

**“You Have to be Radical to Change a Radically Sick Society:”  
Robert R. Church, Jr., Maxine Smith, and the Memphis NAACP’s Shift to  
Direct Action**

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**Introduction**

The Memphis branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was one of the first chapters founded in the South, and in the 1960s became the largest and one of the most active branches in the country. The Memphis branch also produced some of the most powerful and influential, if not fully acknowledged, figures in Memphis civil rights history, including Robert R. Church, Jr., and Maxine Smith. Church was heavily involved in the founding of the Memphis branch of the NAACP in 1917, and went on to become one of the branch leaders as well as a member of the National Board of Directors. The Memphis branch was the first chapter in Tennessee, and as one of the first established in the South, it was one of the NAACP’s few Southern strongholds at the time. Smith’s involvement with the Memphis NAACP began after she was rejected by Memphis State University (now University of Memphis) on the basis of her race. In 1957, she joined the NAACP and in several years became executive secretary of the branch.

However, the Memphis NAACP that Church established was very different from the one Smith joined and ran. There was a significant shift in the years between Church’s involvement and Smith’s, one which turned the Memphis NAACP from a group working through the judicial system and holding voter registration drives to a nonviolent direct-action organization. Looking at the history of the Memphis NAACP through the careers of Church and Smith, it becomes evident that these two figures played instrumental roles in developing the branch and helped to define the chapter.

## The Origins of the NAACP

The NAACP grew out of the Niagara Movement, an organization that promoted full equality for African Americans, led by W.E.B. DuBois in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Niagara Movement rejected segregation, and argued that “all American citizens have the right to equal treatment in places of public entertainment according to their behavior.”<sup>1</sup> Booker T. Washington, DuBois’ ideological rival, believed in the importance of African Americans improving themselves through education and business opportunities, and waiting for a better time to fight segregation. This contrasted sharply with DuBois’ belief that black intellectual elites should form the basis of African-American leadership and work for civil rights and political representation. In Booker T. Washington’s “call for forbearance and self-improvement,” DuBois saw “confession of black inferiority and contrition for an assumed turpitude,” which he found unacceptable.<sup>2</sup> Like DuBois, the early members of the NAACP believed Booker T. Washington conceded the inferiority of blacks; instead, the NAACP wanted to fight for equality between the races, while still working within the bounds of the law and government.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, the NAACP was very radical for its time, though not in a militant way. In the early years of the organization, the judicial challenge brought forth against racial subordination and segregation was a new and radical concept.<sup>4</sup>

After its creation, the NAACP worked to achieve the goals established by the Niagara Movement, primarily fighting for federal anti-lynching legislation and helping blacks with legal support, advice, and representation. *The Crisis*, the NAACP publication headed by DuBois,

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<sup>1</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, “The Niagara Movement, Declaration of Principles, 1905.”

<sup>2</sup> Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America’s Struggle for Equality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 94.

<sup>3</sup> Kluger, 100.

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP And the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The New Press, 2009), 63.

stated in one of its earliest issues that the organization's object was to bring together people "of all races and classes who believe that the present widespread increase of prejudice against colored races...is...unjust..."<sup>5</sup> *The Crisis* helped to track issues and cases with which the NAACP was struggling, for example, by pointing out that black voters resented Democrats because of the treatment of black soldiers during World War I, violence perpetrated against blacks, and the segregated nature of the army.<sup>6</sup> Writers for *The Crisis* also chastised Republicans for their "absolute failure...to redeem or seriously try to redeem their campaign pledge to pass federal legislation against lynching..."<sup>7</sup> Here, *The Crisis* captured the frustration of not only NAACP members, but blacks across the country struggling with issues of inequality, and with the lack of action from both political parties to help them. The anti-lynching movement was particularly important to the NAACP, and the organization worked for years to pass anti-lynching legislation in Congress.<sup>8</sup>

During 1917, James Weldon Johnson, only the second African American and first Southerner to serve as an administrator in the national office of the NAACP, began a trip across the South in an attempt to establish branches of the organization in the region. In fact, the NAACP's move into the South coincided with the United States' entry into World War I, a time when blacks were unsure about their role in the armed forces.<sup>9</sup> Johnson promised that the organization would fight for full and equal participation in the military for African Americans,

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<sup>5</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, "Object," *The Crisis*, April 1911, 1.

<sup>6</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, "Political Straws," *The Crisis*, July 1923, 124.

<sup>7</sup> "Political Straws," 124.

<sup>8</sup> Ida B. Wells, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, ed. Alfreda M. Duster (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). See Ida B. Wells' autobiography for more information on the anti-lynching movement in the United States, of which Wells was a leader.

<sup>9</sup> Sullivan, 64. There was a great deal of controversy over whether or not the draft should apply to African Americans, as many white politicians and white officers in the military felt it would be a disgrace for black men to wear an American military uniform. Ultimately, black men were allowed to serve during the war.

which encouraged more people to join the NAACP because the organization was fighting to allow black men to be drafted (in spite of Southern politicians' efforts to prevent this) and even opening training camps for black officers.<sup>10</sup> Johnson began his tour with "two major goals: to expand and deepen the NAACP's base of black membership and to take the organization South."<sup>11</sup> Johnson believed that "the racial terror and wholesale violation of citizenship rights in the South created more fertile ground for the NAACP and [so it] galvanized its southern growth strategy."<sup>12</sup> In fact, Johnson visited Memphis to investigate a lynching, and Robert Church was his tour guide through the city. Johnson went to investigate the lynching of Ell Persons, but left having begun the Memphis branch of the NAACP with help from Church and B.M. Roddy, future president of the branch, with 53 members and 35 pledges.<sup>13</sup> He found "an aroused black community ready to enlist in the work of the NAACP," not yet realizing the importance of the Memphis branch and Church's invaluable involvement and connections.<sup>14</sup> Johnson, Church, and Roddy understood the importance of establishing the NAACP in the South, where it was desperately needed precisely because of the violence and racism that threatened African Americans daily.

As an organization fighting for equality, members of the NAACP were put at risk simply for joining, especially in the South. Although Memphis was in some ways a special case in the South, as blacks were able to vote in the city, black Memphians certainly experienced violence and racism. Lynchings occurred and were considered the norm, and those who dared to speak out publicly against these brutal acts knew that they might face the same violent end.

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<sup>10</sup> Sullivan, 63.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

## **“The Most Outstanding Man of Color in American Politics”<sup>15</sup>**

In 1918, as Robert Church sat safely in his Beale Street office, a sniper fired into his home, with the hope that Church himself was in the room.<sup>16</sup> But the targeted second floor bedroom belonged to Church’s widowed mother, and the only harm done was to the window and woodwork of the room.<sup>17</sup> Not long before this attempt on his life, Church had been asked by the Memphis mayor to help ease tensions following the lynching of a black man within the city.<sup>18</sup> The sniper attack happened just a year after Church helped to found the Memphis branch of the NAACP, the first of many to be established in Tennessee and the mid-South with Church’s help. The dangers blacks faced in the mid-South during this period were real and deadly, and represented brutal domestic terrorism.<sup>19</sup> Through his political influence, and his involvement in the NAACP, Church became an important civil rights leader in Memphis and the mid-South during the 1920s and 1930s. His constant efforts on behalf of the NAACP made him one of the organization’s most indispensable assets.

The 1920s South was a dangerous place where civil rights activism could prove deadly. It was a time when photographs of lynchings were used as postcards, and there was a migration of African Americans to the North in response to violence following the end of World War I.<sup>20</sup> The NAACP sought to fight unfair treatment through the legal system, while other organizations

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<sup>15</sup> 1920 Newspaper article on Robert R. Church, Jr., Church Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>16</sup> Ron Walter, “Courage of Memphis NAACP Guided Drive for Black Rights,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 10 February 1982.

<sup>17</sup> Walter.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). See Green’s book for more background information about Memphis and the South, particularly black life in the South in the twentieth century.

<sup>20</sup> See Green’s work for more information.

such as Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) believed that segregation provided an opportunity for African Americans to take pride in their race and return to Africa.<sup>21</sup> After being charged with fraud in the United States, Garvey continued his work from Jamaica and then London, meaning that he did not have to experience the intense racial hatred of the South.<sup>22</sup> This made the activity of the NAACP branches in the South more unique, since even the national NAACP offices were located in New York, where civil rights activities were less dangerous. Garvey is but a snapshot into other civil rights activities of the 1920s, however, the NAACP appears to have been the most powerful civil rights presence of the time in the South, meaning that African Americans' options for involvement in the civil rights movement were limited during this time.

Church grew up the son of the South's first black millionaire, Robert R. Church, Sr., in Memphis and he followed in his father's footsteps by continuing to fight for civil rights, voter participation, and anti-lynching laws.<sup>23</sup> Church, Sr., was born the son of a black seamstress and a white steamboat captain on the Mississippi in 1837. He spent much of his time working on his father's boat, until he remained in Memphis during the Civil War. By 1833, Church, Sr., controlled most of the business on Beale Street, earning the title, "The Boss of Beale Street."<sup>24</sup> In the coming years, until his death in 1912, Church, Sr., amassed an empire in Memphis real

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<sup>21</sup> Marcus Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey: Or, Africa for the Africans*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 1989). See Garvey's work for a thorough explanation of his views and the goals and activities of the UNIA. Also see Green's *Battling the Plantation Mentality* for specific information on Memphis at this time. There is little academic literature about civil rights activism in the 1920s, so Green's book on Memphis and the South provides helpful contextual information about black life at this time.

<sup>22</sup> See Garvey's work for more information.

<sup>23</sup> Perre Magness, "Church left his mark across racial lines," *Commercial Appeal*, 24 September 1992.

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Gritter, *River of Hope: Black Politics and the Memphis Freedom Movement, 1865-1954*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), 17.

estate which he passed on to his son, who was born in 1885. Church, Jr., grew up privileged, but had personally experienced the enactment of segregation in the 1890s and the changes it wrought on black lives. During his childhood, the Church family did everything possible to avoid having to submit to segregation, for example, “when on trips, they took non-segregated Pullman cars..., no family member ever rode on segregated streetcars..., and by having meals at home the family avoided restaurant segregation.”<sup>25</sup> He received his education in Memphis and Ohio, eventually graduating from Morgan Park Military Academy in Illinois, and took classes at Packard School of Business in New York City, before eventually being hired as a cashier at Solvent Saving Bank and Trust Company in Memphis, of which Church, Sr., was a founding member and president.<sup>26</sup> At age 24, in 1909, Church, Jr., became the president of the bank, inheriting the position from his father.

Crucial to Church’s success politically was his organization, the Lincoln League, which encouraged voter registration and participation among blacks.<sup>27</sup> This organization helped Church to develop a loyal following of voters who respected his opinions on politics and listened to his views on which candidate would do the most for blacks. Church used his position within the League as a platform to advocate for civil rights issues. For example, in 1917, Church spoke at a meeting of the Lincoln League, the first since a recent lynching in Memphis, saying “I would be untrue to you and to myself as your elected leader if I should remain silent against shame and crime of lawlessness of any character,” thus explaining his reasoning behind

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<sup>25</sup> Gritter, 30.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>27</sup> For more information on the Lincoln League and Robert R. Church, Jr.’s, career, see Elizabeth Gritter’s book, *River of Hope*. It is also briefly discussed in Patricia Sullivan’s *Lift Every Voice*.

speaking out against lynchings, which was still very dangerous at that time.<sup>28</sup> Church also expressed the Lincoln League's support for the actions and efforts of the NAACP, another dangerous move on his part, demonstrating yet again the courage and passion he felt for what he believed. It is also noteworthy that the speech was popular enough to be included as news in Nashville, despite the fact that the speech was given in Memphis. This reveals the rarity of open condemnation of lynching at the time, especially by a black man, as such a speech could make him or his family the next target of a lynching mob.

Church also ran to be a member of the State Republican Executive Committee in 1918, with the help and support of the Lincoln League. The *Nashville Globe* commended Church and the League, noting Church as "peerless," and praised the Lincoln League for "the magnificent manner in which they have conducted their campaign – namely, above board and courageously."<sup>29</sup> After winning the seat on the Executive Committee, Church credited the Lincoln League. The paper noted that the League set things in motion, and made "the sleepy Negro voter wake up and work politically."<sup>30</sup>

The importance of encouraging black voter participation and involvement in politics is undeniable. Church's organization gave him yet another platform to push a civil rights agenda, and it gave him a greater audience. At a meeting of the Lincoln League held in Church Auditorium, there were more than 3,000 people packed in the Auditorium, with hundreds turned

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<sup>28</sup> *The Nashville globe*. (Nashville, Tenn.), 06 July 1917. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86064259/1917-07-06/ed-1/seq-6/>>.

<sup>29</sup> *The Nashville globe*. (Nashville, Tenn.), 26 July 1918. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/seq-6/>>

<sup>30</sup> *The Nashville globe*. (Nashville, Tenn.), 09 Aug. 1918. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86064259/1918-08-09/ed-1/seq-4/>>.



away.<sup>31</sup> A voting block this large could hardly be ignored by politicians, forcing leaders like E.H. Crump, a Memphis politician who built a political machine that controlled all of Shelby County for decades, to work with Church and the Lincoln League in order to secure the black vote. Church used this influence to push for greater rights for blacks, both locally and nationally.<sup>32</sup>

Although a respected and loyal member of the Republican party, Church showed himself numerous times to consider civil rights more important than party affiliation. Church frequently corresponded with popular and powerful white Republicans, and was not afraid to criticize them on their approach towards blacks and civil rights. In a 1920 letter to the Kansas Governor, Senator Ogden Mills, and the Chairman of the Subcommittee on Social Problems of Policies and Platform Committee, Church asked for several important policies to be included in the party platform. He requested that there be legislation making lynching a federal offense, and called for the end of segregation on the public transportation system and in government departments in Washington D.C., among many other similar requests.<sup>33</sup> It is noteworthy that Church was already calling for the desegregation of public transportation in the 1920s, while this part of civil rights history is typically associated with the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955, showing Church to be ahead of his time.<sup>34</sup> Church also asked that there be “an emphatic plank declaring for

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<sup>31</sup> *The Nashville globe*, 06 July 1917.

<sup>32</sup> Wayne Dowdy, *Mayor Crump Don't Like It: Machine Politics in Memphis* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 2006). See Dowdy's book for more information on Crump and his political machine in Shelby County.

<sup>33</sup> Robert R. Church, Jr., letter to Henry Allen, Ogden Mills, and William Allen, 1 May 1920, Church Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>34</sup> Stewart Burns, ed., *Daybreak of Freedom: The Montgomery Bus Boycott* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1997). See Burns' work for more information on the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955.

equal citizenship rights and equal industrial rights to all citizens, regardless of race,” instead of accepting segregation and inequality.<sup>35</sup> However, these requests were denied.

Church’s influence gave the NAACP a window into the federal government, while at the same time, Church’s civil rights agenda both overrode and complemented his party loyalty. According to one pundit, Church was “credited with having a large-sized block of Negro votes at his command that he can swing pretty near any way he wants to.”<sup>36</sup> The pundit also added that his influence extended well beyond Memphis, as “in Washington, [he was] probably better known and better respected than at home.”<sup>37</sup> Church was recognized as the most outstanding black man participating in American politics, and he was a frequent visitor at the White House during Coolidge’s term as President.<sup>38</sup> Even before Coolidge had become President, Church had been known to Warren Harding, Coolidge’s predecessor in the Oval office. In 1921, William Hays, Chairman of the Republican National Committee, wrote to Harding, saying that Church was “one outstanding man among all the colored people, in the quality of unselfish and efficient work done...[who] goes about largely at his own expense on [the Republicans’] political errands, and he is a very exceptional individual,” and asked Harding to meet with Church while he was in Washington about the appointment of blacks in the government.<sup>39</sup> Several days later, Hays wrote to Harding again that Church was “in a class by himself in the colored race of this country, as to matters political...Mr. Church would be the very best man to talk to, because of his own good

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<sup>35</sup> Church, 1 May 1920.

<sup>36</sup> C.J. Lilley, “Bob Church, Colored Politician, at Home in Memphis, as in Washington,” 17 May 1927, Church Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>37</sup> Lilley.

<sup>38</sup> 1920 Newspaper article on Robert R. Church, Jr.

<sup>39</sup> William H. Hays, letter to President Warren G. Harding, 21 April 1921, Church Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

judgment.”<sup>40</sup> Clearly, Church worked diligently for the Republican party for years in order to further his civil rights agenda.

Of the many high-level politicians he knew, Church’s relationship with Herbert Hoover proved to be particularly interesting and somewhat tumultuous. At one point during the 1928 presidential election, Church wrote the essay “Why I am For Hoover,” and explained that he had “been asked by some... ‘Shall Negro leadership be destroyed?’”<sup>41</sup> This was perhaps asked due to Church being viewed by the “‘lily white’ Republicans as their greatest enemy,” meaning that Church’s power, influence, and passion for equality and rights for blacks was seen as a threat to the existing hierarchy, both within the Republican Party and the broader racial hierarchy.<sup>42</sup> The “lily white” branch of Republicanism was an anti-civil-rights movement within the party who pushed back against the socioeconomic and political gains made by African Americans before the passage of Jim Crow laws in the 1890s.<sup>43</sup> These Republicans also wanted to bring about the downfall of African Americans who had risen to power in the party, making Church and his voting block targets of some of Church’s fellow Republicans. He answered the question about whether or not black political leadership would be destroyed with a “‘No,’” though he noted that “there are some who call themselves Republicans who would like to see that done.”<sup>44</sup> Church recognized the racism that was rampant even within his own party, but saw Republicans as the

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<sup>40</sup> William H. Hays, letter to President Warren G. Harding, 27 April 1921, Church Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>41</sup> Robert R. Church, Jr., “Why I am For Hoover,” 1928, Church Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>42</sup> 1920 Newspaper article on Robert R. Church, Jr., Church Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>43</sup> Donald J. Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, and Lily-Whites: A Study of Southern Strategies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985). See Lisio’s work for more information about President Hoover’s attitude towards African Americans, as well as the lily-white segment of the Republican party.

<sup>44</sup> Church, “Why I am For Hoover.”

lesser of the two evils in this respect, as he believed that Hoover's opponent, Al Smith, "would deny [him] life, liberty, pursuit of happiness and a chair for [black] women to ride in."<sup>45</sup>

Church's firm belief in the Republican Party pushed him to draw on a block of African-American voters, which proved a powerful bargaining chip in his political career.

Once Hoover was safely elected, Church set out to force him to keep promises about respecting black leadership and their concerns.<sup>46</sup> He wrote that he believed "Hoover will prove a shocking disappointment to both the small but important element of colored Republicans who fear that his silence gives consent to their persecutors."<sup>47</sup> Church continued that "colored men do not expect...to take over the Government...but they do expect to remain...a citizen in the government and a man in the party."<sup>48</sup> This shows Church criticizing his own party at the national level to call attention to their attitude towards blacks, and expresses Church's hopeful view of Hoover's forthcoming term. It was also a way to place pressure on Hoover to respond to issues of race and to uphold his promises in exchange for continued support from Church's constituency.

After Hoover's inauguration, Church sent him a letter stating that "the Negro, having stood the scorn of time, can stand the indifference and neglect of even so good a man as you are, but I, with millions of men, many white men of sober judgment, doubt that our country can afford to issue so open an invitation to the designs of oppression."<sup>49</sup> Here, Church points out that Hoover's silence on the treatment of blacks can be mistaken for implied complicity in

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<sup>45</sup> Church, "Why I am For Hoover."

<sup>46</sup> Gritter, 106.

<sup>47</sup> Robert R. Church, Jr., statement on President Elect Hoover, Church Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>48</sup> Church, statement on President Elect Hoover.

<sup>49</sup> Robert R. Church, Jr., letter to President Herbert Hoover, 6 November 1929, Church Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

oppression, and that black Republicans' "disappointment can be measured only by their surprise and...resentment."<sup>50</sup> This veiled threat from Church reminded Hoover that the block of black voters under Church's control might not vote in his favor in the future, depending on Hoover's actions. It also showed that through Church's political savvy, the NAACP, for which Church was a National Board member, had the potential to further its agenda by gaining the ear of the president, though the onset of the Great Depression likely made African-Americans' struggles a low priority problem for Hoover, and undid any progress Church might have made.

Church's involvement in politics proved useful to the NAACP, since having someone as respected and admired as Church on their National Board heightened the organization's own stature in the political realm. Through his efforts in both Republican politics and the NAACP, Church pushed an agenda of equality between the races and made the NAACP a fixture in the mid-South, a major step forward in the civil rights movement, as the South was the apex of racism in the nation.

Within Memphis, Church worked with local leaders to pursue further rights for black citizens, and even worked with Crump, Memphis' political boss for much of Church's era. The two originally had a cordial relationship, as Crump wanted the black community's votes, which Church could sway, and Church, in return, wanted Crump to help him push a civil rights agenda.

Early in both men's careers, Crump advised and assisted Church with problems that arose in Memphis. In 1914, Church wrote to Crump, thanking him for his "courteous consideration of [a] matter," noting that "those to whom you directed me very cheerfully lent their aid in following your instructions."<sup>51</sup> A similar letter was sent by Church to Crump the following year,

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<sup>50</sup> Church, 6 November 1929.

<sup>51</sup> Robert R. Church, Jr., letter to Edward H. Crump, 24 November 1914, E.H. Crump Collection, Memphis Public Library and Information Center, Memphis, TN.

again thanking Crump for meeting with him, which he promised not to forget.<sup>52</sup> Both letters are vague about what the two men discussed, implying that they reached an arrangement to assist one another politically. Likely, Church promised to assist Crump with getting the black community's votes, and Crump promised to support civil rights initiatives in Memphis. Church even helped to provide Crump with Republican alliances in the levels of state government, allowing Crump to maintain his political machine in Shelby County.<sup>53</sup> The men were in opposing parties, but both understood the necessity of working together for political advancement in Crump's case, and for greater support for a civil rights agenda for Church.

After Franklin D. Roosevelt became President in 1933, however, Crump "began a personal campaign against Church...Although Crump had aligned with him, Church was a powerful black leader and well-known civil rights advocate who potentially threatened Crump's control. Crump no longer needed Church on the national scene, and it became less necessary for him to secure black votes as his power grew."<sup>54</sup> In fact, by 1937, Crump's machine had "renege[d] on its apparent promise to exempt Church from local property taxes, and ordered him to pay city, county, and state back taxes."<sup>55</sup> Church could not afford to pay that amount of money, as the Great Depression had hurt him financially. In response, the city collected rent from his tenants, filed a lawsuit, and seized much of his Beale Street property in order to pay off

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<sup>52</sup> Robert R. Church, Jr., letter to Edward H. Crump, 9 July 1915, E.H. Crump Collection, Memphis Public Library and Information Center, Memphis, TN.

<sup>53</sup> Gritter, 100.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

more than \$80,000 in back taxes that had built up between 1915 and 1937.<sup>56</sup> This fissure proved fatal to Church's real estate holdings, and likely was part of what forced him to leave Memphis.<sup>57</sup>

Crump continued to track Church's political movements into the 1940s after their relationship crumbled, saving newspaper clippings about Church's activities in Washington D.C. One article from 1932 discusses the fracturing within the Tennessee Republican Party, and notes that Church had long been in control of Shelby County Republicanism, adding that Tennessee politicians hoped to "break his power and bring 'the better faction' of the Republican party into control in Shelby County."<sup>58</sup> Another clipping details a controversy over Church being granted an office in the Senate building in Washington D.C., and his support of the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) bill in 1948, as well as his relationship with Senator Robert Taft, Jr. Also noteworthy in the article is that Church mentions that he seldom returns to Memphis, spending most of his time in Washington D.C. and Chicago.<sup>59</sup> The article describes him as the "former Republican political leader of Memphis," which implies that Church had lost a significant amount of his power in Memphis by the 1940s.<sup>60</sup> The fact that Crump saved clippings about Church's political career reveals Crump's political interest in Church and his

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<sup>56</sup> Gritter, 116.

<sup>57</sup> Crump kept records of Church's real estate holdings. In the 1940s, the Church home was seized and used in a fire department drill, leaving the home in ruins, sending the final message to Church that he was no longer welcome in Memphis. These records can be seen at the Memphis and Shelby County Room at the Memphis Public Library & Information Center in *The E.H. Crump Collection*.

<sup>58</sup> "Bob Church, Negro Leader, Takes Floor to Attack Opponents," *Commercial Appeal*, 19 March 1932, E.H. Crump Collection, Memphis Public Library and Information Center, Memphis, TN.

<sup>59</sup> "Bob Church Lobbies for FEPC From Office in Senate Building," *Commercial Appeal*, 8 March 1948, E.H. Crump Collection, Memphis Public Library and Information Center, Memphis, TN.

<sup>60</sup> "Bob Church Lobbies for FEPC From Office in Senate Building," 8 March 1948.

commitment to minimizing Church's influence in Memphis following the growth of Crump's political machine.

Church had fought well for the cause in his behind-the-scenes negotiations, and his work within the confines of the judicial and political systems was effective. He remained active in business and in Republican politics from Washington D.C. until his death in 1952. His daughter, Sara Roberta Church, carried on his legacy and went on to become an official and advisor to United States Presidents Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon.

### **Making the NAACP a Fixture in the South**

In addition to his political machinations, Church allowed his office to be “a sort of clearing house for clippings and information destined for [the NAACP]” as it related to lynchings, which newspapers of the time often did not report.<sup>61</sup> Included in a letter to Church from Herbert Seligmann, a national NAACP official, was a telegraphic code for information about lynchings, labeled “Confidential” at the top. The need for a telegraphic code at all demonstrates the danger involved in trying to expose lynchings. Seligmann noted at the beginning of the letter that he was “enclosing the beginnings of what may become a telegraphic code when your suggestions are incorporated into it,” which signified that Church's opinion on the code was important to high-ranking officials such as Seligmann.<sup>62</sup> Church expressed his passionate opposition to lynchings in 1921, when he wrote to the *New York World* that “the exposure of the Ku Klux Klan is the greatest public service a newspaper has rendered in the past

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<sup>61</sup> Herbert Seligmann, letter to Robert R. Church, Jr., Church Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>62</sup> Seligmann.



decade.”<sup>63</sup> Church went on to encourage the newspaper to continue their work against the KKK, an organization known for their lynchings and violent racism.<sup>64</sup> He did so understanding the dangers of speaking out against such a group.<sup>65</sup> At the unveiling of a collection of documents in 1976 about the Church family, Roberta Church mentioned the letter from Seligmann about codes for lynchings, noting that “news about lynchings traveled by word of mouth, and it was dangerous even to discuss them in this fashion, as perpetrators of such heinous crimes did not want to be identified.”<sup>66</sup> She also pointed out that “anyone below the Mason-Dixon line identified with an organization speaking out against this heinous crime [lynching] was a fair target for the same treatment,” speaking to the danger of her father’s involvement in the fight against lynchings.<sup>67</sup>

In addition to his anti-lynching efforts, Church assisted the NAACP with legal cases in any way possible. For example, he was asked by James Johnson, Field Secretary of the NAACP, to “write...a confidential letter telling [the NAACP] what [he knew] and what [he could] find out about Colonel Murphy’s standing as a man in the state and as a lawyer, and as to his attitude toward colored people.”<sup>68</sup> Johnson added that “the Association [wished] to keep its hand hidden in this matter until [they got] results” after they hired the lawyer.<sup>69</sup> At the top of the letter was

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<sup>63</sup> Robert R. Church, Jr., letter to *The New York World*, 15 September 1921, Church Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>64</sup> The Southern Poverty Law Center, *Ku Klux Klan: A History of Racism and Violence*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (The Southern Poverty Law Center: 1997.) See for more information on the activities and history of the KKK.

<sup>65</sup> Church, 15 September 1921.

<sup>66</sup> Roberta Church, Remarks at Ceremony Unveiling plaque, 3 June 1976, Church Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>67</sup> Roberta Church, Remarks at National Convention of NAACP, 28 June 1976, Church Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>68</sup> James W. Johnson, letter to Robert R. Church, Jr., 2 December 1919, Church Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>69</sup> Johnson, 2 December 1919.

typed “PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL,” and Johnson later wrote “STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL” above some particularly secret information about a witness in the case.<sup>70</sup> This letter proves Church was invaluable to the organization, and also shows how the NAACP worked within the law to eliminate racial bias within the system. Church’s aid in researching attorneys involved in cases like this one reveal Church as a trustworthy and important element of these cases, where the NAACP did their best to ensure a fair trial and good representation in order to give the defendants the best chance possible of being freed or attaining a lesser sentence.

Indeed, within a year of the founding of the Memphis branch, Church began to organize branches of the NAACP at the state and regional level, specifically Knoxville, Nashville, Chattanooga, and Jackson. For example, he wrote in a letter to James Johnson that “while [Johnson was] down...[he] could establish a branch in Nashville, Chattanooga and Knoxville.”<sup>71</sup> Several months later, Church contacted Johnson again, writing that he had “just heard from Mr. U.W. Richardson..., Chattanooga Tenn., and he...agreed to take charge and try and organize a branch in that city...In Nashville write to Rev. John H. Grant...Just as soon as I hear from Knoxville and Jackson I will let you hear from me.”<sup>72</sup> These letters demonstrate that Church was devoted to the development of new branches across the region even as early as 1918.

Church was also an important leader in the Memphis branch, as James Johnson noted in a 1917 letter to B.M. Roddy, President of the Memphis branch of the NAACP, that “it will be impossible for me to get back to Memphis on the 29<sup>th</sup>, but I am sure that you and [Church] can

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<sup>70</sup> Johnson, 2 December 1919.

<sup>71</sup> Robert R. Church, Jr., letter to James W. Johnson, 19 March 1918, Church Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>72</sup> Robert R. Church, Jr., letter to James W. Johnson, 24 October 1918, Church Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

make the meeting as great a success as if I were there.”<sup>73</sup> Johnson also stated that he hoped “the results in new members taken in will not only be astonishing to the National Office but even to [Roddy and Church]....”<sup>74</sup> He expressed the opinion of the National Office of the NAACP that they were “very enthusiastic over the prospects for a great branch in Memphis,” which was due in large part to Church’s efforts and dedication.<sup>75</sup>

Over a year later, Johnson wrote to Church again, asking if he was “at liberty to propose [Church’s] name as a Member of the Board of Directors of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.”<sup>76</sup> Because Johnson believed the South should be represented on the Board, Church’s name rose immediately to the top of the list for a currently nonexistent position before Johnson was certain that such a position would be approved by the upper levels of the NAACP.<sup>77</sup> By January 1919, Church became a member of the Board of Directors of the NAACP, and was described as an “especially fitting...representative of the constantly increasing number of branches and members in that long suffering section of the United States, the South.”<sup>78</sup> The article about Church also noted that he was “of great service in aiding the National Office in furthering the work in the South,” which Church later acknowledged was one of his goals in taking the position on the Board.<sup>79</sup> After serving more than a decade on the Board, Church had successfully made the NAACP a more dominating presence in the mid-South. In 1932, Church sent in his letter of resignation from the Board, stating that he “accepted

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<sup>73</sup> James W. Johnson, letter to B.M. Roddy, 26 June 1917, Church Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN. See Patricia Sullivan’s *Lift Every Voice* for more information on Johnson and the national office of the NAACP.

<sup>74</sup> Johnson, 26 June 1917.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> James W. Johnson, letter to Robert R. Church, Jr., 29 October 1918, Church Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>77</sup> Johnson, 29 October 1918.

<sup>78</sup> “Our New National Board Member,” *The Branch Bulletin*, January 1919.

<sup>79</sup> “Our New National Board Member.”

the place only because [he] thought [his] going on the Board might give courage to other Southern men and women to join the Association,” and that since the NAACP had become “a fixture, [he did] not see any other helpful thing [he] could do by remaining a member of the Board.”<sup>80</sup>

### **Why Robert R. Church, Jr., Matters**

Though Church preferred to be a behind-the-scenes figure in the NAACP, the principles of the organization were a primary force behind his actions. With that in mind, his political connections both in Memphis and in Washington made him an invaluable asset to the NAACP in pushing a civil rights agenda. As an attorney and businessman in Memphis, Church’s connections within the city and the mid-South were varied as well, and gave the NAACP opportunities to work within the judicial system by helping to find attorneys willing to represent black defendants and to establish the NAACP in the South.

The Church family also proved the potential for success for blacks in the South. The success of both Church and his father was proof to African Americans that that there were opportunities for them. Church, Sr., became the most powerful man on Beale Street and one of the richest black men in the South, though he did not have his son’s political acumen. Church, Jr., earned enough political clout to have private meetings with presidents to discuss the issues plaguing the African-American community. The family also provided black Memphians with a park, as they were not allowed to enter the public parks in the city, and an auditorium, the

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<sup>80</sup>Robert R. Church, Jr., letter to Walter White, 2 January 1932, Church Family Papers, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

original meeting place of the NAACP.<sup>81</sup> These are crucial contributions to the black community in Memphis, providing evidence that they could thrive even in the face of segregation. The founding of the Memphis branch of the NAACP was another of these contributions.

In the early years, the Memphis branch was reliant upon the national office for a great deal, but Church's symbiotic relationship with the national office proves that the Memphis branch was special. Church needed and used the NAACP to advance his political career and agenda, but the NAACP needed Church for the same purpose, in addition to needing Church's help to make the Memphis branch the huge success they needed it to be. The national office knew that the Memphis branch had to become an example of a strong, successful chapter of the NAACP in the South in order to encourage growth in the region, and they needed Church to help make that happen. Church was an invaluable asset to the national office and the Memphis branch. While he may have had his own personal agenda when making backroom deals with politicians, Church's agenda consistently lined up with the NAACP's goals. Church's efforts on the NAACP's behalf partially embodied ideals the organization stood for – namely working through the existing system to gain equality for black citizens. Even though Church personally cut through red tape, he helped to ensure that the Memphis branch fully embodied everything expected in a chapter of the NAACP.

### **The Memphis NAACP in the 1950s**

Not a great deal is known about the Memphis NAACP during the 1950s, perhaps because attention was on major court cases being won on a national level, such as *Brown v. Board of*

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<sup>81</sup> Church Park is located on Beale Street in downtown Memphis, next to FedEx Forum. Church Auditorium, where President Theodore Roosevelt once spoke, was torn down in 1921. It was rebuilt, but torn down yet again in 1971. Church Park is still in existence, and there is a bust of Robert Church, Sr., as well as a plaque about Robert Church, Jr., his mother, and his daughter.

*Education* in 1954, while Memphis appears to have had a lull in activity.<sup>82</sup> However, records indicate that “the Memphis NAACP membership [was] at a record high” as of 1956, though the number of members is unknown.<sup>83</sup> In 1953, the Memphis branch warranted a visit from the NAACP Director of Branches. An article on the visit noted that Gloster B. Current was “making a tour of key branches of the NAACP throughout the country.”<sup>84</sup> This points to the Memphis branch as being one of the important chapters deemed worthy of a visit from Current.

By 1951, there was “‘an anti-civil rights movement’...on the rise in the South,” potentially in response to a greater push for school desegregation.<sup>85</sup> It became evident that “violence and terror remained the primary weapons in the battle to protect the ‘southern way of life,’ and increasingly the NAACP and its work became a target.”<sup>86</sup> In fact, local NAACP members and leaders across the country were murdered. For example, in Florida, a sheriff shot two black men whose convictions had been reversed by the Supreme Court, and who had been defended by the NAACP; the attorney, Henry Moore, who represented them was also murdered.<sup>87</sup> Such violence was in response to a series of crucial victories for the NAACP in the Supreme Court.

As of 1953, the Memphis NAACP appears to still have been primarily writing letters as a form of protest. The president of the branch at the time, Utillus R. Phillips, wrote:

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<sup>82</sup> James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and its Troubled Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). See Patterson’s book for information on *Brown v. Board* and the NAACP’s involvement in the case.

<sup>83</sup> “NAACP to Award Citations Sunday,” *The Memphis World*, 20 April 1956, *Crossroads to Freedom*.

<sup>84</sup> “NAACP Branch Director to Visit Branch at LeMoyne,” *The Memphis World*, 20 November 1953, *Crossroads to Freedom*.

<sup>85</sup> Sullivan, 412.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

It has come to our attention that segregation is still being practiced on some of your runs [railroads]. We bring this matter to your attention, because in the light of recent Supreme Court Decisions such actions are illegal...It may be that a violation of the decisions of the court has not been called to your attention, and we therefore respectfully request that you make an investigation...[and] remedy the conditions.<sup>88</sup>

This letter contrasts starkly with the later actions of the NAACP, and even the letters of Robert Church, Jr. Neither Church nor Maxine Smith were ever afraid to speak their mind, even if they did so in a respectful way. This letter from Phillips contains a tone of respect and deference that seems unnecessary, but perhaps was required at the time. However, Phillips did tell the recipient that “a copy of this letter is being sent to the Interstate Commerce Commission for their information and guidance,” which reveals that whatever the tone of the letter, Phillips and the NAACP are serious about bringing the segregation on this railroad to someone’s attention and changing it.<sup>89</sup>

By 1955, the Memphis branch appeared to be struggling with meeting attendance. At a meeting of the chapter, which writer Raymond F. Tisby attended, Tisby explains that “to say the meeting was a disappointment is to be unduly kind, but the fact is that except for the presence of president-elect Lockard, none of the past or other incoming officers were present. So in actuality, Monday’s meeting was not a meeting at all, but rather a gathering of persons interested in the local NAACP.”<sup>90</sup> Tisby added that “right now the Memphis NAACP is stymied...the new officers cannot fully assume responsibility...We would like to see the new officers installed and the NAACP back on the job. There are too many things pressing for the local NAACP to be held

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<sup>88</sup> “Railroad Segregation Hit by Local NAACP,” *The Memphis World*, 26 June 1953, *Crossroads to Freedom*.

<sup>89</sup> “Railroad Segregation Hit by Local NAACP.”

<sup>90</sup> Raymond F. Tisby, “Prompt Action, Need for Memphis NAACP,” *The Memphis World*, 14 January 1955, *Crossroads to Freedom*.

up. Let us turn out for Sunday's meeting and keep the NAACP ball rolling."<sup>91</sup> It is unclear why the attendance was so low at this meeting, or if this was a common occurrence, but either way, Tisby clearly believed the Memphis NAACP needed to continue its work.

This account of a planned meeting of the branch indicates that attendance at meetings was poor, even if they did have high membership numbers. The lack of leadership is evident, though perhaps a fluke if word of the meeting was not widespread. However, the fact that the branch felt the need to put the story in the paper in order to get members and leaders to appear indicates that the branch was struggling. This does not mean that the branch could not organize and successfully carry out activities, but it would not be the most effective or productive activities in the history of the branch. The absence of clear leadership in the organization implies that either members did not care or did not know what direction they wanted the Memphis NAACP to take. It is possible that the victory of *Brown v. Board of Education* and several other major court victories for the NAACP against segregation made people feel less driven to take part in the local chapter, as some of the laws were now changed.<sup>92</sup> Some members might have felt that participation in the Memphis NAACP was now unnecessary, not realizing that the task of desegregation would take nearly the rest of the century, and even then, was not fully accomplished.

By 1956, "southern states had mounted an all-out war on the NAACP...[and] required the NAACP to register and provide membership lists," or the association would be banned.<sup>93</sup> However, Memphis again appears to have been a special case, as the Memphis NAACP seems to

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<sup>91</sup> Tisby.

<sup>92</sup> See Patterson's book *Brown v. Board of Education* for more information about *Brown v. Board*.

<sup>93</sup> Sullivan, 425.



have been spared from this level of hatred. The 1950s was still undoubtedly a dangerous time to be involved with the NAACP in the South.

In the 1960s, it became clearer that the Memphis NAACP had changed drastically by the beginning of the decade. It was more militant and direct-action driven. The Memphis branch publicly “pledged its ‘moral, financial, and legal resources’ to the students from Owen and LeMoyne colleges who are participating in sit-ins at Memphis Public libraries and other public places.”<sup>94</sup> The branch wrote the following pledge:

The Memphis Branch of the NAACP, having been informed of the efforts by local Negro student groups to obtain recognition of their city, wishes to declare its whole-hearted support of these students, their objectives, and their non-violent demonstration: this branch further pledges its moral, financial, and legal resources to assist them in achieving these goals.<sup>95</sup>

Though the Memphis branch did not agree to send members to sit with the students, it publicly declared its support and approval of the nonviolent direct-action method of working for equality. Although it is unclear which leaders were proponents of this shift in the early and mid-1950s, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Maxine Smith emerged as one of the leaders of the new, activist Memphis NAACP.

### **“‘What Would I Have Done if They Had Admitted Me?’”<sup>96</sup>**

In 1957, Maxine Smith joined the Memphis branch of the NAACP. Earlier that year, she was rejected by Memphis State University for a graduate program due to her race. In fact, Smith and Laurie Sugarmon “were turned away from the admissions office...they didn’t even get a

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<sup>94</sup> “NAACP Pledges Financial, Legal Aid to ‘Sit-ins’ Movement,” *The Memphis World*, 26 March 1960, *Crossroads to Freedom*.

<sup>95</sup> “NAACP Pledges Financial, Legal Aid to ‘Sit-ins’ Movement.”

<sup>96</sup> Sherry L. Hoppe, and Bruce W. Speck, *Maxine Smith’s Unwilling Pupils: Lessons Learned in Memphis’ Civil Rights Classroom* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 15.

chance to apply for admission to MSU [Memphis State University].”<sup>97</sup> Upon learning this, the two women requested to meet with the president of the university – he refused to see them and adamantly promised that blacks would not be permitted to attend while he was president of the university.<sup>98</sup> The press heard about the incident, and the NAACP took interest in the two women who were prepared to fight and raise hell over being denied their right to education. Soon after the story was publicized, the “Memphis NAACP called Maxine and Laurie and tapped them to serve on the association’s board.”<sup>99</sup> This marked a milestone for the Memphis branch’s board: Smith and Sugarmon were the first two women to serve. It also marked the beginning of a 38-year career for Smith which lasted until her retirement in 1995, and a new focus on education for the Memphis NAACP.

Born in 1929 in Memphis, Smith came from a family who believed that “a black person without an education had very little chance for advancing in life.”<sup>100</sup> Smith’s father, Joseph Atkins, a postal worker and military veteran of World War I, died when she was young, but he instilled in her an abhorrence for injustice that certainly inspired her during her years as executive secretary of the NAACP.<sup>101</sup> Joseph’s dream was for his three children to attend college, though this became a challenge when Smith’s mother, Georgia, had to use much of the money saved for college to pay for their home following her husband’s death in 1939. Smith graduated from Booker T. Washington High School in Memphis at the age of 15, before attending Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia. While at Spelman, she met a young Martin Luther King, Jr., who was attending Morehouse College. She graduated in 1949 with a bachelor

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<sup>97</sup> Hoppe and Speck, 16

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

of arts degree in biology, with honors. After attempting to find a job teaching at a public school in Memphis, Smith attended Middlebury College in Vermont, earning a master's degree in French in 1950. By 1955, Smith had met and married Vasco Smith III, a young dentist establishing his own practice in Memphis. They remained in that same house until Smith's death in 2013. Until the 1956 birth of her son, Smitty, Smith taught in Memphis schools and at LeMoyne College. Vasco believed that mothers should stay home with their children, so Smith cut short her teaching career to raise her son. However, it took only a year before Smith wanted to return to school at Memphis State University, which Vasco eventually agreed to support. So began the Smiths' involvement in the Memphis NAACP in 1957, with her rejection from Memphis State University. Civil rights activism would turn out to be a lifelong passion for them both.

Smith realized that the letter writing campaigns, voter registration drives, court cases, and backroom dealings that had worked for Robert Church in the 1920s and 1930s, no longer worked to enact real change. Smith saw laws being struck down and altered, but did not see any movement toward changing the system and enforcing the law. She saw the bus boycott in Montgomery in 1955, the sit-in in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960, and the campaigns and marches of Martin Luther King, Jr., and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Smith recognized that these strategies were working to draw media attention and to enact change. Groups like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference were founded in the 1950s and 1960s. These organizations had successfully drawn media attention and raised awareness about racism and violence in the South through events like the Freedom Rides in 1961, organized by SNCC and CORE to protest segregation on interstate travel, which had been

deemed illegal.<sup>102</sup> It was actions such as these which spurred Smith and the Memphis NAACP to shift strategies.

In fact, the “Memphis branch was not particularly vibrant when Maxine and Vasco returned to the city.”<sup>103</sup> Though the NAACP had won a decisive, crucial victory in 1954 with *Brown v. Board of Education*, the integration of schools was slow, if not non-existent. As a black woman who had been afforded the opportunity to get a college education, even a graduate degree, Smith believed ardently that higher education “was the doorway to economic and social opportunity.”<sup>104</sup> With that belief, education became one of Smith’s primary concerns, which was reflected in the efforts of the NAACP. At this point in the history of the Memphis NAACP, a group of young professionals emerged in the NAACP, many of whom had been to college, believed in the importance of education, and were passionate about equality.<sup>105</sup> Initially, Smith only reported incidents of social inequity from around the city and helped with voter registration drives.<sup>106</sup> But in 1962, after demonstrating her capabilities of connecting with Memphians and organizing successful protests for the organization, she was made executive secretary of the branch, becoming “in effect...the face of the NAACP in Memphis, the chief strategist, and the most vocal opponent of illegal attempts to circumvent civil rights.”<sup>107</sup>

Smith’s ultimate goal was to educate people about the horrific and widespread nature of racism, though the methods of teaching were unorthodox. Smith would begin by speaking to a business owner about the importance of black representation in business, before informing

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<sup>102</sup> Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). See Arsenault’s book for more information on the 1961 Freedom Rides. These serve as an example of the nonviolent direct action which inspired Smith.

<sup>103</sup> Hoppe and Speck, 17.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

appropriate government officials of the NAACP's plans to take nonviolent steps to protest the business, while "behind the scenes [Smith] was organizing effective opposition to hard heads...time and again she strategized, organized, and participated in the boycott or protest march."<sup>108</sup> This strategy proved successful for the NAACP. Smith organized and led sit-ins, pray-ins, protests, boycotts, demanded black representation in government, businesses, and education, protested police brutality, and pushed for greater economic opportunity.<sup>109</sup>

However, there were some within the Memphis NAACP who were more reluctant to enact the change in strategy Smith helped to instill in the branch. In 1962, NAACP attorneys Ben F. Jones and Russell Sugarmon, Jr., (who was involved in the Memphis NAACP) were interviewed by Nat D. Williams on "Brown America Speaks." Williams asked them, "Should the NAACP change its current approach to racial problems?"<sup>110</sup> Sugarmon and Jones both believed that the NAACP's approach worked and that there was no need for the organization to change, despite Williams' suggestions.<sup>111</sup> They both "agreed that there is some criticism," but "the NAACP is not all courts." They said the NAACP helps people to register and vote, works in connection with labor affairs and keeps an eye on housing conditions at the same time it is fighting for civil rights through the courts."<sup>112</sup> None of the efforts which Sugarmon and Jones mentioned were direct-action tactics, showing that those strategies which were beginning to be used by the Memphis NAACP were not widely considered to be appropriate in the organization nationally. While this could have changed, it implies that there was no consensus on whether or

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<sup>108</sup> Hoppe and Speck, 18.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. Also see Sullivan for information on the NAACP's strategy. The NAACP typically worked through the judicial system, making the Memphis branch's shift to strategies like boycotting and marches more surprising and atypical for the organization.

<sup>110</sup> "Jones, Sugarmon Say NAACP Approach 'OK,'" *The Memphis World*, 8 April, 1961, *Crossroads to Freedom*.

<sup>111</sup> "Jones, Sugarmon Say NAACP Approach 'OK.'"

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

not the NAACP needed to evolve. However, despite any potential reticence, the Memphis NAACP branch did evolve, becoming the largest branch in the country as a result.

Even in 1969, white Memphians were noticing the shift in the NAACP. *The Commercial Appeal* ran an article titled, “New Militancy, Scope Mark NAACP’s Demands,” about the famous Black Mondays (described in more detail later). The writer notes:

The development of the Memphis NAACP into a ‘direct action’ organization dates from the late 1950s [when Smith joined the NAACP]. Before that, the branch’s civil rights activities were confined to ‘letter writing, appeals and voter registration,’ said Jesse Turner...In 1955, the first NAACP suit to demand desegregation in the tax-supported institution was filed against Memphis State University. The next target was the Memphis Transit Authority. Sit-ins were staged at the main library and at Memphis Museum. Torchlight marches, with such dramatics as marchers dressed in prison uniforms, helped to give the NAACP a new, aggressive look.<sup>113</sup>

Smith was interviewed for the article, saying that “‘Any man needs self-esteem before he can really be a man. I think we will have to have more polarity before meaningful integration can take place.’”<sup>114</sup> In short, Smith felt that there had to be more tension and more radical action before meaningful change could take hold in Memphis. She felt that direct-action tactics were one step toward improving Memphis by creating that polarity she felt was necessary.

It was precisely these more radical views that drew Smith both condemnation and admiration within Memphis. By 1970, Smith was one of five people from around the U.S. recognized by the national NAACP office.<sup>115</sup> Both Smith and Jesse Turner, former president of

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<sup>113</sup> “New Militancy, Scope Mark NAACP’s Demands,” *The Commercial Appeal*, 26 October 1969, *NAACP Clippings*, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>114</sup> “New Militancy, Scope Mark NAACP’s Demands.”

<sup>115</sup> “NAACP to Honor 2 Memphians,” *The Press-Scimitar*, 9 January 1970, *Press-Scimitar Collection*, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

the Memphis branch, received awards for ““outstanding NAACP leadership in Memphis,”” in effect rewarding the Memphis NAACP for its success with nonviolent direct-action tactics.<sup>116</sup>

In 1972, an article about Maxine Smith was published in *The Press-Scimitar*, saying that “if she had not been black and had espoused more popular causes with the vigor and unflinching dedication which she has brought to the civil rights movement, there is little doubt that Maxine would have been regarded as one of the grandest ladies Memphis has ever produced.”<sup>117</sup> The writer added that no one personified the struggle for equality in Memphis better than Maxine Smith.<sup>118</sup> Smith is described as “highly intelligent and keenly analytical – and when you combine that with an effervescent feminine charm and an occasional witticism, you have a leader of unparalleled proportions in black Memphis.”<sup>119</sup>

### **“Hell on Wheels:” Maxine Smith, the NAACP, and Memphis’ Fight For and Against School Desegregation**

Smith and the other young leaders surrounding her ushered in a new era at the Memphis branch. The new strategy of using nonviolent direct-action tactics became a staple in the Memphis branch, which was decidedly different from the branch Church knew. There were protests, sit-ins, boycotts, and a new focus on education which was all likely Smith’s doing. Despite the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education*, very little had been done in Memphis to desegregate schools.<sup>120</sup> This proved the primary battle that Smith would fight alongside the

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<sup>116</sup> “NAACP to Honor 2 Memphians.”

<sup>117</sup> Art Gilliam, “Maxine: Forever on the Case,” *The Press-Scimitar*, 26 March 1972, *Press-Scimitar* Collection, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>118</sup> Gilliam.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> David J. Armor, *Forced Justice: School Desegregation and the Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). See Armor’s book for more information on school

NAACP. In 1960, the Memphis branch of the NAACP filed a suit to desegregate the Memphis City Schools, a suit which they eventually won.<sup>121</sup> However, that win was only the beginning of the NAACP's fight to integrate schools. The battle, with Smith leading the charge, was a long one and reached its zenith in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Education became a priority for the NAACP on the national level as well. "There were major changes in the NAACP in the years following the *Brown* ruling," which included the rebuilding of the legal arm of the organization following Thurgood Marshall's departure with the Legal Defense Fund (LDF).<sup>122</sup> The LDF had made up a great deal of the machine that was the NAACP. However, the "organization launched an ambitious challenge to school segregation in the North in 1961, expanding the application of *Brown*'s mandate through community action and, when necessary, litigation in an effort to dismantle segregation in schools across the country."<sup>123</sup> This implies that the national office expected most of the organization and work to be done on a local level, where the "struggle for equal opportunity and racial justice remained centered in NAACP branches in many communities across the country."<sup>124</sup> This meant that branches were given a certain amount of latitude, allowing the Memphis NAACP to become more direct action-oriented than had been permitted in the past. Smith ensured that the branch took full advantage of this newfound freedom to try new strategies.

During September 1969, the NAACP launched a series of protests known as "Black Mondays," of which Smith was the primary architect. The goal of Black Mondays were to pressure the city government to meet the NAACP's demands, including more black teachers,

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desegregation on a national scale. Also see Hoppe and Speck's book for details specifically on Memphis.

<sup>121</sup> Hoppe and Speck, 35.

<sup>122</sup> Sullivan, 432.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 433.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*



more black members of the Board, and the addition of classes on black culture and history to the curriculum, among others. If the demands were not met, the NAACP would encourage black students and teachers to stay home on certain days, which would affect district funding since federal and state funding were based on attendance. City officials refused to grant NAACP demands, and the boycotts began in September, 1969. In addition to students missing classes, there were marches downtown on Black Mondays. One report indicates that a “march started with 500 marchers moving out from Clayborn Temple [and] the crowd grew slightly at City Hall” as the protesters made their way through downtown Memphis.<sup>125</sup>

Edgar Bailey, president of the Memphis School Board, released a statement saying that the board would “not meet ‘with the NAACP or any other organization under the threat of boycott, unrest, or destruction of property.’”<sup>126</sup> The writer of the article described a “walkout by students at predominantly Negro schools – forcing 21 of them to close for the day – [which] was wholly uncalled for. There was window-breaking and other forms of vandalism at some of the schools.”<sup>127</sup> The writer also argued that “it is preposterous for an executive of the NAACP to say the organization ‘had nothing to do or say with the walkouts,’” implying that it would have been impossible for the well-organized event to take place without the NAACP’s involvement.<sup>128</sup> The writer noted that “the events...were not the result of spontaneous combustion...there was some careful planning by somebody,” likely the NAACP, according to the writer.<sup>129</sup> At the conclusion of the article, the writer adds that “the NAACP has presented a list of demands to the City

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<sup>125</sup> “Demonstrators Move Down Middle of Main Street,” *The Press-Scimitar*, 19 October 1969, *Press-Scimitar* Collection, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>126</sup> “NAACP Hurts Own Cause,” *The Press-Scimitar*, 10 October 1969, *Press-Scimitar* Collection, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>127</sup> “NAACP Hurts Own Cause.”

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

School Board. Whatever validity these demands might have contained has now been seriously diluted by the overbearing behavior of the NAACP leadership.”<sup>130</sup> With this, both the writer and Edgar Bailey placed a great deal of import on the NAACP as the primary civil rights organization in Memphis. Both seemed convinced that the NAACP would follow through on the promise of boycott, though the writer seemed surprised at the vandalism.

The NAACP events had remained largely peaceful, truly following the principles of nonviolent direct action which they had begun to make use of. The reactions to this event prove that the Memphis branch had become a force in Memphis, with the organization becoming bold enough that the chapter’s leaders, including Smith, were demanding a greater voice in shaping school policy.<sup>131</sup> Though the NAACP’s involvement in the walkout was not proven, it seems like the kind of protest Smith and the Memphis branch would organize in order to pressure the school board to negotiate with them.

Reverend Ezekiel Bell, president of the Memphis branch, said that “‘meaningful negotiations’ could ease the black coalition’s protests against the Memphis Board of Education and signal an end to the ‘first phase’ of a planned series of activities.”<sup>132</sup> However, he added “that an economic boycott probably will continue until several other subjects are dealt with.”<sup>133</sup> He indicated that:

If negotiations are begun... a march and work stoppage along with a fourth ‘Black Monday’ next week ‘could climax the first phase of our movement.’ Therefore, it was indicated, students probably would not stay out of classes, but ‘we do not intend to call off this economic boycott until Memphis is a beautiful place to live.’<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> “NAACP Hurts Own Cause.”

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> “NAACP Says Negotiations Could Ease Protests,” *The Press-Scimitar*, 28 October 1969, *Press-Scimitar* Collection, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>133</sup> “NAACP Says Negotiations Could Ease Protests.”

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

Bell publicly stated the dedication of the NAACP to seeing this boycott through until they saw at least some effort being made to meet their demands on the part of the school board. Also of note is the fact that “Memphis school officials expressed some relief that only 45,000 students were absent yesterday, because the NAACP had called for 75,000 absences,” meaning not only that there were still significant absences, but that Black Mondays were working and were placing pressure on school officials to negotiate with the NAACP.<sup>135</sup> Though Smith was not present for all of the Black Monday events, she directed the segment of the NAACP’s weekly meetings about Black Mondays, which were included in her weekly notes and reports on the branch’s activities.<sup>136</sup> This indicates that Smith was the primary organizer of the events, and she was often in negotiations with city officials as the head representative of the NAACP.<sup>137</sup>

In response to the protests and Black Mondays, the school board sought “an injunction against ‘those responsible for student boycotts, picketing and absenteeism of pupils, teachers, and other employees.’”<sup>138</sup> In response, The United Black Coalition “threatened...to effect a continuous school boycott if such an injunction [was] served.”<sup>139</sup> Ezekiel Bell said the boycott would be continued until the demands of the NAACP were met, though the Memphis branch of the NAACP was included in a lawsuit filed by the board.<sup>140</sup> The coalition released a statement which said:

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<sup>135</sup> “NAACP Says Negotiations Could Ease Protests.”

<sup>136</sup> Maxine Smith, handwritten report on the weekly meeting, 26 October 1969, Maxine Smith Collection, Memphis Public Library and Information Center, Memphis, TN.

<sup>137</sup> Smith, 26 October 1969.

<sup>138</sup> “Full-Time Boycott Poised if Board Gains Injunction,” *The Press-Scimitar*, 5 November 1969, *Press-Scimitar* Collection, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>139</sup> “Full-Time Boycott Poised if Board Gains Injunction.”

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

The threat of total boycott 'is being taken as a result of increasingly severe harassment, pressure, and intimidation, including threats of suspension of 66,000 black children, 600 black teachers, possible suspension of city employees who participated in Monday's work stoppage, a restrictive ordinance to limit peaceful demonstrations and marches and the threat of damage suits against organizations and individuals who support the coalition.'<sup>141</sup>

The fact that in the face of legal action the NAACP and its allies were willing to continue boycotting, and even threaten a full-time boycott, shows an impressive level of dedication to not only school desegregation, but to the NAACP and other civil rights organizations. However, it also proves the black community in Memphis and civil rights organizations in the city were organized and unified - an effective combination. With the NAACP as the heart of this coalition, it is no wonder that the school board was doing everything in its power to prevent the boycott, protests, and marches to continue. It is also unsurprising that Memphis city officials were scared of another violent outburst like the one that occurred in 1968 during the Sanitation Strike in Memphis, which had occurred less than two years before. With such a traumatic event as the peaceful protest which turned into a riot only a few years before, the caution and even fear Memphians felt every time there was a march or protest downtown is understandable.<sup>142</sup>

Black Mondays were controversial but certainly made a statement about the unification of the black community in Memphis. Reportedly, "on an average day, only 6,700 students and 200 teachers are absent. Yesterday [a Black Monday protest day]...60,522 student absences and 541 teacher absences were from predominantly Negro schools," showing the massive numbers of black Memphians taking part in these events, of which Smith and the Memphis NAACP were the

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<sup>141</sup> "Full-Time Boycott Poised if Board Gains Injunction."

<sup>142</sup> David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1986). See Garrow's biography of Martin Luther King, Jr., for more information on his work, the SCLC, and the events leading up to his death in Memphis in 1968.

main proponents and architects.<sup>143</sup> However, Smith eventually encouraged students to return to school, stating that she did not believe “the NAACP was doing an undemocratic thing in urging three [Board members] resign so Negro members could be elected in their place.”<sup>144</sup> She argued that “the present board was elected by a system of racism,” and that “the white structure’ was beginning to realize how unified the Negro voter was becoming.”<sup>145</sup>

This unification was in great part due to the NAACP and Maxine Smith. The main push for school desegregation came from the NAACP, and they were making use of everything they could, using the judicial system and nonviolent direct action to change Memphis schools. With Maxine Smith organizing Black Monday events, it became a phenomenon. During this time, the NAACP held meetings with the district superintendent and the Board, led by Smith and the rest of the NAACP’s education committee. At a rally, Ezekiel Bell, “urged all Negro parents to keep their children out of school Monday, and announced that pressure would be increased against the school board...[and] tactics would include picketing of some white schools, the school board, as well as homes, churches, and businesses of school board members.”<sup>146</sup> This radical move on the part of the NAACP indicates the shift toward being a nonviolent direct-action organization in order to pressure officials to agree to their demands.

In an effort to stop Black Mondays and other civil rights protests within the city, Mayor Henry Loeb announced that “city workers who did not report for work...will be docked a day’s

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<sup>143</sup> Wayne Chastain, “Negroes Will Escalate Protest Activities,” *The Press-Scimitar*, 21 October 1969, *Press-Scimitar* Collection, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>144</sup> “Negroes Will Escalate Protest Activities.”

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> Wayne Chastain, “Boycotting Pupils Refused Entry,” *The Press-Scimitar*, 11 October 1969, *Press-Scimitar* Collection, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

pay and possibly suspended.”<sup>147</sup> This threat included teachers among other city workers who participated in a downtown march. Teachers faced the possibility of being fired from their jobs for participating in Black Mondays. A representative of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) replied to Loeb’s statement and a threat against AFSCME, saying, “‘If the city spent more time in trying to solve these disputes and at getting at the root of racial unrest, we would have a more progressive community.’”<sup>148</sup> In spite of these threats, the NAACP continued Black Mondays into November of 1969, until the city agreed to add two nonvoting black members to the Board. However, Smith noted that “‘issues in the school dispute had not changed since the NAACP called for a moratorium on boycotts earlier last week, [and]... ‘all that havoc wreaked upon the children gained nothing.’”<sup>149</sup> Smith insisted that negotiations would continue, which they did, and she played a major role in negotiating with the Board.

The same day that Smith called for children to return to school, NAACP attorneys asked the U.S. Sixth Court of Appeals to order the immediate desegregation of Memphis city schools.<sup>150</sup> According to the NAACP’s numbers, “during the 1968-69 school term, 35 Memphis schools were all-white, 50 were all-Negro, 47 were predominantly white and 17 were predominantly Negro.”<sup>151</sup> In short, the Memphis NAACP was seeing little to no desegregation in schools. The NAACP presented several proposals for school desegregation in Memphis,

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<sup>147</sup> “Teachers Face Dismissal For Skipping Classes,” *The Press-Scimitar*, 4 November 1969, *Press-Scimitar* Collection, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>148</sup> “Teachers Face Dismissal For Skipping Classes.”

<sup>149</sup> “School Attendance Normal for First Time in 6 Weeks, Negotiation to Resume this Week, Getting Students to Settle Down is Big Problem,” *The Press-Scimitar*, 24 November 1969, *Press-Scimitar* Collection, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>150</sup> Bill Evans, “NAACP Asks Total School Desegregation in Memphis,” *The Press-Scimitar*, 4 November 1969, *Press-Scimitar* Collection, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>151</sup> Evans.

which included suggestions that “rather than build new facilities at a particular site, the school board might assign children from a Negro or white area to a school in another section, thus achieving racial mixture,” and requiring busing, which proved to be one of the main issues in school desegregation.<sup>152</sup> U.S. District Judge Robert M. McRae, who had decided in May 1969 that the Memphis school board must file revised zoning provisions by the end of the year, said, “this court is of the opinion that busing which would result in further desegregation would be appropriate in preference to permanent additions to schools when population shifts have created...undercapacity schools in one zone and over-crowded schools in another.”<sup>153</sup> The Board announced that students would receive an initial school assignment within their zone, but that transfers would be granted without restriction.

This court case exemplifies the complicated nature of school desegregation. Everything about desegregation and busing was a battle the NAACP had to fight, either through the court system or through nonviolent direct action. The Memphis NAACP felt that the Board’s proposals did not go far enough, while the Board felt the NAACP’s plans went too far too fast, which led to numerous long court battles in the coming years.

Finally, there was a very small step forward in school desegregation just after Black Mondays came to an end. The Memphis School Board accepted a recommendation of a biracial committee for school changes.<sup>154</sup> Many white Memphians were outraged, and the Board faced serious backlash because they were seen as capitulating to the NAACP’s demands. The president of the Board, Edgar Bailey, said that “even before demands were made by the NAACP for changes, the board recognized that blacks were entitled to more voice in public schools since

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<sup>152</sup> Evans.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> “‘No Apology’ Says Board to Whites,” *The Press-Scimitar*, 17 November 1969, *Press-Scimitar* Collection, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

55 percent of our school children are black. The board's acceptance... is in no way a capitulation to unreasonable grievances... [and] we do not apologize for our decision."<sup>155</sup> This statement from Bailey reveals the rampant fear and racism among white parents. The backlash was not a response to the potential interaction of students, but to the possibility that black individuals on this proposed committee could have a part in shaping Memphis schools and education. This incident is also reflective of the pressure the NAACP placed on Memphis officials to make school desegregation a reality.

In 1971, Smith ran for the Memphis City School Board, and she won, serving on the Board until 1995. While campaigning for the seat, she made an argument for "two-way busing of Memphis city school students to increase desegregation," noting that "the burden of desegregation should not be put on black people alone."<sup>156</sup> Smith claimed that the Board left the running of the school district to the superintendent.<sup>157</sup> As she noted, "in the past, most school board members did not actually run the schools as they were elected to do," making her election a turning point for the School Board. Her seat on the Board also provided the Memphis NAACP with an insider who could push for policies favorable to the NAACP's desegregation efforts. The fight over busing, however, was far from over.

In fact, in 1972, lawyers for the NAACP "headed for Federal Judge Robert McRae's court with a demand that the Memphis Board of Education be jailed and its members fined \$1,000 a day each until they approve a school busing contract."<sup>158</sup> The Board had voted on

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<sup>155</sup> "No Apology' Says Board to Whites."

<sup>156</sup> "Jaycees Hear Busing Plea," *The Press-Scimitar*, 30 July 1971, *Press-Scimitar* Collection, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>157</sup> "Jaycees Hear Busing Plea."

<sup>158</sup> "NAACP Asks Judge McRae to Jail Memphis School Board," *The Press-Scimitar*, 23 May 1972, *Press-Scimitar* Collection, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.



whether or not to delay approving a system of busing, a vote which Smith called, ““a deliberate attempt on the part of the board to contravene the court order”” to desegregate schools and provide transportation.<sup>159</sup> The fact that the Memphis NAACP was willing to potentially jail one of its own leaders in order to try to approve a busing contract reveals the level of dedication the NAACP and Smith felt about school desegregation. It also shows that the Memphis NAACP was still using the strategies originally used by the NAACP, namely using legal and judicial pressure to try to enact change.

The fight to integrate schools carried on throughout the 1970s. At one point, in 1976, there was a “proposal to allow junior and senior high school students in city schools to be grouped according to learning abilities,” which Maxine Smith labeled “a method of ‘resegregation.’”<sup>160</sup> She said that ““the proposal leaves too much to the imagination of our teachers, and I have doubts about the imagination of some of our teachers. Some imagine that all blacks are dumb.””<sup>161</sup> The article concludes by saying, “Mrs. Smith, who is also executive secretary of the Memphis chapter of the NAACP, said she fears most black students would be placed in a slower learning group.”<sup>162</sup> It is fascinating that the writer found it necessary to mention Smith’s affiliation with the NAACP in an article about her position as a member of the Memphis Board of Education. It is unclear whether the writer meant this to have a negative or positive connotation for his readers, as it could be either. The statement could simply have meant to inform readers of her role as a leader in the organization, or it could have been to

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<sup>159</sup> “NAACP Asks Judge McRae to Jail Memphis School Board.”

<sup>160</sup> Paul Vancil, ““Resegregation?” Plan considered to Group Pupils,” *The Press-Scimitar*, 24 August 1976, *Press-Scimitar* Collection, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>161</sup> ““Resegregation?” Plan considered to Group Pupils.”

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

discredit Smith's perspective due to her association with a group which was considered radical by many whites in Memphis.

The same year, Memphis City School Superintendent of Education John Freeman said, "Maybe out of this entire process...we will arrive at a better society, and we will arrive at a better youngster. But it is hell on wheels while you are in the middle of it."<sup>163</sup> Freeman went on to blame the NAACP for the constant push for further desegregation of the school system. He argued against busing, calling it regressive and claiming that busing would lead to "forced integration" of school students."<sup>164</sup> Freeman also contended that:

Poor children, black or white, can have their self-image hurt by putting them into a situation where they obviously do not have the material evidences in which they are placed...You lift the child out of this kind of environmental situation and place him in another one and his self-image is damaged, is hurt...when he is dropped into a culture or environment where he is more obviously a poor child.<sup>165</sup>

With this statement, Freeman claimed that the problem was less racial than socio-economic. In fact, he believed that there were "socio-economic problems inherent in a 'mass-mixing' situation." Freeman went even further, adding:

The neighborhood school concept tends to serve the economic status and we tend to segregate ourselves into economic levels in which we, black or white, are generally comfortable...I don't know that you would create one thing educationally by mixing a poor economic white, for example, and a rich economic white as far as the educational image of that child goes.<sup>166</sup>

Additionally, Freeman said that "I think some children, both black and white, would be hurt by forcing complete integration...we have become so hung-up in the integration process that we don't regard the education of children...in some cases the purposes by which we achieve

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<sup>163</sup> Kay Pittman Black, "Freeman Terms Desegregation Process 'Hell on Wheels,'" *The Press-Scimitar*, 4 November 1976, *Press-Scimitar* Collection, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>164</sup> Black.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

integration are disruptive to both white and black children.”<sup>167</sup> However, Freeman concluded that ““integration is an integral part of life in 1971...I think if other areas of the community would embrace the same social responsibilities that have been legally pointed out, if they would morally accept the same things, then the problem would reduce itself.”<sup>168</sup> It is impossible to tell what Freeman meant by this last statement, whether blacks needed to accept certain parts of white culture or vice versa, but either way, he begrudgingly accepted that integration was becoming part of the new reality of Memphis due to the efforts of Smith’s NAACP.

In contrast to Freeman, “a top-ranking desegregation official in Washington...was quoted...as saying he hoped the Memphis busing plan would serve as a ‘model’ for northern cities.”<sup>169</sup> Even as late as 1976, after years of proposed plans, busing was still a key issue and faced severe backlash.<sup>170</sup> However, the NAACP continued to push for a busing plan and further desegregation, much to the chagrin of many white Memphians, especially city officials such as Freeman, who were happy to keep the city school system as it was.

As a result of busing and integration, many white families, who could afford to do so, either moved to another district or transferred their children to private schools in order to avoid integration. Smith said, ““I can’t be satisfied with the extent of integration because I deeply regret that so many have left the system, which certainly curtails the quantity of desegregation.”<sup>171</sup> Another member of the Board, Frances Coe, said, ““It is a deprivation for

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<sup>167</sup> Black.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Walter G. Stephan, ed., *School Desegregation: Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Plenum Press, 1980). See this work for more information on school desegregation and busing on a national level during the 1970s.

<sup>171</sup> Paul Vancil, “After Five Years of Memphis Busing, Desegregation Debate Rolls On,” *The Press-Scimitar*, 2 January 1978, *Press-Scimitar* Collection, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

white children to be isolated in all-white schools. I think the white students who have stayed in the system have had a broader experience, one that's going to prepare them better. There have been a lot of headaches, and I personally regret that we've had to bus. But I still think the good that's been accomplished outweighs all the problems."<sup>172</sup> Advocates in favor of busing and integration argued that white flight prevented meaningful integration.<sup>173</sup> After years of fighting, board members, the NAACP, and other advocates seemed tired, but driven to continue. Smith argued that "busing itself had nothing to do with the flight. 'It's not the busing...it's the niggers.'"<sup>174</sup>

### **One of Memphis' Grandest Activists**

In a 1972 piece on Smith's career thus far in the NAACP, the concluding paragraph was written directly to her. It read:

You will never receive in your lifetime all the credit you deserve...because Memphis really is not quite ready for you. In fact, it may be that you will never even be formally recognized as one of the genuinely grand people in this community. But for consistency, effectiveness, dedication, and sincerity, you have to be regarded as the black Memphian who has most represented the aspirations of black people. You have truly been forever on the case. And Maxine, we love you!<sup>175</sup>

Maxine Smith indeed proved to be one of the grandest people in Memphis. Her involvement in the Memphis NAACP and her ability to revitalize the branch through direct-action initiatives make her a crucial figure in the history of Memphis civil rights.

Smith was one of the most visible faces and a primary force behind the Memphis NAACP during the 1960s and 1970s. Though much of her effort focused on school

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<sup>172</sup> "After Five Years of Memphis Busing, Desegregation Debate Rolls On."

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Gilliam.

desegregation efforts, Smith worked to improve Memphis as a whole for the black community by fighting for greater equality. Her charisma, intelligence, and passion made her an excellent representative of the Memphis branch, and likely drew in many new members to the group, allowing membership of the branch to reach an all-time high, upwards of 10,000, during her time as executive secretary. In spite of all her efforts, Memphis schools remain segregated in many ways today, but Smith's efforts against school segregation and her push for direct action in the NAACP allowed great strides to be made towards the Memphis she envisioned.

## **Conclusion**

Robert R. Church, Jr., and Maxine Smith are two of the most important figures in the history of the Memphis NAACP. Both worked endlessly to inspire the branch and the city of Memphis to work for change. Without Church in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the NAACP would not have become a fixture in the South, and without Smith in the second half of the century, the Memphis NAACP would not have been the largest and very influential branch it was. Between these two figures came leaders in the branch who made a more radical, action-driven figure like Maxine Smith a welcome leader in the NAACP. Church laid the groundwork for a powerful chapter of the NAACP, and by the mid-1960s, Smith made it a reality and not only revitalized the branch Church helped to found, but helped it to thrive.

Though not militant or violent, the founding of the NAACP was considered radical at the time, and the ideas it promoted were certainly radical. The thought that blacks could fight segregation case-by-case through the judicial system, that blacks had rights as full citizens of the United States, that "separate but equal" was illegal, were all radical concepts. Church took those concepts even further, calling for full desegregation of public transportation in the 1920s, a full

35 years before Rosa Parks refused to move to a re-designated “colored section” on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Church also encouraged black voter participation and openly spoke out against lynching, both of which were not only radical at the time, but dangerous in the South. His political clout and acumen provided blacks with a much-needed voice, one that was even heard by presidents, at a time when black voter suppression was all too prevalent in Southern states and racial terror was reaching a zenith. And finally, the establishment of the NAACP in not only Memphis but the South, proved to be one of Church’s greatest achievements.

A decade after Church’s time, Smith took the Memphis NAACP to a new level of radicalism with the staging of protests, boycotts, and sit-ins - all nonviolent direct-action strategies. In 1973, Maxine Smith gave a speech to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, birthday. She said, “the malignancy of racial hate has spread across the country like a cancer...it destroys everything in its path.”<sup>176</sup> Smith noted that many of her “white critics” claimed she was radical.<sup>177</sup> Considering this, the Memphis NAACP has a history of radical thought, a history which makes the shift to activism between the time of Church and Smith’s appearance in the organization less surprising, and less “radical,” but not any less significant. Smith helped to assure that the Memphis NAACP did not become obsolete by helping the branch to shift strategies based on effective strategies she was seeing elsewhere in the country, from the SCLC, SNCC, and CORE.

Neither Church nor Smith are well-known figures, although they have each been studied by historians before, including Elizabeth Gritter in her book *River of Hope* about Robert R. Church, Jr., and E.H. Crump, and Sherry Hoppe and Bruce Speck’s biography of Maxine Smith,

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<sup>176</sup> Jerry L. Robbins, “King Honored – ‘Racism’ Called Top Plight,” *The Press-Scimitar*, 15 January 1973, *Press-Scimitar* Collection, Special Collections, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

<sup>177</sup> Robbins.

*Maxine Smith's Unwilling Pupils*. Considering them together, and using them to look at the long history of the Memphis NAACP provides unique insights into Memphis and black Memphians, and helps to explain why Memphis is the city it is today. As one of the only and most powerful civil rights organizations in Memphis, the local chapter of the NAACP is a crucial component of Memphis' history, and both Church and Smith helped to shape it. It is therefore unsurprising that both were deemed radicals by some of their contemporaries. Smith replied to those who called her radical with a statement which embodies the Memphis branch of the NAACP: ““You have to be radical to change a radically sick society.””<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Robbins.