattiesburg during Freedom Summer. The Sandra Adickes Papers are also located in the USM Archives, including accounts and materials from Adickes, a northern white woman who led other white northern teachers to the South during Freedom Summer.

Within the USM archives and collections, the Victoria Gray Adams Papers are the most vital. These crucial papers include bibliographic data, materials from the various Civil Rights organizations that Adams was a part of, and other personal documents and letters from Adams. These bibliographical papers are essential to this project, as many of the materials in this collection pertain to her leadership in the Civil Rights Movement as well as her early and later life. College class assignments, autobiographical materials, and papers of family members are all included in this earlier portion of the papers. Black

Power Conference papers, awards, and memorial conferences are included in the papers of her later life following the Movement. One of the most important items from this collection for this thesis was a journal that was kept by Adams from 1963 to 1964. This journal included daily recaps of what Adams did that day—with notes of what meetings she attended, what citizenship school classes she taught or attended, and every day events pertaining to herself and her family such as getting the kids ready for the homecoming football game or wrapping presents at Christmas. This journal is critical throughout this thesis— especially for revealing how Adams worked to balance her activism with her personal life.

The Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage (USM-COHCH) also hosts many oral histories that pertain to the Movement in Hattiesburg and throughout Mississippi. An audio recording of an interview with Victoria Gray Adams and Charles Bolton is vital to this project. The interview follows Adams's life and leadership within the Movement. Interviews with others close to Adams and the Hattiesburg Movement include Raylawni Branch, Peggy Jean Connor, J.C. Fairley, Lawrence Guyot, and Hollis Watkins. These interviews offer perspective on several civil rights organizations that Adams was actively involved in or working parallel with, including the MFDP, SNCC, NAACP, and SCLC.

Another significant archival collection that demonstrates Mississippi segregationist culture as well as the day-to-day movement of Civil Rights activists, is the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Papers, located at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH) in Jackson, Mississippi. The Mississippi Sovereignty Commission was an organization created through the State of Mississippi in 1956 and

funded by taxpayer dollars through 1977 that worked to protect segregation in Mississippi. It investigated citizens within the state suspected to have an association with the Civil Rights Movement. These papers range from newspaper articles to investigative reports on various Civil Rights figures within the Mississippi Movement. This collection not only shows that the Mississippi government viewed the Movement as traitorous but also reflects the sexism of the times, as men were the activists deemed important enough to watch. Still, women leaders like Adams have a few useful records in the collection. *The Student Voice*, SNCC's student newspaper, is also vital in tracking major and more minor news events about the Movement in smaller towns throughout the South.

This thesis follows Victoria Gray Adams from birth to death, looking at her life with a wide lens to understand what decisions created her remarkable achievements and legacy. Chapter two examines Victoria Gray Adams's birth and early life experiences before 1960 and how they influenced her local and statewide leadership in the Civil Rights Movement. The independence she learned from her grandparents and the community of Palmers Crossing influenced her actions and leadership in Hattiesburg to challenge the Forrest County registrar and establish Citizenship schools. This chapter aims to understand many of Adams's life decisions, including her choice to move her and her children back to Mississippi from Washington D.C following her divorce. This chapter also examines the decisions she made when forgoing her successful independent business to join the Civil Rights Movement full time.

Chapter Three involves Adams's incredible leadership in the busiest periods in the Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and the national Civil Rights Movement. Her local leadership with the implementation of Citizenship schools in Hattiesburg laid the groundwork for

Freedom Schools during Freedom Summer. Throughout this time, Adams made decisions between her personal and political spheres and even sometimes blended the two together—often multitasking between obligations of her children and her obligations to the Movement. Adams's statewide leadership in aiding the organization of the Freedom Vote and the founding of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party were vital to the impact of Mississippi's struggle for freedom. The MFDP's Atlantic City Democratic National Convention Challenge in 1964 and the Congressional Challenge in 1965 required Adams to travel out of state often. Adams made this critical decision, which required her to be away from her children.

The final chapter follows Adams's life after 1965, when she organized and led CEP schools and Head Start programs in Mississippi until she was faced with an important decision. Should she continue her activism in Mississippi, or should she be with her family? Her decision impacted her activism, but instead of leaving everything in Mississippi and stopping her organizing work completely, Adams shifted her sights to other projects and organizations. Adams worked throughout the rest of her life as a campus minister, real estate agent, college professor, and event speaker. Throughout her life, Adams maintained her independence and her commitment to fight for black self-determination. At the same time, her life and her decisions also reflect other middle-aged women within the Civil Rights Movement who often faced the choice between family and activism.

CHAPTER II – "Part of Making Things Work"

"In the middle of a cold November night in 1926, there was much excitement in the Jackson household. Everybody was sleepily excited and expectant. Naturally so. At 1:00 o'clock am Thursday morning, Nov. 5, I was born (the first child) to Mr. and Mrs. Mack Jackson, in the small Southern town of Hattiesburg, Miss. Quite a reward for being awakened in the middle of the night, don't you think?"[26]

Victoria Gray Adams's remarkable life started out in Palmers Crossing, Mississippi. There, she learned independence in herself as a black person and as a woman from her grandparents and elders within the community around her. Her journey began in a home birth and was interrupted by the death of her mother at an early age. Following her mother's death, she was raised by her grandparents who instilled lessons of independence and self-determination—teaching her that she only needed herself to be successful in life. Following her divorce from her first husband, She moved back to Mississippi where she used her lessons of independence and self-determination in her life. She opened up a Mississippi branch of Beauty Queen Cosmetics, and she sold her products door to door before she hired and managed over twenty black saleswomen. Upon the arrival of a pair of SNCC workers in Hattiesburg, she took it upon herself to introduce them into her community and then took the leap to become an organizer herself. This decision to become a part of the Civil Rights Movement was the apex of all of the lessons and experiences Adams had up to that point in her life and was only the start of her remarkable journey as a high-profile Civil Rights leader.

Victoria Almeter Jackson was born in a homebirth on November 5, 1925, to parents Mack and Anne Mae Ott Jackson in Palmers Crossing, Mississippi, a black

[26] "Autobiography," November 28, 1945, box 7 folder 1, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

community that was just outside the southern city limits of Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Victoria Almeter Jackson's father, Mack Jackson, was the only son born to Conteen and Frozeen McCallum Jackson, but he had five sisters. He grew up on his family's farm in Forrest County, Mississippi, in Palmers Crossing. Victoria Almeter Jackson's mother, Anne Mae Ott Jackson, was born to Thomas and Pinky Ott. Anne Mae Ott Jackson died following surgery when Victoria Jackson was only three years old. Both Anne Mae Ott Jackson and her sister had abdominal surgery, and while in recovery, Anne Mae Ott Jackson got out of bed to help her sister when she fatally fell and broke her stitches from the surgery open.[27]

Upon her mother's death, Victoria Jackson moved onto the farm with her paternal grandparents, where she spent most of her young life. Her paternal grandparents being landowners in the black community was not uncommon. Most of the families in Palmers Crossing held some amount of land or were businessowners. The community was comprised of all black people, and the community was self-sustaining. This meant that the community functioned primarily without the intervention of locals. Victoria Jackson claimed that the McCallum family gained their land through homesteading. Once the children married out, they were gifted a set amount of land, and Conteen and Frozeen continued to acquire land throughout the years.[28] The family land dated back to her great, great, great grandmother in the McCallum family.[29] The McCallum family members, who

[27] Victoria Gray Adams, interview by Racine Tucker Hamilton, October 12, 2004, in Petersburg, VA, transcript, History Makers Archive, available online at https://da.thehistorymakers.org/storiesForBio;ID=A2004.098, 4.

[28] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA, 4.

[29] Victoria Gray Adams, interview by Charles Bolton, June 5, 1999, in Hattiesburg, MS, transcript, the University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, Hattiesburg, MS,

originally acquired the land, most likely were recently freed slaves following the Emancipation Proclamation and the end Civil War. The land would have been acquired in the latter part of the 1890s or early 1900s under the Second Homestead Act of 1866.

The passage of the Southern Homestead Act of 1866 opened 46 million acres of public lands to previously enslaved peoples in the Southern states of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi. The Act gave freedmen (and loyal whites) priority in the first six months of the Act and barred ex-confederates from utilizing the Southern Homestead Act until 1867. Requirements for obtaining a title for land ownership included filing a claim to land at a land office, living on the land for five years, and then either patent or paying a registration fee for the title.[30] The Southern Homestead Act largely failed to provide an economic standing for newly formerly enslaved people, as the framers of the Act had intended. The Act was repealed ten years later, but black Mississippians were only 35% successful in acquiring the title to their land in the ten years.[31]

Growing up on the farm, Jackson was busy. She recalled being "very, very engaged from the time you awakened until the time you went to sleep at night. Everybody, as soon as you were able--capable of balancing yourself, you had a task, you had a job that you performed." She recalled a litany of jobs, from bringing water home to the cedar buckets to doing chores around the house and farm. Her younger brother,

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available online at https://usm.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USM_INST/dvterf/alma991014205579105566, 2.

[30] Neil Canaday, Charles Reback, and Kristin Stowe, "Race and Local Knowledge: New Evidence from the Southern Homestead Act," *The Review of Black Political Economy* 42, no. 4 (2015): 399–413.

[31] Michael L Lanza, *Agrarianism and Reconstruction Politics: The Southern Homestead Act*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press; 1990), 88-89.

Goldies, and her elder first cousin lived on the farm and grew up alongside Victoria Jackson. She recalled that her grandfather would always keep them busy, "papa's motto was 'idle minds are the devil's workshop,' and he kept both your mind and your hands engaged."[32]

Four years following Anne Mae Ott Jackson's death, Mack Jackson remarried. Victoria Jackson moved in briefly with her "new" family at seven years old. She recalled being unsure of her new mother, "I had not learned to meet strangers halfway," but eventually realized that their relationship would blossom if she were to meet her stepmother halfway.[33] She applied this tactic to the neighborhood children, recalling that she often had issues making friends with other children. She was a fiercely independent child, a trait instilled by her grandparents, and always loud and outspoken. She often spoke out in her classes, a skill that she attributed to growing up with many men in the household.

Forrest County Training School, DePriest Consolidated School, and the Eureka School, were some of the only schools available for black children to attend in Forrest County. The Eureka School was built in 1921 to improve black education to keep many of the industrial black families in the area, as opposed to heading North in what would come to be known as the Great Migration. The Eureka School was built at 412 East 6th Street, in the heart of the Mobile Street business district and neighborhood, one of Hattiesburg's black communities.[34] Forrest County poured more money into its black

[32] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA, 7.

[33] "Autobiography," November 28, 1945, box 7 folder 1, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM

[34] William Sturkey, *Hattiesburg: An American City in African American and White* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2019),129.

students than any other county in Mississippi, "in 1940, Forrest County's per capita expenditure on its black schools was $18.20, while $37.84 went to each white child; in the same year, Amite county officials spent only $3.51 per black student, while lavishing $30.24 on every white student." There were five consolidated schools in addition to the Eureka School in Forrest County in the 1930s and 1940s.[35]

An influx of black men and women to Forrest County and Hattiesburg occurred in the late 1880s. The city of Hattiesburg was established in 1882 through a land grant received by William H. Hardy.[36] Established in the center of the railroad routes within the Pine Belt, Hattiesburg grew to become known as the Hub City. Within the center of the Hub City, railroads ran throughout downtown. Pine forests surrounded the town, lumber companies and mills took root in the Hub City, with black laborers being key to their success. The jobs that black men worked were the jobs that were unwanted by white workers. Black men often worked the dirtiest jobs within the railroads and local lumber industries, with 97% of porters, 60% of brakemen and firemen, and 87% of railroad workers in Mississippi being black.[37]

While these job opportunities were not always the best, they paid better and were better labor than the other option of rural sharecropping. With the jobs opening throughout Hattiesburg and in the surrounding Piney Wood Forest, an influx of black workers moved into Hattiesburg in the late 1890s and early 1900s. The workers and their

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[35] Charles Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All: The Battle Over School Integration in Mississippi, 1970-1980* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 17-18.

[36] Federal Land Grant made to William H. Hardy, May 10, 1882, Box 2, Folder 11, Hattiesburg Historical Photographs, USM.

[37] Sturkey, *Hattiesburg*, 44.

families moved and settled an area of floodplain land that sat north of the core of downtown Hattiesburg. The area, situated at the confluence of the Bouie and Leaf Rivers, would become known as the Mobile Street Neighborhood due to the positioning of the area running along Mobile Street. This area would be the first of the major black neighborhoods established in Hattiesburg during the 20th century; it would also become the heart of black Hattiesburg for decades to come.

The increasing black population in the early parts of the 1900s in Hattiesburg created multiple black communities. Mobile Street became a bustling business district, with much of the black middle-class population owning businesses and residing in the neighborhood. Palmers Crossing developed just south of Hattiesburg. These communities were established and grew exponentially within the first four decades of the 1900s.[38] The black residents in Hattiesburg and surrounding areas were stricken by Jim Crow laws and segregation laws established by the state of Mississippi, which dictated their lives from where they could shop to where they could live. These laws led the black community to band together, creating their own society within Hattiesburg that could operate outside of the use of white businesses. If the white population were not going to help them, they would do it independently. Black residents of Hattiesburg, mainly situated in the Mobile Street neighborhood, took it upon themselves to support their community.

The community of Palmers Crossing was very religious, and Victoria Jackson and her family were no exception. The family belonged to a Methodist church originally named St. John Methodist Episcopal Church and would be renamed twice to St. John

[38] Sturkey, *Hattiesburg*, 128.

Methodist Church and finally became St. John United Methodist Church.[39] Victoria Jackson had taken part in church school from an early age and was deeply influenced by religion early in her life, "Here I realized the value of religion, as well as some essential factors to have a well rounded and happy existence. I made it a point to try to live up to these ideas."[40] The leaders and elders of Palmers Crossing, some of whom were old enough to have lived in the times of enslavement, imparted an important lesson on a young Victoria Jackson— an essential lesson in freedom and the importance of putting forth the efforts to further freedom.

Much of Victoria Jackson's early writings emphasize the lesson of appreciating the freedom one had at the time but also constantly working to further what freedom meant. This moment was one of the moments in which Victoria Jackson realized a purpose for her life and decided who she would be in her life. At the time, she did not know it meant playing a significant role in securing freedom for black Mississippians. At the time, it meant bettering her community where and when she could. The conclusion of her unpublished autobiography envisions helping her community,

> I feel that most children are extremely energetic and that unless they have the proper channels to exercise this energy, they will seek some other source. Thus, causing a high percentage of juvenile delinquency. I find that this is not only in my hometown, but in many other places, and it has become my ambition to try in some way to help my people towards establishing an organization for this purpose. One that will bring up the morale of the children and cut the percentage of delinquency.[41]

[39] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA, 11.

[40] "Autobiography," November 28, 1945, box 7 folder 1, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

[41] "Autobiography," November 28, 1945, box 7 folder 1, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

Throughout her youth and schooling, she furthered these ideas and then embodied them throughout her life.

The McCallum Jackson farm was host to fun-filled Sunday afternoons following Sunday School. Many neighborhood children came to the farm following the Sunday School classes and played baseball or other games throughout the afternoon. For holidays, such as Easter, Victoria Jackson's grandparents hosted an Easter egg hunt for the neighborhood children throughout the yard. They also had a Victrola Phonograph used often on Sundays, when they played the latest music.[42] The Jackson family was better off than many of the other black families in the Hattiesburg area. Since they owned their farm, they were financially independent and supported themselves. This was in line with many black upwardly mobile families within Hattiesburg, especially the business owners on Mobile Street. While the McCallum Jacksons lived in a rural area and were not business owners like the others, they were still self-sustaining and able to financially support themselves.

Victoria Jackson attended elementary school at Forrest County Training School in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, where she graduated on April 24, 1941.[43] She then attended high school at Forrest County Training High School, later known as DePriest Consolidated School. Both schools were in the community of Palmers Crossing.[44] Victoria Jackson reflected upon her schooling in a college assignment for her English 101

[42] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA, 7.

[43] "Elementary School Diploma," April 24, 1941, Box 7 Folder 12, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

[44] "High School Diploma," April 26, 1945, Box 7 Folder 16, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM

course, where she explained that she did not grasp the concept of school when she first started. Having trouble with discipline from teachers and having issues making friends caused her to have to attend summer classes to complete her first year of schooling.[45]

When the Great Depression hit the black working population in Hattiesburg, it hit hard. In Hattiesburg, jobs of any sort were hard to come by as white and black Hattiesburg residents were grasping at straws. Towards the end of the Depression, the unemployment rate for black men in Hattiesburg fell between 20 and 30 percent. The men who were working were working in jobs that white people had refused to do for many reasons, mainly that they were physically demanding and dangerous types of jobs.[46] Hercules Powder Company was one of the largest employers during the Depression. Hercules Powder Company moved into the Hattiesburg area in 1923, wanting to use tree stumps to produce cleaning chemicals. Hercules employed 400 workers, black and white, throughout the Great Depression.[47]

The Great Depression impacted Victoria Jackson's life in various forms. While her grandparents owned their farm and remained in Mississippi, her father moved north to Detroit, Michigan, in the late 1930s by invitation of his sister, Velma. Victoria Jackson moved to Detroit during her sixth-grade year to live with her father and stepmother for one year and then moved back with her grandparents in Mississippi.[48] She attended a public school named McGraw Elementary School for her sixth-grade year, where she

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[45] "Autobiography," November 28, 1945, Box 7 Folder 1, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

[46] Sturkey, *Hattiesburg*, 170.

[47] Sturkey, *Hattiesburg*, 111.

[48] "Autobiography," November 28, 1945, Box 7 Folder 1, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

made satisfactory and exceptional marks in her classwork and her citizenship grades.[49] Her family lived on the West Side, one of the more prominent black neighborhoods in Detroit. Like most other black families, they most likely lived in overpriced rental housing because most black people and their families were systemically excluded from purchasing real estate due to restrictive covenants and discriminatory practices by banks and the government in loan programs.[50]

Black southern families moved to Detroit and other northern Rust Belt cities preceding and following the Great Depression, in what has become known as the Great Migration. In Detroit, the years following the Depression and leading up to WWII created an industrial boom. Mack Jackson most likely worked in some sort of unskilled industrial factory position, jobs in which white residents of Detroit refused to work.[51]

Few escaped the hurt of the Great Depression, except self-sustaining businesses owned by the black middle class. In Hattiesburg, most businesses residing on Mobile Street made it through the Depression somewhat unscathed. E. Hammond Smith, the owner of the Smith Drug Company, was able to employ two to three people at a time during the years of the Depression. While his business was not thriving, he did not experience the same hurt that much of the black population experienced throughout the Depression.[52] Agriculture was not a reliable job for working-class black people in

[49] "Report Cards of Victoria Jackson (1938-1939)," 1938-1939, Box 7 Folder 27, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

[50] Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 34-35.

[51] Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 19.

[52] Caudill/Smith, Interview, USM-COHCH, 11.

Hattiesburg, only supplying a smaller number of jobs during certain seasons. The Jackson family could sustain themselves during the Depression by owning their land, where they could grow and raise their food. This was like the black working class on Mobile Street, who kept gardens and raised chickens or cows to maintain a food source during the Depression.[53]

The black community in Hattiesburg was deeply religious, like Palmers Crossing, with St. Paul Methodist Church, Zion Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church, St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church, True Light Baptist Church, and Mt. Carmel Baptist Church being the five main congregations in Hattiesburg near the Mobile Street Neighborhood. During the Depression, the churches and black business owners aided their community through religious aid societies and the Hattiesburg Negro Business League. Since most of the New Deal aid was being excluded from the black community, the black community members themselves stepped up to provide funds, food, and various items (such as clothing and toys) to those in need in the black community. Ladies Aid groups in different churches in Hattiesburg organized various church events and fundraisers.[54] In Palmers Crossing, the story was much of the same. Victoria Jackson's grandmother, Conteen McCollum Jackson, was the President of the Ladies Aid Society at St. John Methodist Episcopal Church.[55]

One of Victoria Jackson's earliest memories of her dreams and aspirations occurred when she was in preschool and had attended a baccalaureate sermon where she

[53] Sturkey, *Hattiesburg*, 173

[54] Sturkey, 175-177

[55] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA, 11.

saw graduating seniors and decided that she "was going to wear that cap and gown. Upon graduating high school in Hattiesburg, Victoria Jackson attended all-black Wilberforce University in Ohio, intending to become a lawyer. When she moved north for college, she ran into some "trouble" with some men and their ideas of gender roles. One of the Wilberforce football players demanded that she iron his shirts, and she explained that she did not even iron her own brother's shirts. While at Wilberforce she made somewhat decent grades. Her grades on various German and English assignments ranged from As to Cs.[56] Victoria Jackson spent one semester in 1945 and one semester in 1946 at Wilberforce before she returned home due to a lack of funding.[57]

When the United States declared it was going to war in Europe in 1917, the U.S. Army announced that it would open sixteen sites that aided in preparing soldiers to ship out to Europe. The Hattiesburg Chamber of Congress had put the city's name in the hat to be one of those sixteen sites and were approved to open a site on July 12, 1917, that the U.S. Army opened as Camp Shelby. Throughout the two years that U.S. involvement in WWI lasted, Camp Shelby remained active but not intermixed in a significant way with the city of Hattiesburg.[58] In the years preceding WWII, however, Hattiesburg and its surrounding areas underwent a significant transformation that impacted the city indefinitely.

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[56] "Autobiography," November 28, 1945, box 7 folder 1; "Lost: Earliest Memory Assignment," October 10, 1945, box 7 folder 9;. "Autobiography Outline," November 9, 1945, box 7 folder 9; "A Kiss Goodnight," box 7 folder 9; and "German 101 Homework," April 11, 1946, box 7 folder 9, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

[57] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA, 13.

[58] William Theodore Schmidt, "The Impact of the Camp Shelby Mobilization on Hattiesburg, Mississippi, 1940-1946" (PhD Diss., The University of Southern Mississippi, 1972), p. 4-7.

On the eve of the United States entering WWII, Camp Shelby was transferred to the federal government from an order by Mississippi Governor Paul B. Johnson, Sr., on September 6, 1940. The transfer to the federal government brought major government funding and employment to Camp Shelby and, by proximity, Hattiesburg.[59] Camp Shelby in the 1940s utilized local Hattiesburg workers in various jobs; they used 5,000 in construction crews and eventually employed over 17,000 workers from the Hattiesburg area. [60] These numbers did not include the population of soldiers moving in and out of the base in their training and preparation for WWII. While her grandfather was living, he had made it clear that Victoria Jackson would not "work out" for anyone else because she "had a job" on the farm. After her grandfather died, she worked for one week at a laundromat in Hattiesburg, where she noted that she did not get paid well or get proper breaks throughout the day.[61] Later, sixteen-year-old Victoria Jackson worked at Camp Shelby as a laundress for better pay and conditions than she had received at her earlier laundromat job in Hattiesburg.[62]

Camp Shelby helped boost business and traffic on Mobile Street, with many black soldiers stationed at Camp Shelby spending their time and money there. Many black troops also came from northern states where Jim Crow laws were not in place. Northern ideas soon spread throughout the black community in Hattiesburg, and southern views flooded the black troops. The black community welcomed the new soldiers with open

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[59] Schmidt, "The Impact of the Camp Shelby," 9-12.

[60] "Need 5000 to Work at Camp Shelby," *Hattiesburg American*, September 12, 1940.

[61] Bolton/Adams, Interview, USM-COHCH, 11.

[62] Sturkey, *Hattiesburg*, 217-218.

arms, often caring for them as their own before they shipped off overseas.[63] Local black men from Hattiesburg were also stationed at Camp Shelby before being sent to Europe. J.C. Fairley, a Hattiesburg native and later the Forrest Country NAACP President, was stationed at Camp Shelby before being a truck driver in Europe for two years. Upon his return from WWII, like many other black men returning from WWII service, J.C. Fairley returned and worked a farming program and earned his high school and college degrees utilizing the G.I. Bill.[64]

In the years following their return to the United States, similarly to when black veterans returned from World War I, black veterans joined the local branches of the NAACP.[65] E. Hammond Smith, his brother, and other business owners from the Mobile Street business district were joined by NAACP Mississippi field secretary Medgar Evers to coordinate their efforts to lay what became the groundwork for the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Black businesses and black churches became vital to the operations as Mobile Street became the center for Civil Rights in Hattiesburg. Most black companies played a role in the planning and executing voter registration efforts, meetings, and citizenship schools.[66] Mrs. Lenon Wood's guesthouse was used as the headquarters for a handful of civil rights organizations such as the Hattiesburg branch of COFO, SNCC, and other groups in the 1960s. Raylawni Branch, one of the first African Americans to attend

[63] Sturkey, *Hattiesburg*, 219.

[64] J.C. Fairley, interview by Mike Garvey, in Hattiesburg, MS, January 31, 1977, the University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, Hattiesburg, MS, available online at https://usm.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USM_INST/1prcivv/alma991014205759105566, 8.

[65] Chad L. Williams, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 349.

[66] Caudill/Smith, Interview, USM-COHCH, 11.

The University of Southern Mississippi, recalled the importance of Mobile Street to the movement in Hattiesburg, "That's where the base was. The COFO office was on Mobile Street. The Freedom Democratic Party was there. The Delta Ministry from the United Council of Churches was there. The NAACP met down there. If you had a deposition to make, SNCC was down there. It was all there on Mobile Street."[67]

While many in the Mobile Street Business District and neighborhood in Hattiesburg were working in the early portions of the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, Victoria Jackson was working as a teacher following her return from college. She worked at several various schools in the surrounding counties of Jones, Wayne, and Perry. Her high school principal encouraged Victoria Jackson to become a teacher. While teaching, she met and married her first husband, Tony West Gray.[68] She was still teaching, they got into a large fight that caused her to quit her teaching job in southern Mississippi and move to Ohio with one of her aunts. When Tony West Gray finally convinced her to return to Hattiesburg, he was called back into military service for the Korean War.[69]

The couple moved to Germany in the early 1950s due to Tony Gray's job in the Army, where they spent four years and adopted their daughter Georgie Roswitha Gray who was five years old. Victoria Jackson Gray suspected that Georgie was Tony West

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[67] Raylawni Branch, interview by Kim Adams, October 25, 1993, in Hattiesburg, MS, transcript, the University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, Hattiesburg, MS, available online at https://usm.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USM_INST/dvterf/alma991007148939705566, 4.

[68] At this point, I will refer to Victoria Jackson as Victoria Jackson Gray following her first marriage where she took Tony West Gray's last name.

[69] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA, 17.

Gray's biological daughter; he had been in Germany a few years before the couple moved together. They had been trying to have a baby for years but experienced complications in conceiving but shortly after adopting Georgie, Gray became pregnant and then gave birth to her second child Tony West Gray, Jr., and later their third child, Cecil Conteen Gray.[70]

The family returned from Germany in the mid-1950s, where they moved to Washington D.C., as Tony West Gray was stationed at Fort Meade in Maryland. Upon returning from Europe, the couple realized that they both needed to work to afford to live in Washington D.C.. Gray was very protective over her children and wanted to start a job where she could somewhat work from home and manage her family.[71] She came across an advertisement for a young company called Beauty Queen that was starting up, which allowed women to work on their own time and sell beauty cosmetics and household goods door to door.[72] Beauty Queen Cosmetics was established by Marcus Griffith and was the most prominent black business in Washington D.C. in the 1950s. The company operated nationally with beauty salons and individual salespeople working door to door.[73] The couple divorced in 1955, and Victoria Jackson Gray had convinced Beauty Queen Cosmetics to open their business to Mississippi. She decided to move herself and her children back to the family farm that had been left behind by Conteen and Frozeen

[70] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA, 18.

[71] Vicki L. Crawford, "'Be Ye Doers of The Word, Not Just Hearers Only' Faith and Politics in the Life of Victoria Gray Adams," *Cross Currents* Vol. 57, No. 2 (2007): 172.

[72] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA 19-20.

[73] Shelley Green and Paul L. Pryde, *Black Entrepreneurship in America*, (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1989), 181.

McCallum Jackson and live independently while running her branch of Beauty Queen Cosmetics.

While Gray was in Germany and Washington D.C., members of the black community in Hattiesburg were laying the groundwork for Hattiesburg to become a hotbed for the Civil Rights Movement. Following the return home of black soldiers from WWII, many of the Hattiesburg veterans established the Forrest County chapter of the NAACP.[74] Many of the individuals who joined were either members of the business community located on Mobile Street or prominent church members at the various Hattiesburg churches situated near and around Mobile Street. The Smith brothers, pharmacist E. Hammond Smith, and Doctor Charles Smith, were among the Forrest County NAACP founding members.[75] They, alongside notable Hattiesburg business members such as Vernon Dahmer, eventually worked alongside Medgar Evers, who was named NAACP Mississippi field secretary in 1955. Together, the Forrest County NAACP consistently worked to mold the community in Hattiesburg into what would eventually be a hotspot during the Civil Rights Movement.[76]

Back in Hattiesburg, Gray worked hard to build up her business and worked within her community. She opened her own Beauty Queen Cosmetics branch in Hattiesburg, which quickly became popular in the black community in Southern Mississippi. She had to bring on two more women to help keep with demand, and by 1960, Gray leased out an office in the black business district on Mobile Street and

[74] Sturkey, *Hattiesburg*, 227.

[75] Caudill/Smith, Interview, USM-COHCH, 9.

[76] Sturkey, *Hattiesburg*, 232-234.

employed twenty-five salespeople to sell beauty Queen in Southern Mississippi.[77] Upon her return to Hattiesburg, she also became the head of her local PTA and a prominent leader within St. John Methodist Church. However, she did not join the local NAACP chapter. She saw it as a "closed social group" for a specific type of person and a male-dominated organization, which she decided to stay away from.[78] For the moment, she would remain in her role at St. John and continue growing her branch of Beauty Queen Cosmetics.

In the early 1960s, a new civil rights organization gained traction in Mississippi. SNCC, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, was founded and mainly run by young college students, spearheaded by their Chairman John Lewis and Executive Secretary James Forman. The organization's creation resulted from Ella Baker's ideas of participatory democracy. Her ideas translated into the creation of SNCC and gained membership from young leaders across the Southern United States, especially in Mississippi. She brought the concept of organization of people, rather than the mobilization of people, influencing SNCC organizers to be the people in the back of the room working with people rather than being the poster child for the Movement.[79]

In 1960, Bob Moses, with guidance from his mentor Ella Baker, moved into Mississippi, intending to spread SNCC's work throughout various cities in the state. In 1961, he focused on the town of McComb, located in Amite County, Mississippi, where

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[77] Vicki L. Crawford, "'Be Ye Doers of The Word, Not Just Hearers Only' Faith and Politics in the Life of Victoria Gray Adams," *Cross Currents* Vol. 57, No. 2 (2007): 172.

[78] John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 182.

[79] Steven F. Lawson and Charles Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 141.

he started to recruit local black citizens into the organization. He met Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes, two young and enthusiastic men who wanted to aid in SNCC efforts.[80] In McComb, SNCC began two primary forms of work and organization—direct action and voter registration. In August of 1961, Curtis Hayes and Hollis Watkins led sit-ins that resulted in their arrests, and Bob Moses was beaten so severely it required eight stitches. Following these instances, more and more sit-ins were staged by other local students in McComb, which inspired an influx of other SNCC workers into McComb that Fall.[81] The white leaders and police in McComb attempted to put down the various attempts of SNCC, even sentencing Hollis Watkins to two years of jail time.[82]

Hearing the success of SNCC student workers in McComb, Mississippi, Forrest County NAACP president Vernon Dahmer requested student workers to come to Hattiesburg to register voters and gain participation in SNCC activities. Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes arrived in Hattiesburg in 1962 and lived with Dahmer. Upon venturing out into the community, Hayes and Watkins figured out that much of the community in Hattiesburg was wary of young college students coming into the town. Many were worried that they were there to stir up trouble, and eventually many people began to ignore the pair of SNCC workers. Some churches allowed them to hold meetings, but very few people were showing up.[83]

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[80] Sturkey, *Hattiesburg*, 274.

[81] Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 68-72.

[82] Hollis Watkins, interview by John Rachal, October 23, 29, 30, 1996, via telephone, transcript, the University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, Hattiesburg, MS, available online at https://usm.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USM_INST/1prcivv/alma991014205564005566, 13.

[83] Rachal/Watkins, Interview, USM-COHCH, 22-24.

Gray's brother, Goldies Jackson, had remained in Hattiesburg and opened an electronics shop with J.C. Fairley on Mobile Street.[84] The SNCC workers had a hard time breaking through into the black community and struggled to rally participation in voter registration efforts. Some churches had allowed them to speak and hold meetings that encouraged participation, but they usually only hosted eight to ten people.[85] Much of the clergy in the various churches in Hattiesburg viewed the SNCC workers as college kids who stirred up trouble in the community and primarily ignored SNCC workers.[86]

By chance, the pair walked into the electronics shop on Mobile Street and started chatting with Goldies Jackson. Hayes and Watkins explained the trouble they were having in Hattiesburg, and Jackson directed them to his sister, Victoria Jackson Gray. When she met the pair of SNCC workers, they told her of their issues with many of the pastors in Hattiesburg and the refusal to aid the pair. She then told them, "He [Reverend L.P. Ponder] doesn't control everything. He doesn't control St. John's, I can assure you of that."[87] Gray arranged a meeting between the SNCC workers and Reverend L.P. Ponder, the pastor of St. John Methodist Church. After discussion with the church board, Reverend Ponder agreed to let the pair work with the congregation of St. John, which allowed the movement to gain the traction that it needed to propel the work in Hattiesburg forward.[88]

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[84] Garvey/Fairley, Interview, 38.

[85] Rachal/Watkins, Interview, USM-COHCH, 19.

[86] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA, 20.

[87] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA, 22.

[88] Bolton/Adams, Interview, 13.

Gray claimed this moment was "truly the birthplace of the Hattiesburg Movement, for all practical purposes."[89] This moment, when Gray decided to help the pair of SNCC workers, was the result of Victoria Jackson Gray's life experiences up to that point. Independence, instilled by her family and experiences growing up, pushed her to stand up against the norms within the Hattiesburg community regarding the workers. She stood up for and backed the SNCC pair before her church and the other leaders, allowing them to gain footing within Hattiesburg. Her early life set the groundwork for what soon came in the years following Hayes and Watkins' first steps into Hattiesburg. Her transformation into a movement leader would not just solidify her as a local leader in Hattiesburg, but on the statewide level in Mississippi and eventually in Washington D.C..

Once the pair of SNCC workers were able to meet with the church members at St. John, they launched a campaign to register members of the Hattiesburg community to be able to vote. Upon their first meeting at St. John, they asked for volunteers to go with them to the courthouse and register to vote. At this point, Gray was under no obligation to get involved any further than giving the SNCC pair a fair chance to speak to the congregation. She could have gone about her business, given her involvement in her children's school and her business. However, she made the decision to get more involved with the activism that Hayes and Watkins were promoting. Gray's hand was one of the first to fly up and then other hands followed. The group consisted of Gray, three school

[89] Bolton/Adams, Interview, 13

bus drivers, and two others church members who went with the SNCC pair to the Forrest County Courthouse to face the Forrest County Circuit Clerk Theron Lynd.[90]

The Forrest County Circuit Clerk was already on watch at this point by the federal government, with two FBI agents visiting Hattiesburg to investigate complaints that Lynd was unfairly registering whites and denying members of the black community. In May of 1960, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Civil Rights Act of 1960 into law, and Title III of the document required county clerks to retain voting records for twenty-two months and to produce them if requested by the Department of Justice. When the United States of America Department of Justice (DOJ) requested the documents in August of 1960 from Forrest County, Lynd requested an extension to produce the records for him to continue to withhold the records.[91]

He continued to refuse to produce the records and was not held accountable by the other Forrest County officials. District Judge William H. Cox failed to issue a court order that required Lynd to produce the documents. The DOJ appealed the inaction and Lynd was cited for criminal and civil contempt.[92] Some black Hattiesburg residents cited that Lynd had a completely different method for registering black people compared to white people.[93] J.C. Fairley, who later became the Forrest County NAACP President, recalled, "We had some professors, some educators, you know, to go and try this. We knew that they passed it. The Justice Department got involved, they started collecting and

[90] Dittmer, *Local People*, 182.

[91] Sturkey, *Hattiesburg*, 279

[92] Sturkey, *Hattiesburg*, 281.

[93] Sturkey, *Hattiesburg*, 280.

compiling data. They brought Lynd into court and had all these people come in and testify."[94]

Throughout the ongoing case against Lynd, the SNCC pair led voter registration efforts for over one hundred people. Lynd denied each of the applicants. Gray herself had attempted to register and had been denied three times by Theron Lynd—April 23, June 15, and July 30. The case was built throughout the early portions of 1962 and was brought against Lynd in September of 1962. It included testimony and depositions from many black residents across Hattiesburg and their issues in registering to vote.[95] One of the main arguments against Lynd was described by Lawrence Guyot, "you had situations where in Hattiesburg, where you had a very literate population, you had Phi Beta Kappas failing the literacy test, and you had ignorant whites who were illiterate, passing the test successfully."[96] In July of 1963, Lynd was found guilty of civil contempt and the court required him to register the forty-three people who had testified. Even though forty-three had been allowed to register in Forrest County, Lynd continued to deny black residents their right to vote.[97]

Gray continued to support the pair of SNCC workers in their efforts throughout Hattiesburg—whether it was cooking the pair meals, speaking to her clients about their

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[94] Garvey/Fairley, Interview, 39.

[95] Sturkey, *Hattiesburg*, 275.

[96] Lawrence Guyot, interview by John Rachal, September 7, 1996, in Hattiesburg, MS, transcript, the University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, Hattiesburg, MS, available online at https://usm.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USM_INST/1prcivv/alma991014205578205566, 7.

[97] Sturkey, *Hattiesburg*, 285.

efforts when she was selling Beauty Queen Cosmetics products door to door, or vouching for them to have a small office space set up in her brother's electronics shop.[98] At this point, the pair suggested that they do more in Hattiesburg, and they asked Gray if she would like to go to a training in Atlanta that was being hosted by SCLC. She recalled being reluctant at first, but the confidence the pair had in Gray compelled her to attend Septima Clark's training for her "Citizenship Education Program" (CEP).[99] In this moment, Gray decided to wade further and further into the movement. She no longer was just helping the SNCC workers but would be working alongside them as peers. This would require further involvement into the Civil Rights Movement and take away from her work as a businesswoman with her branch of Beauty Queen Cosmetics.

Septima Clark, the longtime activist with the NAACP and SCLC, and Ella Baker developed a program that would be able to appeal to a lot of regular, everyday people. Septima Clark developed the Citizenship Education Program that "drew upon the daily experiences of individuals and, in a dialectical fashion, forged a bridge between the prefigurative politics of individual experience and the politics of the movement."[100] The program originated out of Clark's program in Monteagle, Tennessee where the program reached large proportions of the community and was successful in attempts for voter registration of black citizens. Ella Baker had traveled to Tennessee and approached Clark with an idea to bring her program to a larger level. After convincing SCLC founders

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[98] Sturkey, *Hattiesburg,* 283.

[99] Bolton/Adams, Interview, USM-COHCH, 16.

[100] Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 9.

Martin Luther King, Jr. and Myles Horton, they agreed to establish a place to hold workshops to train local southern activists.[101] This programing was attended by various local leaders in the Civil Rights Movement, especially from Mississippi.

Clark's main goal in the CEP was to teach reading and writing skills, believing that literacy was the route to help rural black people learn about their citizenship rights. Voter registration was another goal intertwined with literacy—for a black person to successfully register to vote in the southern states, the person would more often not have to read and interpret a portion of the United States Constitution. Clark believed that this was all possible, but not without the confidence and trust of the community one was working in.[102]

Gray attended the training at Dorchester in Atlanta, Georgia in August of 1963.[103] She returned to Hattiesburg and implemented the program, but under a different name, and brought on other local women to teach the classes.[104] These classes in Hattiesburg continued through the Fall and Winter of 1963, setting the basis for Freedom Summer in the Summer of 1964. The classes included teaching literacy skills, an emphasis on the attempts to register to vote, and like Septima Clark's model, there was an emphasis on working within the community.[105] When classes started, she recalled the first things they focused on, "One of the first questions in the Citizenship Education class was, 'Define a

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[101] Robnett, *How Long? How Long*?, 88-89.

[102] Robnett, *How Long? How Long*?, 90-91.

[103] "Certificate of Attendance," August 23, 1963, box 7 folder 8, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

[104] Bolton/Adams, Interview, USM-COHCH, 22.

[105] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA, 29.

citizen. How do you become a citizen in this country? Most people just didn't have a clue, just didn't have a clue… But as you gave people this kind of information, as they were able to begin to understand how the country supposedly was to function and operate, then they began to lose the fear, you know, of doing whatever was necessary to make those things happen that they said were supposed to happen."[106] She explained that the whole point of the program was to push community members to understand that they were not being given the same rights as everyone else in the country.

Once the people who attended the program for a few classes and retained literacy skills, they proceeded to learn things that they needed in their attempts to register to vote. The classes taught the skills that they needed to defend themselves when they were eventually turned away from registering to vote. Once the members of the community understood what they were being kept from, they had more of a willingness to take the risk to fight for their rights.[107]

The assassination of Medgar Evers in June 1963 inspired more and more people to get involved in movement activities. Peggy Jean Connor, a local businesswoman who owned a Beauty Shop on Mobile Street, was inspired in the aftermath of Evers's death. She walked down to the Woods Guest House and met with Mississippi Gulf Coast activist Lawrence Guyot, where they discussed Connor attending a meeting at Gray's church in Palmers Crossing. At this meeting in Palmers Crossing, Connor was approached by Gray who asked if she had any interest in becoming trained to be a CEP

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[106] Bolton/Adams, Interview, USM- COHCH, 19.

[107] Bolton/Adams, Interview, USM- COHCH, 20.

teacher. Connor expressed her interest and attended a training week held by SCLC and Septima Clark in the Spring of 1964. Connor went on to become another prominent leader from Hattiesburg in various organizations, including the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.[108]

Once Gray brought other CEP teachers on board, she started to move into the movement full time and let her business fizzle out. This was not an easy decision but was timely as Beauty Queen Cosmetics all over the nation were beginning to close.[109] The movement has exploded in Hattiesburg—the success of the CEP classes and the door-to-door work of Vernon Dahmer and Gray aided in the increased interest in the town. Local churches in Hattiesburg began to become the center of the movement with many of the major historical churches taking the lead. St. John Methodist Church was the center of many of the operations in Palmers Crossing. St. Paul Methodist Church, Zion Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church, St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church, True Light Baptist Church, and Mt. Carmel Baptist Church were the five main active congregations located in and around the Mobile Street district near downtown that participated in movement activities.[110] The support did not come easily—the National Council of Churches (NCC**)** had to invite many of the churches to get involved. Gray recalled wondering what the hold on the church leaders was, "the moral connotations of

[108] Peggy Jean Connor, interview by Richard Conville, September 11, 2001, in Hattiesburg, MS, transcript, the University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, Hattiesburg, MS, available online at https://usm.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USM_INST/1prcivv/alma991014192562605566, 6.

[109] Shelley Green and Paul L. Pryde, *Black Entrepreneurship in America*, (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1989), 181.

[110] Caudill/Smith, Interview, USM-COHCH, 9.

getting the church involved, how that might get some people, might give just regular, local people the courage to begin to take some kind of a stand, instead of just silence."[111]

As the movement was exploding in Hattiesburg, SNCC set up a full-time office in Mrs. Lenon Wood's guesthouse. Woods was no stranger to using the guesthouse for other purposes than just a hotel. Her husband, John Bradley Woods, was heavily involved in the Republican Party in Hattiesburg. They used the guest house, which was originally a grocery store and barbershop, to frequently host meetings for the Republican Party in Hattiesburg.[112] Later, the guesthouse was also used as the headquarters for the COFO Hattiesburg office and Victoria Jackson Gray's Congressional Campaign's office.[113]

In the Fall of 1963, COFO started to work on a statewide campaign that was known as the "Freedom Vote." This was a mock vote, to show that if black Mississippians were given the chance, they would utilize their right to vote. SNCC's student leaders worked alongside local community leaders throughout Mississippi to organize the Freedom Vote, which eventually yielded over 70,000 votes. COFO ran their candidates against the state registered candidates on the real ballot—they ran a ticket consisting of Aaron Henry, the President of COFO from Clarksdale, and Reverend Edwin King, a white Civil Rights leader from Vicksburg.[114]

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[111] Bolton/Adams, Interview, USM-COHCH, 27.

[112] Sturkey, *Hattiesburg*, 138.

[113] Sturkey, *Hattiesburg*, 289.

[114] "Over 70,000 Cast Freedom Ballot." *The Student Voice*, November 11, 1963, Atlanta Vol. 4, No. 4, SNCC-SV.

Gray helped organize a rally for Aaron Henry and to promote the Freedom Vote in Hattiesburg at the Masonic Temple in October of 1963. Over 200 people attended the rally in addition to the various civil rights leaders, including Lawrence Guyot, Aaron Henry, and Gray herself. Also in attendance, investigators from the State of Mississippi's Sovereignty Commission.[115] This group investigated and followed many Civil Rights leaders and participants throughout much of the late 1950s and through the 1960s, investigating various events and rallies such as the gubernatorial rally for Aaron Henry in October of 1963.

The rally for Henry was not the only involvement that she had with the Freedom Vote. Gray had been organizing the distributions of ballot boxes all over the Southeastern portion of Mississippi, especially in towns surrounding Hattiesburg. During late October and early November of 1963, she distributed boxes around Hattiesburg, Palmers Crossing, and Purvis. She had also been advertising the Freedom Vote in her Citizenship School classes and even at her children's homecoming game in October. While balancing getting her children ready for marching in the band and escorting one of the maids on the field during the game, Gray was readying flyers to distribute during the game for the Freedom Vote.[116] In the middle of the Freedom Vote in 1963, on her 37th birthday, Gray was able to cast a legal ballot in the Mississippi election. This was after Gray was

[115] Special Report Aaron Henry Rally in Hattiesburg 1-16-1-70-1-1-, Mississippi Sovereignty Commission Files, MDAH.

[116] "Journal Kept by Victoria Gray," October 7, 1963, box 7 folder 18, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

registered to vote because of the court case against the Forrest County registrar earlier that year.

The Freedom Vote's success relied on those local community organizers, such as Victoria Jackson Gray. Gray's independence that she learned from a young age while living with her grandparents aided in the evolution of her skills as an organizer within her community. The skills she learned at the Citizenship Education Program Training in Georgia combined with her on-the-job learning at the Hattiesburg CEP schools helped propel her further into her work as an activist. She did this all while balancing her home life and family. As a single mother, she had to make the decision to move into the movement full time which meant taking time away from her children. Gray made her commitment to the movement work alongside her commitment as a mother. This meant that she would be working full time in the movement while also being a mom to her children, who were a variety of ages. She found ways to balance her time and multitask her duties as a mother and as an activist within the movement. This looked like her bringing her children to different events, such as CEP classes and pickets downtown. Later, as she became further involved in statewide organizing, she would have to make similar decisions between her activism and her family.

Victoria Jackson Gray's early life before she got into her high-profile activism was just as remarkable as the rest of her life. In her early life, the groundwork was laid for her to be an independent woman in her various ventures. Her community's investment in her and the lessons of black self-determination translated into her early Civil Rights Movement work. Her hard work in bringing the CEP classes to Hattiesburg, and later working as the State Supervisor for Mississippi's CEP, is just one example of her

working to better the conditions of the black community around her. Her continued support and work with COFO in the 1963 Freedom Vote was just the start of her remarkable high-profile activism throughout the Movement. The Freedom Vote would evolve into a political party that Gray would help found in 1964, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, where her activism would accelerate

CHAPTER III - "Yours For Freedom"

Thursday, October 24, 1963

"Worked getting children ready for Homecoming all morning. Tony Jr. escorted one of the Maids. Georgie was chosen to march in the parade and played in the band. Gave out Freedom Ballot leaflets at the Homecoming game tonight."

Tuesday, November 5, 1963

"Cast my first ballot on my 37th birthday. It was a protest ballot. Several persons were turned back at the polls to my knowledge. Don't know if there was any follow up or not."

Monday, December 23, 1963

"Carried the boys to get haircuts. Went and paid some necessary bills and straightened up the paper bills. Again, helped the children to get the papers out. Made pie crusts and picked nutmeats out for pies. Also had papers cut. Memorial service unattended."[117]

Victoria Jackson Gray's emergence as a remarkable high-profile leader started following a shift from her being just a local leader in Hattiesburg to statewide in Mississippi. Her increased participation with the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) across the state launched her into her high-profile roles within various organizations in the Movement. Gray's membership and leadership in the MFDP helped spur two national events—the MFDP's challenge of the regular Mississippi Democratic Party and Gray, Devine, and Hamer's Congressional Challenge. Both challenges launched Gray to national spotlight and showcased her leadership and drive to better life for black people, not just in her own community or in Mississippi but throughout the whole United States. By using the lessons and experience Gray learned in her early life, she solidified her legacy as a remarkable leader and fighter for black self-determination through her leadership in the mid 1960s.

Following the success of the Freedom Vote of 1963, SNCC started to plan a major event in Hattiesburg, a "Freedom Day" scheduled as the first of many Freedom

[117] "Journal Kept by Victoria Gray," October 7, 1963, box 7 folder 18, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

Days for mass voter registration. The plan was to have large numbers of people register to vote at the Forrest County Court House. This idea of having a mass group of people attempting to register gave confidence to other citizens who were not yet involved in the movement in Hattiesburg.[118] Prominent figureheads from across the south arrived the day before, including Ella Baker, John Lewis, Fannie Lou Hamer, Bob Moses, and Aaron Henry. Local leaders who were already in Hattiesburg, such as Lawrence Guyot, Hollis Watkins, Curtis Hayes, and Gray, had a hand in the planning and other events that led to the big day.[119] Many of these people arrived on January 21, 1964, the day before the "Freedom Day" took place.

The night before, St. Paul was the site that the leaders and a portion of the black population in Hattiesburg gathered to hear the various speeches and rallying cries. John Lewis spoke on his experiences during the Freedom Rides. Aaron Henry told his stories of being active in the NAACP and the beatings and bombings he experienced. Annelle Ponder and Fannie Lou Hamer told their moving story of their beatings in the Winona County jail, Lawrence Guyot, who spoke of his time in Parchman Prison.[120] Ella Baker spoke of the job that would remain to be done even after the events that would happen at the events at the following day's Freedom Day.[121] That evening, the visitors to the town retired to various homes following the events at St. Paul. Many clergy members from around the country spent the night at Gray's home in Palmers Crossing, sleeping through

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[118] Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 163-165.

[119] Zinn, *SNCC*, 103-108.

[120] Zinn, *SNCC*, 106.

[121] Ransby, *Ella Baker & The Black Freedom Movement*, 165.

the night and waking up early to prepare to stand along the picket line at the Forrest County Court House.[122]

In the morning, the group woke up to a downpour of rain.[123] Over one hundred people arrived downtown and stood on a picket line in front of the courthouse, with smaller groups going into the courthouse and attempting to register to vote. The plan was to gather at the Forrest County Courthouse and encourage black citizens to go in and register to vote. A wall of police in bright yellow raincoats stood around the courthouse. They stood guard but remained primarily peaceful as police made only a handful of arrests that day.[124]

Overall, over one hundred and fifty people attempted to enter the building to register to vote.[125] Lynd limited the groups to four people in the office at a time and closed the office during the lunch break, attempting to delay people if he could. Even with the delays, thirty-six black citizens had tried to register, but none were successful.[126] The picket line continued throughout the day, with a few people arrested. J.C. Fairley recalled that he and Bob Moses entered the courthouse, and Moses was one of the people the Hattiesburg police arrested. They took him straight to the courtroom in front of city Judge Norris and Francis Zachary, the city attorney.[127] A month later, during continuing

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[122] Bolton/Adams, Interview, USM-COHCH, 30.

[123] Conville/Connor, Interview, USM-COHCH, 16.

[124] Sturkey, *Hattiesburg*, 285-290.

[125] "Freedom Day in Hattiesburg, Miss.," *The Student Voice*, January 20, 1964, Volume 5 No. 2, SNCC-SV.

[126] Sturkey, *Hattiesburg*, 288.

[127] Garvey/Fairley, Interview, USM-COHCH, 68.

protests at the courthouse, Peggy Jean Connor was arrested in late February of 1964 for "Obstructing Traffic" even though she and other protestors were on the sidewalk next to the Confederate statue.[128]

While the efforts on Freedom Day were not successful, pickets were successful in gaining momentum for voting rights in the state of Mississippi. The Hattiesburg picket at the courthouse lasted into April, and during that period, over five hundred black citizens attempted to register to vote.[129] COFO workers and SNCC workers around the state of Mississippi began to schedule Freedom Days in their towns, including a Freedom Day in Madison County on February 28, 1964, and in Greenwood on March 25, 1964.[130] The effort of Freedom Day also caused a shift in the mood of Hattiesburg, and black citizens started to trust activists working for voting rights and began to join in even more. Gray recalled, "The white community might have closed down a little bit more, but the black community and the larger community began to open up and be receptive and to understand really, 'These people are not here to hurt anybody, period.'"[131]

Following the successes of Freedom Day and the willingness of the community to be open to the efforts of workers, the planning of a summer program was set in motion for the Summer of 1964. It would later be known as "Freedom Summer," a project which aimed to register as many black Mississippians as possible and to also educate the black population on citizenship, black history, and on their civil rights. Many volunteers,

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[128] Conville/Connor, Interview, USM-COHCH, 12

[129] Sturkey, *Hattiesburg*, 285-290.

[130] Dittmer, *Local People*, 222-224.

[131] Bolton/Adams, Interview, USM-COHCH, 34.

including white northern college students, were brought into Mississippi to teach classes throughout the Summer.[132] Mass training occurred in Oxford, Ohio, headed up by CORE workers. In Oxford, activists involved in the various COFO organizations would make the trip to Ohio to help with the training of the volunteers.

Victoria Jackson Gray traveled with a group to Oxford, Ohio, from Hattiesburg, to train the volunteers to come to Mississippi in the Summer. Groups of southern men and women traveled north to Ohio, with new groups leaving each week. The first group included trainers Michael Schwerner and James Earl Chaney and brought back volunteer Andrew Goodman to Mississippi. The first group headed down to Mississippi on a Saturday, June 20, with Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman heading for Meridian, Mississippi. The trio then headed for Neshoba county on Sunday, where they got pulled over and arrested at 3:00 pm and held in the jail until 10:30 pm. When they were released, they were stopped and turned over to the Ku Klux Klan, about ten miles out of town. Klan members then shot the three men and hid their bodies under the construction of a dam. COFO noticed the three men never arrived at their next location and declared them missing.[133]

Panic and fear set in when the men went missing, prompting federal investigations by the Justice Department in the days following the men's disappearance. Many COFO workers in Mississippi proceeded to start looking for the men.[134] Gray was a part of the second group to go north to Ohio. Schwerner's wife, Rita, was also in the

[132] Dittmer, *Local People,* 211.

[133] Dittmer, *Local People,* 246-248.

[134] Dittmer, *Local People,* 252

second group and rode with Gray and Annie Devine up to Oxford, Ohio, to replace the first group for training. The group learned of the men being missing late Sunday evening upon their arrival. When they learned of the men going missing, Gray and others gathered, prayed, and started singing "Kumbaya, My Lord." She recalled that the men going missing gave many the strength to go to Mississippi and proceed with the work that needed to be done, citing that the mourning was aided by many of the workers' faith.[135] The three men's bodies were found on August 4, 1964, and they were laid to rest in their hometowns. Chaney was buried in Meridian, Mississippi, while Schwerner and Goodman were buried in New York. The Schwerner family wanted Chaney and Schwerner to be buried together in Mississippi, but segregation extended to the Mississippi cemeteries.[136]

Gray often emphasized how important faith was to the movement and how important it was following the three men going missing "because it was just such a wonderful moment of how faith plays into this--any struggle."[137] Faith was central to most Civil Rights Movement activists; Gray was no exception. Faith had always been a central value to Gray and her family, especially while growing up. Her grandparents were trustees of St. John Methodist Church and heavily involved within St. John.[138] Gray made attending church a priority in her life, always attended Sunday services and Sunday School, and would often frequent church on Wednesdays. Even throughout her continued heavy involvement in movement activities, Gray made it to church on Sundays and

[135] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA, 29.

[136] Dittmer, *Local People*, 284

[137] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA, 30.

[138] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA, 11.

Wednesdays every week.[139] Gray's influence at St. John helped create the spark that helped Hattiesburg's Civil Rights Movement explode. Gray's faith remained central to her engagement in the Civil Rights Movement, "I see the civil rights movement as the journey towards the establishment of the kingdom of God... Church is a representation of the spirit of God; we are a spirit people…The commonality was reaching deep down within and finding what I call spirit…So, the civil rights journey was and is and must continue to be a movement towards the establishment of the kingdom of God."[140] Gray used her faith to propel herself forward in her activism, relying on her spirituality to get her through the rough times she experienced.

The plans for Freedom Summer continued forward, despite the murders of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman. Freedom Summer kicked off in Hattiesburg kicked off in July of 1964 at a picnic at Vernon Dahmer's farm, with many of the local workers and the northern students gathering. Black families housed the volunteers at various homes within the black community; Victoria Jackson Gray hosted multiple volunteers in her own home. Hattiesburg had the most extensive participation in Freedom Summer classes in the state, with over 550 students preregistered and over 1000 in total attending courses by the end of the Summer. Gray believed that Hattiesburg was so successful during Freedom Summer because of the groundwork laid the year before with the CEP classes that she helped lead.[141]

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[139] "Journal Kept by Victoria Gray," October 7, 1963, box 7 folder 18, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

[140] Vicki L. Crawford, "'Be Ye Doers of The Word, Not Just Hearers Only' Faith and Politics in the Life of Victoria Gray Adams," *Cross Currents* Vol. 57, No. 2 (2007): 177.

[141] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA, 28.

Gray recalled that in the lead up to Freedom Summer, she and other CEP workers in Hattiesburg were still going door to door recruiting teachers for the CEP classes and encouraging voter registration. From the winter of 1963 until the Summer of 1964, Gray continued to recruit teachers across Mississippi to go to the training in Georgia for the Citizenship Education Program classes in Mississippi. Like those in Hattiesburg, Freedom Schools launched across the state of Mississippi with volunteers from across the country coming to teach Freedom School curriculum in the Summer of 1964. Gray attended sessions around Hattiesburg, often kindergarten classes, and went back and forth between Hattiesburg and the Mississippi Gulf Coast, the Mississippi Delta, and Jackson during the Summer.[142]

In late July and early August, Gray's sixteen-year-old daughter Georgie went to the hospital and eventually went into labor and gave birth to a child who did not survive. Between all of Gray's work throughout Mississippi in the Summer, she had to balance her home life and children throughout it all. During this period, when Georgie lost her child, Gray was in and out of the hospital checking on her while also continuing her work throughout Hattiesburg and Mississippi. [143] Soon after Georgie returned home from the hospital, Gray left Mississippi for the Atlantic City Democratic Convention with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) to challenge the "regular" Mississippi Democratic party in late August.

[142] "Journal Kept by Victoria Gray," October 7, 1963, box 7 folder 18, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

[143] "Journal Kept by Victoria Gray," October 7, 1963, box 7 folder 18, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

In August, Gray joined fellow members of the MFDP, a new political group to challenge of the regular Mississippi Democratic Party at the Atlantic City Democratic National Convention. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was established by many of the COFO workers throughout the state of Mississippi following the Freedom Vote in November of 1963. Gray recalled the creation of the MFDP and how it rose to the needs of those in Mississippi, "It finally begins to make sense: if you can't do anything with the one [political party] that's in existence, then you create the one you need, where you can do what you need to do and what you ought to be, what everybody ought to be doing."[144] Gray credited the momentum of the Freedom Vote, sponsored by COFO, for the creation of the MFDP. Mississippians realized that there was evidence from the mock elections that the African American population would vote if given the information and the opportunity to vote. As a result, much of the planning for the DNC challenge would take place alongside the Freedom Summer events in the Summer of 1964. The Winter of 1963 and the Spring of 1964 were when Victoria Jackson Gray started to move out of her role as a local leader in Hattiesburg. During Freedom Summer, she became the SCLC Mississippi state supervisor of the Citizenship Education Program, so she moved throughout the state, checking in on many of the CEP classes in various cities in Mississippi.[145]

The MFDP was also formed in response to the exclusion from the "regular" Mississippi Democratic Party. The MFDP decided to create their own party where they would be adequately included in the decisions being made. The "regular" Democratic

[144] Bolton/Adams, Interview, USM-COHCH, 35.

[145] Bolton/Adams, Interview, USM-COHCH, 13.

Party was the Democratic Party that was only white. Until the creation of the MFDP, the Mississippi Democratic party had only let whites participate despite the African American population of Mississippi numbering over 40%, with only 6% registered to vote.[146] In response, the MFDP was created and headed by prominent charter members such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Annie Devine, Bob Moses, and Gray. In the middle of the Summer, Bob Moses put out a memorandum to COFO staff saying that if they were not directly involved in Freedom School work, they had to start spending time organizing for the convention challenge.[147] Gray, who was working in Freedom Schools across the state of Mississippi, devoted her time to both the schools and planning for the challenge, as she was the National Committeewoman for the MFDP.

The creation of the MFDP also generated more room for women to become involved in the leadership of the Movement. The inclusion of more women was a departure from the older ways that organizations were founded, organized, and run. Women were a large portion of the founders of the MFDP, including women like Fannie Lou Hamer and Victoria Jackson Gray, and women were also directly elected to vice-chair and delegate positions within the party. The formation of this new party was also more grassroots-based, by taking the local leaders in Mississippi to lead within this new Democratic party. The structure that the MFDP took on diminished gender and class

[146] Charles S. Bullock III, *The Triumph of Voting Rights in the South* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2009), 36.

[147] Dittmer, *Local People*, 272.

divisions by electing a diverse group of women and men from Mississippi to essential roles within the party.[148]

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party got to work quickly and prepared to challenge the legitimacy of the "regular" Democratic Party in Mississippi.The MFDP did not just make the trip and show up to the DNC hoping to be seated, they strategically contacted members of Congress and other prominent members of the Democratic Party. Prior to the convention, Gray traveled across the country and gained support for the MFDP's planned efforts in Atlantic City. She traveled, met with members of Congress and constituents alike, lobbied support for the MFDP to be officially recognized and seated.[149] She met with many members of Congress— several members of Congress understood the plight of the MFDP but were cautious about showing outward support as they were afraid that their support would lose them votes in the next election. So, Gray then had to go and work with the members of that congressmen's district to stir up the support to have voters' backing on the issue.

On August 6, 1964, the MFDP held a state convention where they elected sixty-eight people, including Victoria Jackson Gray, to represent the MFDP at the Atlantic City DNC. The Masonic Temple was host to over 2,500 attendees, where Ella Baker gave a keynote address, and the legal counsel for the MFDP, Joseph Rauh, explained the plans for when they arrived in Atlantic City. The group had many northern delegations' support, and the MFDP would take their case to the credentials committee. If the

[148] Vicki Crawford, "African American women in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party," in *Sisters in the Struggle: African-American Women in the Civil Rights-African American Power Movement*, eds. Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 135.

[149] Bolton/Adams, Interview, USM-COHCH, 37.

committee refused to seat them, eleven votes of the 108 could bring the issue to a rollcall vote on the floor of the DNC, where Rauh told the crowd he felt the rollcall vote would have a high chance for success.[150]

The MFDP delegates arrived in Atlantic City via bus on August 21, 1965. When they arrived at the convention hall, they quickly got to work explaining their plight with various convention delegates from across the nation. The MFDP delegates argued that the "regular" Democratic Party of Mississippi had systematically excluded African Americans from the party. Like the plan laid out by Rauh, they took their case to the credentials committee, where they officially challenged the "regular" Democratic Party of Mississippi. Throughout the fight to be seated, the MFDP had gained support from various states, including Oregon, Michigan, and New York. Twenty-five members of Congress sent their support that the MFDP should be seated. Charles Cobb, a delegate from Michigan, had spoken with Gray and declared his support.[151]

The MFDP had a hearing on August 22, where both parties from Mississippi would present their case to a jury of Democrats. The planned strategy of the MFDP was to get 10% of the committee to file a minority report so that the report would go to the convention floor, where if eight states asked for roll call vote, each state would have to go on official record for the vote.[152] President Lyndon B Johnson was concerned about the MFDP's challenge, worried that if they were seated, he would lose the support of the Southern white Democrats. Rauh was confident going into the credentials committee

[150] Dittmer, *Local People*, 281.

[151] Dittmer, *Local People*, 285.

[152] Dittmer, *Local People*, 287.

meeting, feeling that he had the votes that he needed to request a roll call vote of the states. Various members of the MFDP and the "regular" Mississippi Democratic Party testified in front of the committee.[153]

The hearing was nationally televised, and MFDP brought out high-profile witnesses. Martin Luther King Jr, MFDP National Committeeman Ed King, MFDP Delegation Chair Aaron Henry, and Vice-Chairperson Fannie Lou Hamer were among those who testified. When Hamer started to speak, her speech became so powerful that President Johnson called a press conference to get the press to pull their attention on Hamer. She spoke of her experiences as a black woman in Mississippi and her attempts to gain her civil rights, citing the sexual violence against her while in the Indianola Jail. She ended her speech with questions aimed at the convention, "All of this is on account we want to register, to become first-class citizens, and if the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America, is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave where we have to sleep with our telephones off of the hooks because our lives be threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?"[154]

However, national news networks highlighted her speech on the nightly news. Hamer's powerful speech gained the nation's attention, and support started to pour in. The committee postponed the decision until Sunday. Although, the MFDP had gained the support of seventeen committee members, many voting committee members became

[153] Dittmer, *Local People*, 286-287.

[154] Fannie Lou Hamer, Speech at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. August 22, 1964. Available online via Mississippi Department of Archives and History (https://www.mdah.ms.gov/new/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Lesson-Five-Mississippi-in-1964-A-Turning-Point.pdf)

worried about how their constituents would feel and feared for their reelection bids and support from the rest of the Democratic Party. Some of the committee members who had pledged support earlier in the day pulled their support that evening. The President even tried to persuade the MDFP to stop their challenge and name them "special guests" of the DNC, but the MFDP refused this first proposal. After some deliberation, the committee adjourned until Monday of the Convention, putting the decision off again. [155]

That night, the MFDP leadership convened at their motel and tried to lay out a strategic plan of what to do. During the meeting, they were told that all the people who were going to support them had pulled their support. Many were “persuaded” through threats to their reelection and threats to their family’s political aspirations. As a result, it became apparent that the MFDP would not gain the number of votes they needed.[156] President Johnson had a hand in fixing the “Mississippi Problem.” Eventually, the MFDP lost more and more support, and the MFDP delegates were not seated. The Johnson Administration, via Herbert Humphrey, proposed a compromise—two seats would be given to the MFDP delegates Aaron Henry and Edwin King, and the entirety of the "regular" party of Mississippi would be seated.[157]

Unsurprisingly, the majority "regular" Mississippi Democratic Party refused the compromise and left the DNC, leaving only four of them in town to sign the pledge that gave their loyalty to the Democratic Party. While they signed the pledges, they still did

[155] Dittmer, *Local People*, 288-289.

[156] Dittmer, *Local People*, 290.

[157] Dittmer, *Local People*, 293.

not agree with the MFDP nor did they want to associate with the MFDP.[158] During the Tuesday evening session, twenty-one frustrated MFDP members gained access to the floor and sat in the Mississippi delegation section on the convention floor. The remaining regular Mississippi delegates quickly left the floor, refusing to sit among the MFDP members. Bob Moses, who was among those who made it onto the floor, was asked about the compromise. He responded, "What is the compromise? We are here for the people and the people want to represent themselves. They don't want symbolic Token Votes. They want to vote themselves."[159] As things settled down, the DNC chair read the compromise resolution in front of the floor, and the DNC delegation voted to pass the resolution.

Another meeting was called Wednesday night by Aaron Henry to get the MFDP to vote again on the compromise. The compromise proposal was a highly contested topic throughout the MFDP delegation. Support for the compromise came from Rauh, Martin Luther King Jr, and eventually Aaron Henry. On the other hand, the MFDP delegation overwhelmingly disapproved of the compromise each time it was brought to them, with Bob Moses furiously disapproving of the compromise, believing that the Johnson Administration had tricked the MFDP.[160] It was not a secret that many members of the MFDP did not favor the compromise. Specifically, Victoria Jackson Gray, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Annie Devine were opposed to the compromise. Gray did not want to go

[158] Dittmer, *Local People*, 298.

[159] Dittmer, *Local People*, 299.

[160] Dittmer, *Local People*, 297.

back to their constituents in Mississippi and lie to them.[161] While the delegates of the MFDP discussed and debated the compromise, the three women were leading the charge against accepting the compromise. Gray reminded the delegation why they were there and could not go back to Mississippi with only two seats. Fannie Lou Hamer and Annie Devine publicly shamed those who voted yes to accepting the proposed compromise.[162]

If the MFDP had accepted the compromise, they would not have fulfilled the promise they made in their resolution in July of 1964. In the resolution, the aims of the MFDP were stated to represent citizens who were not represented in the "regular" party, to end discrimination in voter registration, to support the Democratic Party's Presidential Nominee, and to create and provide new leadership to Mississippi that better matches the National Democratic Party's values and ideas.[163] If the compromise were agreed upon, the delegation that was in Atlantic City would have failed in their mission that was set out in the very creation of the MFDP. The MFDP voted again not to accept the compromise and left Atlantic City in defeat.

After their return to Mississippi from Atlantic City, Gray received a letter from Congressman Charles C. Diggs Jr in late September 1964. The letter congratulated Victoria Jackson Gray's role in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's efforts in Atlantic City in August. He pledged his support of the change in the rules for the DNC to eliminate discrimination in the party structure. He encouraged her to continue to register

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[161] Vicki L. Crawford, "'Be Ye Doers of The Word, Not Just Hearers Only' Faith and Politics in the Life of Victoria Gray Adams," *Cross Currents* Vol. 57, No. 2 (2007): 175.

[162] Dittmer, *Local People*, 301

[163] Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party proposed resolution (July 1964), Ellin (Joseph and Nancy) Freedom Summer Collection, M323, Box 2, Folder 14, Special Collections, USM.

voters, continue work in Mississippi, and notify him if anything went wrong.[164] Upon their return to Mississippi, the MFDP decided to put up their own candidates for U.S. Congressional elections to run against the Democrats in the primaries. The MFDP elected Victoria Jackson Gray to run for the Fifth District of Mississippi. Gray, along with Fannie Lou Hamer (Second District) and Annie Devine (Fourth District), attempted to run as independents in the general election.[165] While all three women were not able to get on their respective ballots, it was just the beginning of the fight and strategic plans of them running for election. The three women challenged the election result, which stirred a formal Congressional Challenge.[166] MFDP lawyers officially filed paperwork in December 1964 for the congressional challenge on behalf of Devine, Hamer, and Gray. Lawyers from around the nation volunteered their time helping to prepare for the proceedings of the challenge, where they had forty days to collect evidence for the challenge.[167]

When the United States Congress convened in January 1965, busloads of black Mississippians were protesting the five members of Congress from Mississippi in front of the U.S. Capitol building. Congress gaveled in, and New York Congressman William Fits Ryan objected to the swearing-in of the five white Mississippi men. The House voted eventually to seat the men, but with 149 members of Congress voting against the

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[164] Charles C. Diggs to Victoria Gray, Washington D.C., October 7, 1963, box 2 folder 21, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

[165] Crawford, "African American women in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party,", 133.

[166] Vicki L. Crawford, "'Be Ye Doers of The Word, Not Just Hearers Only' Faith and Politics in the Life of Victoria Gray Adams," *Cross Currents* Vol. 57, No. 2 (2007): 175.

[167] Lee, *For Freedom's Sake,* 109-111.

resolution and not agreeing with the seating of the men. However, the resolution also included a statement that allowed the men to be challenged through proper laws for contested elections.[168]

During the Challenge, the three women travelled back and forth between Washington DC and Mississippi, often, spending large amounts of time in Washington DC away from their families and living in a small apartment relatively close to the Hill. With the Challenge, Gray had to decide between her family and her activism. She recalled, "we didn't see our families sometimes for long periods of time."[169]

The Congressional Challenge entailed a large amount of work for the three women and MFDP workers. They worked diligently to gather depositions from Mississippians who had been refused to register to vote by state officials. The three women worked diligently in Washington D.C., lobbying various politicians and members of Congress to support their challenge.[170] The previous year in Mississippi, the MFDP staged another Freedom Vote, with a similar technique and reasoning as the Freedom Vote of 1963. Again, MFDP volunteers placed ballot boxes around the state in October and November, and black citizens of Mississippi could cast their votes. The ballots listed each office, including the Presidential tickets and the respective Congressional district candidate's name. The records from the 1964 Freedom Vote would be used in arguments

[168] Dittmer, *Local People*, 340.

[169] Vicki L. Crawford, "'Be Ye Doers of The Word, Not Just Hearers Only' Faith and Politics in the Life of Victoria Gray Adams," *Cross Currents* Vol. 57, No. 2 (2007): 175-176.

[170] Steven Michael Gentine, "The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's Congressional Challenge of 1964-65: A Case Study in Radical Persuasion," (PhD Diss., Florida State University, 2009), 28.

during the Challenge as proof that black people in Mississippi would vote if they were able.[171]

Throughout the collection of depositions, the women gained support from all over Mississippi, receiving letters from local MFDP groups across Mississippi. In a letter from Loroy Johnson, the Chairman of the Cleveland, Mississippi, MFDP to Gray, Devine, and Hamer, he reaffirmed their support and sent their depositions to be used in the challenge. The letter also mentioned that the citizens in Mississippi were still suffering, with the burning of Freedom Schools in Laurel and Indianola, dismissal from jobs for black Mississippians involved in the Movement, and homes and churches still being bombed.[172] The letter conveyed that the work in the Capital was important because black Mississippians were continuing to suffer from racist attacks, while white members of Congress refused to represent all of its people. Letters like Johnson's came in from across Mississippi to support the women's efforts in their Congressional Challenge.

The women had over one hundred lawyers and law students from over the United States who helped their cause. The lawyers accumulated over 400 witnesses and over 10,000 pages of testimony from Mississippi presented to Congress. In early April of 1965, Gray gave a deposition for the Subcommittee about the historical importance of the challenge for the black population in Mississippi, the historical perspective of the challenge, and the efforts she made to get on the ballot. Gray explained that Congress

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[171] Lee, *For Freedom's Sake,* 108.

[172] Loroy Johnson to Lawrence Guyot, Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Gray, and Annie Devine, Cleveland, Mississippi, April 4, 1965. Adams (Victoria Gray) Papers, M345, Box 2, Folder 1, Special Collections, The University of Southern Mississippi Libraries.

was essentially allowing for black citizens in Mississippi to be barred from being a part of Congress if they allowed the white members of Congress to be seated when the election. This, she argued, was in direct violation of the U.S. Constitution. [173] She ended her deposition by explaining how the MFDP was impacting the country, " I think the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party is about the best thing that has ever happened to Mississippi and probably even to this country because it is helping people all around this country to become aware of the fact that Mississippi is a part of America and that every American is responsible for it."[174]

In the Summer of 1964, Gray and a group of MFDP supporters went to the Clerk of the House of Representatives to deliver the evidence for their case.[175] When the group arrived to deliver the boxes and boxes of evidence, the secretary to the Clerk informed the group that the Clerk was out of the office, and they did not know when he would return. Gray and the group decided that they would wait for him to return, to which the secretary tried to convince them just to come back another time. Gray then asked to make an appointment and be given a signed appointment card. They left the office and returned days later, and the Clerk was not there yet again. They asked when they expected him to return, and the group decided to wait again. They stayed through the whole day, and the Clerk did not return. The group refused to leave, and the office secretary retrieved Capitol

[173] Victoria Jackson Gray, Outline of speech to the House Subcommittee on Elections (1965). Adams (Victoria Gray) Papers, M345, Box 2, Folder 17, Special Collections, The University of Southern Mississippi Libraries.

[174] *Depositions of Fannie Lou Hamer, Annie Devine, Victoria Jackson Gray, Subcommittee on Elections and Privileges*, 89th Cong., April 3, 1965, 80.

[175] Patricia M. Boyett, *Right to Revolt: The Crusade for Racial Justice in Mississippi's Central Piney Woods* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 127.

Police to arrest the group. When they appeared in court, Gray informed their lawyer that they had an appointment with the Clerk. When Gray was on the stand, they asked her if she thought she was guilty, and she replied, "No… I had an appointment with the clerk," and presented the appointment card. The judge dropped the charges and released the whole group.[176] Eventually, they were able to get their evidence into the Clerk's office to be given to the Subcommittee on Elections and Privileges.

In July, the ending stages of the challenge began, and both sides had to file their briefs. The white Mississippians did not address the charges made by the MFDP and dismissed the challenge by asserting that the women were not official candidates—essentially stating that the challenge should not even be valid. This, of course, ignored the numerous efforts made by the women to get on the official ballots the year prior. The efforts to register properly failed for the very reason the women were challenging, they were not even given the chance because they were black and being systemically excluded.[177]

On September 15, 1965, the Subcommittee on Elections and Privileges presented its report on the challenge to the Committee on Administration. Their findings recommended that the challenge be dismissed, but the committee sent the resolution to the floor to be voted upon. The Speaker of the House, John W. McCormack, invited the women to sit on the floor of Congress, which made them the first black women to ever sit on the floor of Congress. By a vote of 228 to 143, the resolution failed, and the challenge

[176] Bolton/Adams, Interview, USM-COHCH, 45-46.

[177] Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 113.

ended. The three women from Mississippi would not be seated.[178] The failure of the Challenge came as a harsh blow to the women, who felt that they had a strong case against the white men. Gray was upset and felt as if many of the members of Congress voted based upon political affiliation rather than evidential facts, "And the tragedy here was that here was the House of Representatives of the United States with everything they needed to correct an injustice that had been going along for far too long, and they did not have the will, unfortunately, to take it; it was handed to them on a silver platter."[179] Shortly after the vote on the floor of Congress, Gray stated her opinions about the Congress, "Until the time comes, that they [House members] are ready to argue the Constitution instead of technicalities, the Constitution will not be real to me or to hundreds of thousands of people."[180] She contended that Congress was not upholding the Constitution; similar thoughts were included in her speech to the committee.

Gray witnessed the challenge defeat, but the failure of the challenge symbolized something else. The failure of the challenge brought to light many of the failings in the south, especially in Mississippi.[181] Earlier that year, Gray would submit testimony to Congress, urging them to pass the Voting Rights legislation but with changes. The testimony was on behalf of the MFDP, where they stated their appreciation for the timeliness of the legislation but felt that the bill could be strengthened. They called for four adjustments to the bill, which included holding new elections to ensure that everyone

[178] Lee, *For Freedom's Sake,* 114.

[179] Bolton/Adams, Interview, USM-COHCH, 47.

[180] Lee, *For Freedom's Sake,* 114.

[181] Vicki L. Crawford, "'Be Ye Doers of The Word, Not Just Hearers Only' Faith and Politics in the Life of Victoria Gray Adams," *Cross Currents* Vol. 57, No. 2 (2007): 176.

was being represented fairly, federal registrars for anywhere in the country that had reported over 50 people who were denied registration, elimination of poll tax and literacy tests, and allowing for voters to register directly under federal registrars as to end intimidation.[182] The House Judiciary Committee considered the ideas that the MFDP and Gray proposed on the final bill. Though the MFDP did not get all of its requested changes, the final Voting Rights Act, passed on August 6, 1965, included provisions that included federal marshals who oversaw voter registration, the elimination of literacy tests and poll taxes, and allowed for federal registrars to operate in jurisdictions that had over 20 complaints filed to the Department of Justice.[183]

Following the end of the Congressional Challenge, Gray returned home to Hattiesburg to be with her family and continue her activism within the movement. She married Reuben Earnest Adams Jr. in 1966.[184] Reuben was nicknamed "Buddy," and he was an Army veteran of the Korean and Vietnam conflicts who retired in 1980 as a Sergeant Major. The pair had one child together, Reuben E. Adams III, born in 1967.[185] While she was pregnant with her third child, she continued organizing with many of the groups she worked with since 1962. Her organizing included being Mississippi's state supervisor for SCLC's Citizenship Education Program and an executive committee

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[182] "Testimony on proposed voting legislation in 89th Congress," Ellin (Joseph and Nancy) Freedom Summer Collection, M323, Box 2, Folder 15, Special Collections, The University of Southern Mississippi Libraries.

[183] James Thomas Tucker, "The Power of Observation: The Role of Federal Observers Under the Voting Rights Act," *Michigan Journal of Race and Law* 13, Vol. 13 (2007): 236.

[184] From here, I will refer to Victoria Jackson Gray as Victoria Gray Adams.

[185] Legacy, "Washington Post Obituary of Reuben Adams, Jr. May 26, 2013," accessed October 29, 2021, https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/washingtonpost/name/reuben-adams-obituary?id=6010354.

member of the MFDP. Her decision to move to Washington D.C. would not be the last major decision she would make that affected her activism and family. The three years following the Congressional Challenge were full of similar decisions that made her choose or compromise between the two significant parts of her life.

Victoria Gray Adams's participation in the high-profile activism roles in the mid 1960s embodied her value of independence and showcased her leadership in high-profile roles within multiple organizations. Her positions in the MFDP as an Executive Committee member during the 1963 Atlantic City DNC Challenge and as a Congressional Challenger were two of her most monuments roles during the Civil Rights Movement. All of her remarkable leadership roles during this period advocated for people around her to gain support to improve their lives and communities. While many see the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as the apex of the Civil Rights Movement and when many began to wind down their activism, Adams continued on her tradition of remarkable leadership and helping those in her community gain knowledge, skills, and support.

CHAPTER IV – "Until All Are Free, None Are"

"We must remember. We must recall. We must rehearse. We must keep highly visible to the degree possible those struggles for social justice and human rights because if you don't I can promise you that it won't take very long for things to regress, and they regress much more rapidly than they go forward."[186]

Following the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Victoria Gray Adams continued her remarkable activism in various ways. She worked diligently on several projects and with several organizations for three years straight following the Voting Rights Act, all of which provided the knowledge, skills, and support for black people around her to improve their lives and their communities. In the middle of all this, Adams was faced with an important decision. Should she continue her work in Mississippi—where she worked for the betterment of the education of Mississippi children and adults and being the head of the Mississippi Citizenship Education Program through SCLC, or should she be with her family? This question plagued Gray. Adams eventually picked her family; however, this was not the end of her social justice work. Instead of leaving everything in Mississippi and stopping her organizing work completely, she shifted her sights to other projects and organizations where she would use her remarkable organizing skills to advocate and teach others around her to use their voice to stand up for themselves.

Adams was approaching forty years old and had three children to raise. It would have been understandable for her to take a step back from activism and turn inward towards a private life with her family. Instead, she took on more organizational leadership roles in Mississippi and at the national level. Adams reflected later in her life,

[186] Bolton/Adams, interview, USM-COHCH, 42.

> I have not been anywhere in the world that I've not found needs at the local level that needed identifying, needed addressing. If there's something there, and I feel I have something to offer to meet it, you know, then I offer it, and there will always be something there to offer it.[187]

When there was an opportunity to improve the community around her, she rose to the occasion and worked towards it. Her decision to balance all the countless projects and positions, along with her family obligations, meant that she sincerely believed in and cared about her work.

Adams continued as the Mississippi State Supervisor of the SCLC Citizenship Education Program, a position she held from 1963 until 1966.[188] Her last Mississippi statewide report was from 1966 and revealed her observations of the CEP's efforts in the Mississippi Delta, with a month-by-month update of the successes and the hardships of the program, the total spending, and the recommendations for the following year. [189] Adams' thoughts in April and May were very optimistic. She focused primarily on successful CEP training and classes and help from people like Septima Clark and Dorothy Cotton leading workshops in Sunflower County. The summer months of June and July, however, took a downward turn. The shooting of James Meredith on his march towards Jackson, known as the March Against Fear, stirred emotions. Adams noted that

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[187] Victoria Gray Adams, interview by Racine Tucker Hamilton, October 12, 2004, in Petersburg, VA, transcript, History Makers Archive, available online at https://da.thehistorymakers.org/storiesForBio;ID=A2004.098, 36.

[188] Victoria Gray Adams, interview by Charles Bolton, June 5, 1999, in Hattiesburg, MS, transcript, the University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, Hattiesburg, MS, available online at https://usm.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USM_INST/dvterf/alma991014205579105566, 31.

[189] "Citizenship Education Program - Mississippi Report," Box 1, Folder 25, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

many believed Meredith to be dead with initial reports of the shooting.[190] While Meredith survived, Adams was stressed by the experience and likened Meredith's attack to other movement-related deaths. Many of the CEP teachers and organizers were invested in James Meredith's march and prepared food and places for the marchers to rest on the way to Jackson. Adams points out that the March gave many of the CEP workers and black citizens, in general, a great momentum going into the Fall.[191]

Despite her earlier hopefulness, her reports from August, September, October, and November were written harshly and negatively. These months coincided with the proposed moving of Head Start away from the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM), another organization that Adams was working closely with at the time. CDGM was developed from the Head Start program, which was a portion of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty's Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. Head Start was created to improve the lives of disadvantaged children, focusing on preparing young children for school. In Mississippi, these programs were popular because black parents could control the quality of education their children were getting, instead of underfunded public schools that did not even have a kindergarten.[192]

White Mississippians, especially segregationists, were upset with the "extremists" of the CDGM leaders and what they were doing in Mississippi. These "extremists" were

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[190] "Citizenship Education Program - Mississippi Report," Box 1, Folder 25, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM, 1-2. For more about the Meredith March, see Aram Goudsouzian's *Down to the Crossroads: Civil Rights, Black Power, and the Meredith March Against Fear*, 22-25.

[191] "Citizenship Education Program - Mississippi Report," Box 1, Folder 25, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM, 1-2.

[192] Crystal R. Sanders, *A Chance for Change: Head Start and Mississippi's Black Freedom Struggle*, (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 2016), 2-4.

advocating for equal education between black and white children. Following defunding campaigns, which Senator Stennis sponsored, it was proposed that CDGM should be absorbed into further state control. The proposed change to the organization pushed for a more "moderate" leadership. This controversy followed into the early months of 1967, where frustrations among black leadership affected internal operations.[193] Adams was frustrated over the battle over CDGM and with black candidates' removal from various ballots, which painted a gloomy message on the report.

Numerous Civil Rights leaders from various organizations were involved in CDGM, especially women. Mary Lane of SNCC, the NAACP's Winson Hudson and Minnie Lewis, and countless other local Civil Rights Movement organization activists and organizers aided in the success of CDGM. Historian Crystal R. Sanders has pointed out,

> Black women supported the CDGM because the 1964 freedom schools had shown them a new approach to teaching and learning that fostered racial pride and civic engagement. Curricula in black public schools usually neglected black history and discouraged intellectual curiosity.[194]

Adams, who was a strong proponent in bringing the CEP classes to Hattiesburg and then aiding the planning and execution of freedom summer, was highly supportive of the opportunities that CDGM schooling provided.

Adams was selected to serve as a board member of the CDGM, along with many other MFDP and NAACP activists.[195] Black women were many of the board members

[193] Dittmer, *Local People*, 368-382.

[194] Sanders, *A Chance for Change*, 5.

[195] Sanders, *A Chance for Change*, 46.

and other leaders within CDGM, “the only institution of sizable scope and budget that had significant numbers of diverse black women at every level of administration.”[196] Adams was no stranger to organizations that let black women take the lead; the MFDP and the CEP were led with either equal numbers of black men and women or more women than men. Leadership opportunities for black women were essential to Adams. She avoided the NAACP for the very reason that they were a "closed social group," male-dominated, and were less likely to afford leadership opportunities to women in the organization.[197] CDGM provided local, working-class black women to take the lead in their community’s education of their children with both local leadership and educational opportunities. This concept was not new and is included in the long line of traditions of black women advocating for education in their communities.[198]

The report from November, election month, was depressing, with only some of the candidates winning elections due to a split in the vote because of voters' loyalties to one political group over another, such as the NAACP or the MFDP. She ended her monthly report on a more optimistic note, reporting that the CEP workshops continued to have steady and even rising attendance numbers.[199] Adams's suggested plans included adding more CEP-trained teachers and workshops across the state, including a monthly statewide, one-day workshop; a quarterly district level, two-day workshop; and weekly workshops at the county level. These proposed workshops would have a political

[196] Sanders, *A Chance for Change*, 73.

[197] Dittmer, *Local People*, 182.

[198] Sanders, *A Chance for Change*, 74.

[199] “Citizenship Education Program - Mississippi Report,” Box 1, Folder 25, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM, 3-4.

education spin, focusing on the upcoming Mississippi gubernatorial election in 1967. In addition, the proposed workshops would relate politics to issues that affected local communities. She also recommended more training for CEP staff at the statewide level and the addition of a regional county supervisor, a field assistant for the state supervisor.[200] The proposal of the addition of a field assistant for the state supervisor was an attempt for delegation of Adams' position, as she had realized the vast amount of work the job entailed.

In the report, Adams's tone shifts back and forth as if her stress is bleeding through the report. In October, as a precursor to the issues in November's election, she stated, "Not enough being done around the coming election." She saw the writing on the wall; issues were popping up left and right in opposition to the black candidates throughout the state. Her distaste with the vote split in the November election is the most negative section of the report, blaming the various organizations. Multiple groups in Mississippi were pushing for different candidates rather than organizing the black population to focus their efforts and votes on one candidate. Adams's frustrations and tensions with other groups, specifically the NAACP, were not uncommon. She had always taken issue with the NAACP at the various levels throughout the years—locally in her home community and in the national organization's refusal to support or join COFO's efforts in Mississippi.

The last half of 1966 proved to be a rough half of the year for the activists in Mississippi, as the MFDP and organizations in COFO started to break down. SNCC had

[200] "Citizenship Education Program - Mississippi Report," Box 1, Folder 25, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM, 5.

pulled numerous workers from Mississippi and decided not to renew its commitment to the state. SNCC had also voted not to allow white people in the organization any longer, which caused many activists to leave the organization. The MFDP continued to lose support following the defeat of their candidates in various elections, where many candidates ran as independents and split votes.[201] The political changes and breakdowns of organizations lead to Adams's frustrations in the CEP report. She was involved in virtually all the organizations experiencing breakdowns in leadership, participation, and success.

Amid leading the Mississippi CEP and working with CDGM, Adams attended the 1967 National Conference on Black Power in Newark, New Jersey, held from July 20-23, 1967. The conference was held just days following the 1967 Newark Riots, which occurred from July 12 to17 and resulted in the deaths of twenty-six people.[202] Over a thousand people attended the conference, consisting of normal people to local organizers to businesspeople from around the country. Workshops were held on several topics, including armed self-defense, economic empowerment, and black identity.[203] The theme of the conference was "The Unity of Black People for the Greater Good of All," and it attempted to bring together older and younger generations to shape the future of black people.[204] Before the conference, she held some leadership role, but the specific position

[201] Dittmer, *Local People*, 408-412.

[202] Kevin Mumford, *Newark: A History of Race, Rights, and Riots in America*, (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 98.

[203] Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A narrative Hisotry of Black Power in America*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 184.

[204] "Black Power: Brochures and Flyers," 1967, Box 1, Folder 15, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

is unclear. However, following the close of the meeting, she was involved in continuing the evolution of ideas and organizing for Black Power. She served on an advisory committee, the "Steering Committee of the Taskforce," where she was the only person from Mississippi. In fact, she was the only person from the state on any of the committees.[205] The Steering Committee had to "work with the membership of the Committee on Continuation to assure the continuation of the work of the conference."[206]

Resolutions were drafted and discussed at the conference. They included topics such as Economic Development, Political Development, Cultural Development, Black Women and the Home, Black Youth, "Artists, Craftsman, and Communications," General Welfare, International Affairs, Progressive Labor Party of Bermuda, and various additions from the floor of the conference. The resolutions created a detailed plan for moving forward with ideas on how to attain better lives for black people, emphasizing that the National Conference on Black Power was "dedicated to the propagation of self-determination, self-sufficiency, self-respect, and self-defense." [207] These resolutions were a draft that was still worked on after the conference. Victoria Gray Adams' copies have her handwritten comments and edits, one of which adds the "survival of black people" to

[205] "National Conference on Black Power Advisory Committee Contacts", Box 1 Folder 16, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

[206] "Letter from Nathan Wright, Jr. to Leadership of the July 20-23 National Conference on Black Power: Continuing Leadership and Planning," August 18, 1967, Box 1, Folder 17, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

[207] "The National Conference on Black Power Resolutions," 1967, Box 1, Folder 16, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

the second resolution, which read "Make the conference slogan, not Peace and Freedom, but Freedom and Peace."[208]

Victoria Gray Adams served as one of the only Southern women on the Newark conference committees and the only person from Mississippi. Women involved in the Black Power and Civil Rights have been left out of the narrative. Adams's shift in focus to working with Black Power ideology and organizations was not sudden as she had always believed in the empowerment of black people. This can be attributed to her upbringing in Palmers Crossing on her grandparents' farm. Her early want to better her community turned into her efforts in the struggle for freedom in Mississippi and eventually evolved into her various other social justice efforts throughout her life.

The resolutions drafted at the conference had a specific section dedicated towards "Black Women in the Home," that charged black women to be the bearers of Black Power in the family unit. One resolution read,

> Through dialogue and discussion, research and reading, to promote the true image and role of black womanhood through our culture, which is proud, black, natural and aware. That black women commit themselves to: Self-preservation and continuity through education and exposing our people to the genocidal practices by racist societies.[209]

This section of the resolutions is interesting compared to much of the work done in the early 1960s through the SCLC Citizenship Education Program that aimed to teach citizenship and black history in communities. Before and during Freedom Summer in 1964, many of these things were taught throughout the South. A push to move this

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[208] "Black Power Recommendations," 1967, Box 1, Folder 16, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

[209] "The National Conference on Black Power Resolutions," 1967, Box 1, Folder 16, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

thinking and teaching to the homes was a logical next step. Black Power ideology started to gain popularity in the 1950s but hit its peak in the late 1960s.

The uptick in the interest of the Black Power Movement stemmed from James Meredith's March to Jackson. The phrase "Black Power" originated from a speech by Stokely Carmichael in Lowndes County in 1966. On June 16, 1966, during the Meredith March, Carmichael stood upon the back of a pickup truck and declared in a speech, "The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin' us is to take over. We been saying freedom for six years and we ain't got nothin'. What we gonna start saying now is Black Power!" He then engaged the crowd in a call and response, "'What do you want?' 'BLACK POWER!' What do you want?' 'BLACK POWER!"[210] This instantly caught on, and from then on, SNCC used "Black Power" as a new tagline and rallying call. From this moment in 1966, there was a shift to the black revolution, a change from the Civil Rights Era into the Black Power Era.[211]

Adams' interest in Black Power makes sense, especially in the earlier portions of the Black Power Movement before the shift to the domination of the Black Panther. In a 1965 interview part of the KZSU Project South, Stanford University's student radio program addressed Adams' views on violence that occurred during the 1965 Watts uprising. When asked about her feeling, Adams replied, "I certainly don't approve of rioting, but my personal feeling about it is, I would not for one minute feel that I owe anybody an apology just as a Negro for what happened out there, because, you know

[210] Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*, 31-32.

[211] Goudsouzian, *Down to the Crossroads*, 143.

when things are contained and contained on every side, you know, there's no out, whether we like it or not, it's bound to erupt eventually, it's bound to..."[212] Adams was hesitant to condone violence, but at the same time, she showed understanding in how the people in Los Angeles could get to the point where they feel violence was the only answer.

The shift to Black Power was not uncommon among Civil Rights leaders and workers. In 1966 and 1967, many of those involved in Civil Rights work started to focus their efforts on the Black Power Movement and begun to take hold of Black Power ideology. Many Mississippi organizers and leaders were prominent supporters of a nonviolent movement; however, this did not necessarily mean that it meant "unarmed." Armed resistance was a part of the lives of various Mississippians, including organizers such as Medgar Evers in Jackson and Vernon Dahmer in Hattiesburg, in the form of self-defense.[213] The use of armed resistance, even in self-defense, created a turning point in the uptick of popularity in the Black Power Movement, as there was a new form of protest and strategy for black freedom. Many believed that being black and unarmed was more dangerous than being armed; being armed helped aid against the fear that armed

[212] Victoria Gray Adams, interview by KZSU Project South, October 12, 2004, in Hattiesburg, MS, Sandford University Archives, Box 6, folder 158. Available online at https://oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/tf7489n969/, 8.

[213] Vernon Dahmer and Charles Evers both were often armed in self-defense throughout their lives and especially during their involvement with organizing within the Civil Rights Movement. Dahmer shot back at his attackers on the night of his death. Charles Evers, Medgar Evers' brother, was also known to carry weapons with him throughout their various work. For more details on the Evers brothers, see Charles Evers, *Have No Fear: The Charles Evers Story*, (Hoboken: Wiley, 2008) and Simon Wendt, "The Roots of Black Power?: Armed Resistance and the Radicalization of the Civil Rights Movement" in *The Black Power Movement Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, ed. Peniel Joseph, (London: Routledge, 2006), 145.

whites intimidated black people throughout the South.[214] Adams' disapproval of violence but an understanding of self-defense in her comments regarding the riots in Los Angeles point to this shift and bridge from Civil Rights to Black Power Movement. Her participation and organizing for Black Power organizations stopped in early 1968, around the same time she and her family moved to Thailand.

Defensive black militia groups began to pop up over the South in the 1960s typically protecting the black community in the area in one way or another. The Deacons for Defense and Justice were a group of black men in Jonesboro, Louisiana, who protected CORE workers and other local civil rights workers against the Ku Klux Klan.[215] In Adams' community in Hattiesburg, an anonymous group of people named "The Spirit" were acting as a militant enforcement group during a period of boycotts in the Hattiesburg community.[216] While they were not acting in the same way as the Deacons for Defense, the Spirit was helping to maintain the boycott line and threatened those in the black community who did not abide by it.

Black solidarity was an important facet of the boycott in Hattiesburg. Starting in 1967, headed by the NAACP, the black community started a boycott of white businesses in Hattiesburg, intending to get the companies to hire black workers. The original boycott started with a boycott of the city bus system but evolved into a larger boycott of white

[214] Akinyele Omowale Umoja, *We Will Shoot Back: Armed Resistance in the Mississippi Freedom Movement*, (New York City: New York University Press, 2013), 2.

[215] Simon Wendt, "The Roots of Black Power?: Armed Resistance and the Radicalization of the Civil Rights Movement" in *The Black Power Movement Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, 146.

[216] Patricia Boyett, *Right to Revolt: The Crusade for Racial Justice in Mississippi's Central Piney Woods*, (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2015), 171.

businesses downtown.[217] The bus boycott started when the bus managers refused to hire black drivers and were given an ultimatum by J.C. Fairley and Charles Phillips, "if you don't give us two drivers by Monday morning, we're going to shut your bus company down." The pair, who were on the Forrest County NAACP executive board, gave instructions to black ministers in Hattiesburg stating that black residents should not ride the bus the following week. Many residents complied with the directions, driving each other to work in personal vehicles and leaving the buses running empty. The boycott lasted two days before the bus manager broke and hired black drivers and black mechanics.[218]

Years later, Hattiesburg civil rights activist Daisy Harris Wade recalled the philosophy of the Spirit during the boycott in 1967, "The Spirit is unseen. You can't see it with the naked eyes if we tell you not to go downtown and you go anyway, the Spirit going to wait for, visit you that night, either break your windows out, or they're going to put sugar in your gas tank to let you know that we didn't appreciate you breaking our boycott."[219] Dozens of Hattiesburg residents recalled similar stories years later of the

[217] Winston Fairley, interview by Rebecca Zimmer and Hayden McDaniel, in Gulfport, Mississippi, November 1 and 12, 2014, the University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, Hattiesburg, MS, available online at https://usm.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USM_INST/dvterf/alma 991014205758905566, 31.

[218] J.C. Fairley Mamie Phillips, and Charles Phillips, interview by Charles Bolton, in Hattiesburg, MS, June 24, 1998, the University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, Hattiesburg, MS, available online at https://usm.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USM_INST/dvterf/alma99101420 5759005566, 15-18.

[219] Daisy Harris Wade, interview by Misty Lambert, Dick Conville, and Tonya Blair, in Hattiesburg, MS, February 11, 2000, July 12, 2001, and July 20, 2001 the University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, Hattiesburg, MS, available online at https://usm.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/ 01USM_INST/dvterf/alma991014205564805566, 11.

Spirit intimidating others and of how they "encouraged" them to start to follow the boycott.[220] The business boycott lasted for a few weeks and was eventually successful. The white business owners downtown got together with various NAACP officers, including Dr. Charles Smith, who was the active President, and the business owners gave in, stating that they were "hurting" without the business of black Hattiesburgers. Earline Boyd, a Hattiesburg resident that was a member of the Forrest County NAACP, recalled, "Before this so-called integration in the South and Hattiesburg came about there were a few blacks that was working in the stores, maybe janitorial work or maybe working in the candy counter and places like that. But they started hiring people as salespersons in the department stores and places like that and bus drivers and that kind of thing."[221]

While Victoria Gray Adams was not a fan of the Forrest County NAACP, along with Peggy Jean Connor and other MFDP and COFO workers in Hattiesburg, she followed along with the boycott. COFO and the NAACP were often butting heads in Hattiesburg as the national level of the NAACP did not get involved in COFO in Mississippi. Vernon Dahmer, who had previously served as the Forrest County NAACP president in the early 1960s, pushed for the local NAACP to work together with COFO workers shortly before his death.[222] Shortly before his death, Dahmer told Peggy Jean

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[220] See oral histories from USM-COHCH—J.C. Fairley, Richard and Earline Boyd, Vermell and Vermester Bester, J.C. Fairley Mamie, and Charles Phillips.

[221] Richard Boyd and Earline Boyd, interview by Charles Bolton, in Hattiesburg, MS, August 29, 1991, the University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, Hattiesburg, MS, available online at https://usm.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USM_INST/dvterf/alma991014192579505566, 28.

[222] Peggy Jean Connor, interview by Richard Conville, September 11, 2001, in Hattiesburg, MS, September 11, 2001, transcript, the University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, Hattiesburg, MS, available online at https://usm.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USM_INST/

Connor, Adams, and others that the NAACP was trying to oust him from the organization. Despite this, Dahmer continued to work with the black community and advocate for the rights of black people.

Sam Bowers, the leader of the local Ku Klux Klan, ordered the murder of Vernon Dahmer. The Dahmer home was firebombed in the middle of the night by the Ku Klux Klan on January 10, 1966. Dahmer and his wife, Ellie, woke up and rushed to get their children to safety. Vernon Dahmer used his shotgun to fire upon the attacker to distract them while Ellie Dahmer ran to get the children out of the home. The family escaped with the children out the back window, and one of the children, Betty Dahmer, was burned badly. Vernon Dahmer, who was also burned badly, rushed to the barn to evade the further attack. Vernon and Betty Dahmer were rushed to the hospital—Betty Dahmer was severely burned but survived, and Vernon Dahmer died due to smoke inhalation.[223]

The night following his death, a mass meeting was held at St. James Christian Methodist Episcopal church, a meeting that some felt was using the tragedy to the advantage of the NAACP. They were frustrated that the local NAACP was trying to use the tragedy of Dahmer's death to their advantage and to further their messaging rather than allowing the community to come together united, despite differences, to mourn. Connor wanted to address the NAACP leaders publicly and fault them for flipping the tragedy for their own gain at the meeting. However, Adams spoke to Ellie Dahmer about their distaste surrounding the meeting, and Dahmer persuaded them not to attend. Adams

1prcivv/alma991014192562605566, 36.

[223] Ellie Dahmer, interview by Orley B. Caudill, in Hattiesburg, MS, July 2, 1974, the University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, Hattiesburg, MS, available online at https://usm.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01USM_INST/dvterf/alma991014192561705566, 23-25.

and Connor decided not to say anything publicly and wrote the Forrest County NAACP off.[224] This incident, combined with an earlier dislike for the NAACP, left a bad taste in Adams' mouth and her to back off from working directly with the NAACP during the boycott. Peggy Jean Connor felt much of the same way when she recalled the boycott, "I had fallen out with the NAACP over this thing about Mr. Dahmer. So, all I did is not go to these places. But I wasn't involved with them."[225] So, while Adams and Connor followed the boycott and avoided the white businesses, they did not participate in the organizing efforts with the NAACP.

While Adams was working with Black Power, Head Start, CDGM, and the Poor People's Campaign in 1967 and 1968, a decision had to be made by the Adams family about potentially moving to Thailand. Reuben Adams' job in the Army was important to him, as was his family, and he decided that he would not deploy without bringing his family along with him. For Victoria Gray Adams, the decision was more complex, and she was faced with the decision between her work and her family. Adams had many discussions about the idea of leaving Mississippi and the country. Feeling that she may have been abandoning the years of work in Mississippi, she spoke to Ella Baker for advice. Eventually, Adams chose to be with her family, and at the height of the Vietnam conflict in 1968, the family moved to a U.S. Army base located near Bangkok, Thailand. The prospect of leaving Mississippi and thus leaving the work she had been so integral to was terrifying.[226] While leaving meant that she was leaving behind her work for the past

[224] Conville/Connor, Interview, USM-OH, 37-39.

[225] Conville/Connor, Interview, USM-OH, 40-41.
[226] Conville/Connor, Interview, USM-OH, 40.

seven years, moving did not stop her from organizing wherever she was at the time. During her time in Thailand, Adams served as an English teacher at the Royal Thai Army Language Academy in Bangkok. When she arrived in Thailand, she found that there was not an African-American parent-teacher organization or many African-American women attending church, but there were a good number of women going out to nightclubs. She made this conclusion while at a hair appointment when her hairdresser, Gina, told her about an incident that had occurred at a school—a teacher held an essay writing contest, and one of the children wrote an essay comparing black people to animals, and the teacher hung up the essay at the front of the class.[227]

Adams helped lead a letter-writing campaign of parents upset about this incident, including Gina and her husband, James. Adams held a meeting for upset parents at her home, where twelve women attended the meeting upset and angry about the incident. Together with these women, she started an Afro-American Women's Club (AAWC). She also served as the group's first president.[228] This organization eventually gained traction and allowed for the community of African Americans living in Thailand to be visible in the larger community in Bangkok. The AAWC became large enough to where they eventually were in direct contact with the wife of the American ambassador to Thailand, Sherley Glasscock Unger.[229]

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[227] Conville/Connor, Interview, USM-OH, 37.

[228] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA, 37; "Celebration of Victoria Gray Adams Program", 27 August 2004. Dr. Rebecca Tuuri personal collection.

[229] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA, 37. Leonard H. Unger served as the American ambassador to Thailand from August 1967 to November 1973. He was married to Sherley Glasscock Unger.

Adams returned to the United States in 1972, when her family moved to Fort Myer, Virginia. While Adams did not return to live in Mississippi, she continued to organize and lead those in her community around her. They lived on the military installation in Fort Myer, where Adams helped organize the women and junior soldiers. They eventually moved and settled at Fort Lee, where Adams became the Non-Commissioned Officers wives' club president. While president, she set out to get a rule changed that had initially been stated that a wife's husband had to belong to the NCO club for the wife to be allowed to join. They eventually changed the rule to allow for wives whose husbands were not a part of the NCO club.[230]

Towards the end of the 1970s, Adams started a career in real estate, where she continued her activism. She aided those stuck in the cycle of renting homes to become home and property owners. She recognized how people could get stuck in the process and not even know that they could afford to buy a home, "As long as you rent, you're spending your money, but when you purchase, you're investing your money, and when you invest your money, that always gives you the wherewithal to do other things much easier than you ever could do it without it."[231] Rent gauging was still a significant issue in the 1970s, even after the passage of the Fair Housing Act, something Adams was well aware of and pushed for families to remove themselves from the renting system entirely.

Issues with black families being shut out of real estate markets in purchasing homes was an issue that popped up around many urban areas throughout the United

[230] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA, 38.

[231] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA, 39.

States in the post-war period. Many black people were employed in low-paying jobs, which in turn brought about financial strife for many. Overpriced rental housing, restrictive covenants, and discriminatory practices of real estate agents like redlining essentially shut out black families from purchasing their own homes.[232] The Fair Housing Act was included in the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which protected against the "prohibited discrimination concerning the sale, rental, and financing of housing based on race, religion, national origin, sex."[233] Housing issues were not immediately fixed, and many Black Americans still faced discriminatory housing practices.

Following the 1968 Act that technically got rid of redlining and exclusionary practices, new discriminatory practices preyed upon black Americans. Banks and real estate agents realized they could profit from lower-income people, many of whom were black single mothers and families. Through predatory practices, "Real estate and mortgage bankers valued these women…because of the likelihood they would fail to keep up their home payments and slip into foreclosure."[234] Adams' work as a real estate agent likely aimed to combat this and aid black families buy their own homes instead of spending outrageous amounts of money on renting or dealing with predatory practices of bankers. She recognized issues that plagued the black community in the real estate world, many problems still leftover, or had evolved, from the post-war years.

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[232] Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 34.

[233] Civil Rights Act of 1968, Public Law 90–284, 82 Stat. 73, 90th Cong., 2d sess. (January 15, 1968 – October 14, 1968), 12-35.

[234] Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 5.

In 1989, Adams became a campus minister at Virginia State University (VSU). VSU was founded as Virginia Normal and Collegiate Institute on March 6, 1882, by the Virginia legislature, where the land was obtained through a black land grant process. The name was changed to Virginia State College for Negroes in 1930 and later renamed Virginia State University in 1979.[235] Adams was surprised when she learned that there was not a United Methodist Church in the black community in Petersburg, Virginia, when she knew there would be people attending the university who was a part of the United Methodist Church. While inquiring whether there was a Methodist minister on campus, she learned there was no campus minister for any Christian denomination.

Adams was brought into meetings that discussed requesting a Wesley Foundation be set up at VSU, as there was a Wesley Foundation at all other major state universities in Virginia. The request for a Wesley Foundation was approved, but the administration was worried about how a majority-black campus may have perceived a white minister. One of the men in the meeting mentioned that a campus minister did not have to be an ordained minister and that they just needed to be a person committed to campus ministry.[236] When he said this, Adams recalled all eyes looking at her. The administration had found their campus minister. However, Adams was worried about accepting the position as she believed that she might not be able to devote the correct amount of time as she already had too much going on at once. Nevertheless, she decided to take on the role of campus minister because she had been "griping and grumming" over VSU not having a minister

[235] Virginia State University, "History of Virginia State University, Accessed 31 October, 2021, https://www.vsu.edu/about/history/history-vsu.php.

[236] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA, 40.

and felt it would have been wrong to decline with how involved she was up until that point.[237] For the next eight years, Adams served as the campus minister at VSU while living in Petersburg.

At 74 years old, Adams was invited to teach a course on the Civil Rights Movement with her son, Dr. Cecil Gray, in her hometown of Hattiesburg at the University of Southern Mississippi. The class was available to undergraduate and graduate students as HIS 478/578 as “studies in Civil Rights” in the Spring semester of 2000.[238] The class was comprised of mostly white students, something that disappointed Adams. One graduate student came up to Adams after class one day, upset that he had been taught a tame version of the Civil Rights Movement. He had not learned much of what Adams taught when he was in high school through the public education system. This student was not the only student who was impacted by the course. Adams asked the students at the end of the course how the things they had learned in class would impact them in the future. A student, who was getting ready to graduate and become a high school social studies teacher, responded, "I'm still gonna be a history teacher but I'm going to be a teacher of authentic history."[239] The same year, Adams also gave a campus-wide lecture through the University Forum lecture series at the University of Southern Mississippi.[240]

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[237] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA, 40.

[238] "History 478/578 - "Studies in Civil Rights,” Taught by Victoria G. Adams and Dr. Cecil Gray,” Box 10, Folder 1-4, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

[239] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA,42.

[240] “University Forum Lecture by Victoria G. Adams,” Box 10, Folder 10, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

Adams attended and was the subject of many memorials and commemoration events for the Civil Rights Movement and various leaders and friends. The earliest celebration was a tribute to Ella Baker on April 24, 1968, hosted by the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF).[241] Many of the memorials and celebrations took place in the 1980s, which fell on the anniversaries of various organizations. Lawrence Guyot's Tribute of Appreciation was held on June 14, 1985.[242] The 20th Anniversary celebration for the MFDP Congressional Challenge was held in October 1985.[243] Adams, Annie Devine, and Dave Dellinger were honored at the National Committee for Independent Political Action's Third Annual Award Dinner was held on May 20, 1988.[244] Adams and Devine were honored for their work in Mississippi in the 1960s. Dellinger was honored for his work as an activist in the 1960s, specifically for his role as the leading defendant in the "Chicago Seven" trial.[245]

Hattiesburg celebrated Adams' life on August 27, 2004. The celebration was held at the Danny Levy Hinton Community Center in Adams' hometown of Palmers Crossing.[246] A marker was unveiled for St. John United Methodist Church, Adams'

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[241] "SCEF - Tribute to Miss Ella J. Baker," Box 6, Folder 22, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

[242] "Lawrence Guyot Tribute of Appreciation," Box 2, Folder 8, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

[243] "Mississippi Challenge - 20th Anniversary Planning Committee," Box 2, Folder 15, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM

[244] "NCIPA's Third Annual Award Dinner, Honoring Victoria G. Adams, Annie Devine, & Dave Dellinger," Box 7, Folder 22, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

[245] Michael T. Kaufman, "David Dellinger, of Chicago 7, Dies at 88," 27 May 2004, Accessed 24 February 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/27/us/david-dellinger-of-chicago-7-dies-at-88.html

[246] "Celebration of Victoria Gray Adams Program", 27 August 2004. Glenda Fuenches Personal Collection.

church in Hattiesburg, noting the church as the birthplace of the movement in Hattiesburg.[247] Following the celebration of her life and achievements, Adams recalled, "I'm not really worried about my feelings. It doesn't matter what they say, I'm gonna go—when it's time to go, I'm going to sleep and it's gonna be okay because at this moment in my life, I have no regrets. I have given what I had to give. I have received so much more than I have given in that process, that I could never ever regret the journey."[248]

Two years later, Victoria Gray Adams died at age 79 on August 12, 2006. She passed in her son's home in Maryland due to complications from lung cancer. She was survived by her husband, Reuben, three of her children, Georgie Roswitha Gray Dunn Henderson, Cecil Gray, and Reuben Ernest Adams III, her brother, Goldies Jackson, and eight grandchildren. She was preceded in death by one of her children, Tony West Gray, Jr., in 1997. [249] A memorial service was held in Hattiesburg at Parkway Heights Methodist Church on September 9, 2006, following her death.[250]

Adams, and other women like her, made important choices in each day of their involvement in the movement. Just their involvement was dangerous, as it risked their jobs and their spouse's jobs and their safety and that of their families. Major life

[247] National Broadcasting Company, "Victoria Gray Adams dies at 73," 15 August 2006, Accessed 9 November 2021, https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna14367184

[248] Hamilton/Adams, interview, HMDA, 42.

[249] Yvonne Shinhoster Lamb, "Victoria Gray Adams," 9 September 2006, Accessed 9 November 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2006/09/09/victoria-gray-adams/e1cacede-db14-4ac3-a7f0-81f809ac5d6d/

[250] "Memorial Service for Victoria Jackson Gray Adams, Box 9, folder 6, Victoria Gray Adams Papers, USM.

decisions had to be made throughout the movement, and their immediate families had to be factored into those decisions. This is a somewhat different experience from other leaders in the Civil Rights Movement. Older leaders, who were often women whose children were grown and out of the house, did not have to factor their family into their decisions as much as middle-aged women. Younger leaders within the movement were like the older leadership. They were often unmarried and did not have children, so they did not have to factor into their decisions regarding their work in the movement.

Adams's life and her decisions reflect other women within the Civil Rights Movement. Basic choices were made with middle-aged women in the movement—a choice between family and work. Her decisions throughout her life were always a balancing act between her devotion to her family and her commitment to being an activist. While she was balancing leadership between numerous organizations and programs throughout Mississippi in the mid-1960s, she started a family with her second husband and raised her other children. In the years that she remained in her leadership positions in Mississippi, she took care of a newborn child and her other children. Her decisions to stay in her leadership positions proved her commitment to the Movement in Mississippi, which made for such a hard decision and guilt when the family decided to leave Mississippi.

The continuation of her activism outside of Mississippi, while she used different methods and focused on other groups, was consistent with her values as a remarkable, independent leader who always wanted to help those around her gain knowledge, skills, and support to improve their lives and their communities. Adams worked and encouraged those around her for as long as she could, well into her later years. However, even in her

later years, she was still faced with a decision between family and her work. Her husband fell ill while she taught her Civil Rights Movement course at the University of Southern Mississippi. She took a step back and did not continue her course for another semester in order to spend time with her husband. Before her death, she reflected on her life and contributions, "my hope for all of this is that you might find something here useful and inspiring to help you become a part of that community who says that, 'Until all are free, none are.'"[251]

[251] Bolton/Adams, interview, USM-COHCH, 49.

CHAPTER V : CONCLUSION

"*In spite of the defeats, the strength of my decision [to join the movement) stemmed from my faith journey. There's just nothing else that would supply that kind of strength aside from the kind of rearing we had of self-sustainment, believing in yourself… I can see all the training from the farm... it was all training for what I would be doing.*

I can never remember a time when I was not conscious about what I was doing . . . There were some very hard decisions being made; there weren't a lot of local people in my age group, there were so many obligations, and people were just not willing to take the risks that were involved.

But, by the grace of God, I somehow understood that I had been given a very special blessing that I didn't have to worry about anybody firing me, and I didn't have to worry about anybody kicking me outside of their house, because I had a little shack that belonged to me, that was mine, the land that it stood on had been mine before I was born. And I had been reared with that sense that if there is a need, you have a responsibility to respond... that be ye doers of the word and not hearers only"[252]

Victoria Gray Adams started her life learning valuable lessons on her family farm. She learned independence and black self-determination, which she carried with her through her entire life, especially as an activist. As a middle-aged woman working in the Civil Rights Movement, Adams was still taking care of her children for the entirety of her involvement in the 1960s. This was no easy task, but Adams somehow managed to be a mother and a remarkably independent leader. Nevertheless, her children and family were always a consideration in her life, eventually leading her to a crossroads towards the end of the 1960s.

The consideration of children and family was common in most black women's lives. Family was central to the lives of black families; however, family constructs differed. The Eurocentric model of the nuclear family was not always the norm in black

[252] Vicki L. Crawford, "'Be Ye Doers of The Word, Not Just Hearers Only' Faith and Politics in the Life of Victoria Gray Adams," *Cross Currents* Vol. 57, No. 2 (2007): 176.

communities. Adams is an example of that. During the height of her activism, she was a single mother as she had divorced her first husband. Black communities also challenge the norm of Eurocentric separations of political and private spheres. Collins addresses this in *Black Feminist Thought*, "Rather than try to explain why Black women's work and family patterns deviate from the alleged norm, a more fruitful approach lies in challenging the very constructs of work and family themselves."[253] Family and political lives worked together, as Adams combined both aspects of her life during the 1960s.

In the early 1960s, when Adams moved her and her children back to Hattiesburg, she brought Beauty Queen Cosmetics and built it from the ground up in Southern Mississippi. When approached by the pair of SNCC workers in Hattiesburg, Adams balanced her work, home, and emerging pollical life all at once. When she decided to join the movement in a full-time role, she stopped working with Beauty Queen Cosmetics. This was a risk, losing her primary revenue method when she had her own mouth to feed and three children. She thrust herself into the movement and was able to find a position that paid some money through SCLC's Citizenship Education Program. As she worked with the CEP classes in Hattiesburg, the movement moved along and became more complex, and so did Adams' involvement.

The chartering of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party gave Adams another decision to make—whether to become more involved in the Civil Rights Movement on a larger scale or to stay working with the CEP alongside other organizations. She decided to become a part of the MFDP and jumped in completely, becoming the national committeewoman for the party. This came with even more responsibility as it required

[253] Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 47.

constant travel across the state and county and time away from her family. Preparation for events like the Freedom Vote and Freedom Day required Adams to balance her family life at home and her activism. Rather than keep them in separate spheres, she combined the two and would often "kill two birds with one stone." She supported her children and the movement at the same time. Adams' decision to run for political office in 1964 and then the Congressional Challenge in 1965 took a toll on her family as she would spend quite some time away from her children. Adams, Devine, and Hamer, were back and forth between Washington D.C. and Mississippi during the duration of the Challenge, spending a majority of their time in Washington D.C. During this time, Adams also met her second husband, and the decision to remarry would restructure of her family.

When she returned to Mississippi in late 1965 following the failure of the Congressional Challenge, she picked back up where she was in her statewide activism. In 1965 and the beginning of 1966, she worked as the State Supervisor of the CEP, while also serving as a member of the CDGM, and dabbling in the Black Power Movement. She served in all these positions while pregnant with her first child with Reuben Adams. One of the most significant decisions in Adams' life came in 1968 when she moved her family to Thailand for Reuben Adams' job in the military. The decision was a highly emotional and complex as Movement work had been her life for the better part of the decade. Eventually, she decided to go with her family to Thailand and leave CEP and CDGM behind in Mississippi.

Leaving Mississippi did not mean that Adams left her activism behind. She carried it with her to the end of her life. In Thailand, she organized parents and black women in two separate organizations in her four years there. When she and her family

returned to the United States, she continued to organize army wives on the base where her husband worked in Virginia. She advocated for black families as a real estate agent in the 1970s, pushing for homeownership as an alternative to renting. In the 1980s, she became the campus minister for Virginia State University. Adams and her son, Cecil, taught a college history course on the Civil Rights Movement in her hometown at the University of Southern Mississippi. Even in her last few years, she had to make decisions between her activism and her family, as she returned home rather than teaching another semester due to her husband's declining health.

Adams's experiences and decisions illuminate the demands that her activisms commanded of a black woman leader living in the mid-twentieth century. These demands required her to make complicated and important decisions that would impact her political and personal life. Other middle-aged black women involved in the Civil Rights Movement faced these same demands and decisions. As mothers and spouses, they had to find ways to balance their work as activists and as the female figurehead of their families. Understanding black women's lives and their complicated decisions aids in understanding their vital impact and contributions to the Movement.

Victoria Gray Adams' was remarkable for her commitment to the black freedom struggle. In her own words, "I had been reared with that sense that if there is a need, you have a responsibility to respond," she knew where there was work to be done; she would be there to help work towards the goal.[254] This was apparent throughout her life and became a guiding principle. Those lessons that her grandparents instilled unto her, of

[254] Vicki L. Crawford, "'Be Ye Doers of The Word, Not Just Hearers Only' Faith and Politics in the Life of Victoria Gray Adams," *Cross Currents* Vol. 57, No. 2 (2007): 176.

independence and empowerment, followed Adams throughout her entire life, leading her to become one of the most important Civil Rights leaders to emerge from the Magnolia State

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