



Washington History in the Classroom

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Bill Stevens engages with his SEED Public Charter School students in the Historical Society’s Kiplinger Research Library, 2016.

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Becoming “a Force for Desegregation”

The Girl Scouts and Civil Rights in the Nation’s Capital

BY MIYA CAREY

When black pianist Vivian Scott Ramsey moved from New York to Washington in mid-1956, she looked to enroll her daughter, Rheva, in a local Girl Scout troop. She contacted Mrs. Andrew Gibbs, who was in charge of troops in her Michigan Park neighborhood. Gibbs informed Ramsey that although only white girls were part of the neighborhood troop that met at Bunker Hill Elementary School, there should not be any issue with admitting Rheva.

Ramsey then contacted Jean Beane, the leader of a troop that met at Bunker Hill Elementary School. Beane told Ramsey that there were no vacancies in the troop, and that she could either join a black troop in another neighborhood, establish a new segregated unit in the area, or place Rheva on the waiting list for Beane’s white troop. Ramsey decided to put Rheva’s name on the waiting list, arguing that as an adult, Rheva would be a citizen in an integrated society, and she wanted her daughter to have contact with people of various backgrounds, as she had experienced while living in New York.

When Ramsey checked back in the fall to see whether Rheva was still on the waiting list, Beane told her that the troop leaders had decided that they wanted the Bunker Hill troop to remain white only. She claimed that because the leaders were

volunteers, they had the ultimate say over whether a girl could join their troop. Integration, Beane explained, was a process that would take time.

Ramsey was not willing to wait. That November, she wrote to the national headquarters of the Girl Scouts of the United States of America explaining her daughter’s predicament. The GSUSA responded that the Girl Scout Council of the Nation’s Capital lacked the resources and volunteers needed to meet the increasing demand of girls who wanted to join. They did not mention race. However, as she expressed in her letter, Ramsey believed that the barrier to Rheva’s membership in a D.C. troop was not an issue of resources, but one of race.¹

Ramsey’s struggle to enroll her daughter in an integrated troop complicates the progressive legacy often attributed to the Girl Scouts. From its birth in 1912, the national organization embraced an inclusive policy that “the Girl Scout movement shall be open to all girls,” and in 1956, the same year that Rheva Ramsey was denied admission to—and the right to integrate—a white troop, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., declared that the Girl Scouts were “a force for desegregation”; he was speaking in response to the formation of an interracial troop in Kentucky.² A closer look at the racial politics of the organization in

Brownies and Girl Scouts of Troop 512, Girl Scout Council of the Nation’s Capital, pose for the camera in 1955. Although the Girl Scouts of the United States of America declared that scouting was open to all, localities were left to decide whether their troops, and especially camps, were integrated racially. Washington, D.C.’s council avoided integrating troops and adult leadership until the national organization forced the issue. *Unless otherwise noted, illustrations appear, courtesy, Girl Scout Council of the Nation’s Capital.*

Washington between the 1930s and 1950s, however, reveals a more complex picture.

The Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capital proved to be a battleground for debates about civil rights in general, and the place of black women and girls in an interracial organization in particular. Black women community leaders fought to form troops in Washington and led the charge for black scouts to receive the same programming as their white counterparts. Camping proved to be a primary point of contention. African American women framed access to camping as a civil rights issue, namely the right for black girls to have equal access to a healthy and happy childhood. This essay explores the ways in which D.C.'s Girl Scout Council fell short of its inclusive, progressive rhetoric, while simultaneously making notable advances in civil rights. In short, how was the Girl Scouts "a force for desegregation," and how was it not?

Juliette Gordon Low, a widowed white socialite, began the Girl Scouting Movement in 1912 in her hometown of Savannah, Georgia. Within a year, the one Savannah troop had grown to six, and Girl Scouting began to spread across the country. In July 1913 the organization officially changed its name to the Girl Scouts of the United States of America. Its mission was the "development of the girl along physical, emotional, mental, moral, and social lines, to the end that there may result not only a personally enriched individual, but also an intelligently participating citizen in a democratic social order."³

Low established the Girl Scout national headquarters in Washington at the Munsey Building, located at 1327 E Street NW. In December 1913 the first Girl Scout troop formed in the District. Mrs. Giles Scott Rafter, then second-vice president of the National Congress of Mothers and future president of the Parent Teachers' Associations of the District of Columbia, led this original troop. By June 1914, ten troops existed in Washington. The Girl Scout Association of the District of Columbia (later named the Girl Scout Council of the Nation's Capital) received its official charter in 1917.⁴

Although the Girl Scout constitution affirmed its openness to "all girls," the decentralized structure of the Girl Scouts meant that individual councils had a great deal of autonomy. GSUSA had national policies regarding scouts' health and safety that local councils were required to enforce, but the councils were responsible for daily operations of scouting in their particular locale. Although the

national organization declared in 1929 that black troops could officially join, local councils ultimately determined the involvement, if any, of African American girls based on the social customs of their area. The structure of the Girl Scouts limited the national organization's ability to fully put its progressive and inclusive rhetoric into practice.⁵

Early attempts at organized scouting among African American girls in D.C. illustrate those limits. Living in a largely segregated society, black children in Washington lacked the same access to playgrounds, swimming pools, and other recreational activities that white children enjoyed. African American parents and community leaders in Washington had to create their own recreational spaces for young people. Community centers, churches, and African American institutions such as the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA often sponsored groups such as the Girl Scouts, the Camp Fire Girls, and the Girl Reserves.⁶

Among the early black troops was one organized by Carrie Knox, who headed the Burrville Community Center in the Northeast quadrant and the Dunbar Community Center in Northwest in the 1920s and 1930s. Knox's troop came together in 1929 and disbanded two or three years later. Although Knox was approved to start the troop and use the official scout program, Alyce Christopher Ballard, one of the earliest African American members of the local Girl Scout Council in the 1930s, recalled that Knox could not communicate with Girl Scout headquarters.⁷ This barrier suggests a lack of support and hesitance to fully incorporate African Americans into the council.

The push for racial inclusion within the D.C. organization intensified in the 1930s as local civil rights protests began to draw a younger, more militant generation. In 1933, 21-year-old John Aubrey Davis formed the New Negro Alliance, whose "Don't buy where you can't work" and various boycott campaigns challenged such established black activist organizations as the NAACP.⁸ In that same year, the local Girl Scout Council noted that it had received a growing number of inquiries regarding the formation of black Girl Scout troops. Among the active local leaders was Gladys Ward, who was organizing troops in various African American community institutions including the Southwest House and the Burrville and Dunbar community centers. Ward led 50 girls on a five-mile hike in Maryland in an effort to meet scouting requirements. On their hike, the girls made dinner, roasted marshmallows, played games, and sang songs.⁹ Ward's troops, the *Wash-*

ington Afro-American noted, also were “working very hard to register with national headquarters in the near future.”¹⁰

The white commissioner of the GSCNC, May Cheatham, established a Committee on Colored Troops, chaired by Jessie Dashiell, to communicate with advocates for black troops and explore how other councils handled them, particularly where camping was concerned. They soon learned that New York’s Manhattan Council made campsites available to black scouts after white scouts left and offered separate day camps for black girl scouts and training in Rhode Island for black leaders.¹¹

The Committee on Colored Troops also consulted other girls’ organizations such as the Young Women’s Christian Association to understand how they handled the inclusion of African Americans within their programming.¹² In the 1930s the black Wheatley Y and the white DC YWCA operated independently, and the National YWCA did not officially desegregate until 1946.¹³ Although Washington’s YWCAs sometimes interacted with each other for events, they were completely separate operations with their own individual affiliations to the national YWCA.¹⁴ Members of the committee considered solving the “camping problem” by working with the Wheatley Y and sending black scouts to the Wheatley Y’s Camp Clarissa Scott.¹⁵

The committee met in January 1933 with black Girl Scout leaders from Prince George’s County, Maryland, then included in the GSCNC. Many of the Maryland leaders questioned why black Girl Scout troops could form in Maryland and not in the city of Washington. By this time, Carrie Knox’s troop had disbanded, and Ward’s troops do not appear in the historical record until months later.¹⁶ When asked, the Maryland leaders advised the council to enlist a group of “capable colored women” to organize black troops in Washington.¹⁷

The recommendation from the Maryland leaders offers a glimpse into the type of women involved in Girl Scouts. The word “capable” was steeped in the politics of respectability. When the Maryland leaders envisioned future Girl Scout leaders, they likely saw black women who were middle-class, educated, and professional. As a character-building organization and educational space where adult women transmitted notions of idealized womanhood to its young members, the organization sought women who fit traditional definitions of womanhood. For African Americans concerned with racial uplift, it was imperative to recruit respectable black women who would train

the next generation of respectable black women.¹⁸

White leaders within the local Girl Scouts Council often cited the lack of volunteers and financial support as the reason for not allowing certain troops to organize, but some African Americans believed that the white D.C. leadership was simply hostile towards the formation of black troops. Committee Chair Dashiell and fellow member Mary Rebecca “May” Flather visited Southeast House, a D.C. community center for black children, where they met with a worker named in the report as Miss Conover. According to Conover, “the impression was that colored troops were not wanted in Washington.” Conover stated that she supported the creation of African American Girl Scout troops, but only if they were offered the same opportunities enjoyed by white troops, such as camping, visiting the Girl Scouts Council headquarters, participating in local rallies and meetings, and having a black representative on headquarters’ staff. Flather responded that the organization should focus “the attention on the child and the benefit of the program, and letting these other matters adjust themselves.”¹⁹

Conover’s comments implied a tense relationship between the leadership and the black community, and they reveal how black leaders envisioned their eventual involvement in the Girl Scouts. While Conover believed that black girls in Washington should have the opportunity to join the Girl Scouts with privileges equal to those enjoyed by white scouts, she did not argue for interracial troops. In fact she said she would accept having separate training classes for leaders. Conover, like the black leaders within the local Girl Scouts Council, argued for access, rather than integration.

One year after the Committee on Colored Troops published its March 1933 report, the Girl Scouts Council of the Nation’s Capital officially sanctioned the creation of black troops in a new District VII. The council was divided into districts based on geographic boundaries; however, regardless of neighborhood, all black troops fell under the jurisdiction of District VII. The six existing African American troops became part of District VII.²⁰ Although the council was segregated, the formation of District VII signaled that the council was working towards making good on the national organization’s pledge that scouting was for all girls.

The council tapped Virginia “Jennie” Richardson McGuire to lead District VII. An activist and prominent member of Washington’s black society, McGuire served as director of the Wheatley YWCA



Virginia Richardson McGuire, first African American member of the National Capital Council's governing board, oversaw the separate group of black troops.

from 1927 to 1937, helped found the Women's Civic Guild, and was president of the D.C. branch of the NAACP. McGuire accepted the position with the Girl Scouts only after the council agreed to offer black girls the same program as their white counterparts. The troops were segregated, and while black and white scouts did not camp together, they attended camp training sessions and other activities together.²¹

McGuire's civic involvement illustrates how the social and political melded within the lives of black women. McGuire's work with the Girl Scouts and Wheatley YWCA was just as political as her leadership in the NAACP. She believed that giving girls a happy and healthy childhood and a chance to develop into leaders was as much a civil rights issue as racially restrictive covenants and lynching.²² She and other black scout leaders in Washington framed a healthy girlhood as a right, and they argued that access to camping in particular was essential to addressing race-specific health issues that black Washingtonians faced.

Camping became the centerpiece of the national scouting program in the 1920s. Girl Scout leaders believed that camping contributed to a girl's individual development, as well as her growth as a member of a group and society at large. Girls could participate in a day camp or attend an overnight camp with their troop or scouts from other regions. While learning how to be independent and resourceful, campers gained an appreciation for nature, cooked their own meals, engaged in physical activities like swimming, and were encouraged to work with their hands.²³

For Jennie McGuire and other African American scout leaders, camping was about more than leisure or summer vacations—it was about health. In 1933, as the Great Depression deepened, McGuire asked Wheatley YWCA supporters for funds to help keep Camp Clarissa Scott open that summer. She encouraged “civic-minded citizens” to contribute because “the return on an investment in health for young girls is so great that parents cannot afford to keep their children away from this health development this summer.”²⁴ Although McGuire was speaking of the YWCA camp, her sentiments applied to black advocacy for Girl Scout camps as well.

Health was a critical civil rights issue in depres-

sion-era Washington. Subpar housing, disease, and segregated recreation combined to put black children at risk. Washington's notorious substandard housing included alley dwellings, small structures built behind larger houses in the city's internal alleys. Many lacked heat, electricity, running water, gas, or adequate sewage removal. A report from the Federal Writers' Project found that “housing conditions among the Negroes, though good in the case of the more prosperous minority, remain unsatisfactory among a great part of the population and lamentable among the least-fortunate class.”²⁵ Substandard housing contributed to high rates of disease, particularly tuberculosis. By the late 1930s, Washington had one of the highest rates of tuberculosis in the United States, and it was among the top three causes of death among black urban residents.²⁶

Black children also lacked equal access to recreation, which community leaders and health officials believed was necessary for a good health. Reverend J.M. Harrison, Jr., the African American minister of Allen A.M.E. Church, remarked, “They provide plenty of places for the whites, but nothing for Negroes.” Lack of recreational facilities for African American children not only solidified their status as second-class citizens, but also jeopardized their physical well-being. Most of the city's swimming pools, for example, would not admit African Americans. During the hot summer months, black youth often had no other choice but to swim in dirty and dangerous watering holes or rivers where drowning was a tragic but all-too-common result.²⁷

The potential for physical harm resulting from the lack of adequate recreation space is another reason why black scout leaders in Washington were particularly concerned about making camping available to black girls. A 1933 *Washington Afro-American* campaign for donations for summer camp asked, “And what else is there for children to do during these hot summer months, lest they be allowed to hang around and play on the dirty sidewalks of the city, or endanger their lives by playing in the streets[?]”²⁸ Camps gave girls the freedom to swim and run around in safe conditions under adult supervision.

Black scouting leaders also saw camping as a character-building activity that cultivated morally upright, contributing citizens. One of the goals of racial uplift and respectability politics was to challenge racism by presenting black women and girls as moral and virtuous. Camping removed black girls not only from the physical dangers and filth of the city, but also from potential moral pitfalls

and the lure of juvenile delinquency. For African Americans involved in the work of racial uplift, black girls were representatives of the race, and the race's progress was bound together with the progress of its girls.²⁹ In the black press, girl scouts signified the "best" girls of the race.

While many black scouts in the GSCNC regarded camping as the centerpiece of their scouting experiences, the experience also highlighted inequalities within the organization.³⁰ Indeed, not only in the local Girl Scouts Council, but in councils across the nation, camping was a potent source of racial tension. Because of this tension, camping proved to be one of the most visible spaces of civil rights activism within the organization, and one of the most important spaces for understanding racial politics in the Girl Scouts.

Prior to desegregation in 1955, black girls of D.C.'s Girl Scout Council attended camps, including Pine Crest, a day camp located at Minnesota Avenue and Benning Road NE supervised by the women of District VII. When Alma Jackson organized a troop of black girls at Israel Baptist Church in Northeast in 1945, there were separate camps for black and white scouts. She recalled black troops attending camp in Richmond because Camp May Flather, the established GSCNC camp in the western mountains of Virginia, was open to black girls only after the end of the camping season.³¹ More African American Girl Scouts attended day camps than overnight camps, but those who camped overnight or for a period of weeks either stayed at the integrated GSUSA-operated Camp Rockwood in Potomac, Maryland, or attended a desegregated camp elsewhere. Because of its status as a national camp, campers could not be barred from Rockwood on the basis of race.³²

Washington's black Girl Scouts were key players in camp desegregation. Henrietta Abernathy McNair, who became involved in scouting as an adult in the mid-1940s, reported that her daughter was asked to stay overnight at an Annapolis camp specifically to integrate it.³³ Sandra King-Shaw, who became a Girl Scout in the 1940s in Washington, remembered traveling to Camp Bonnie Brae in western Massachusetts to attend an integrated camp. Reflecting on her experience there, King-Shaw noted that this was her first time living with white people, and that her presence at this camp was explicitly about having girls from different races come together and get to know each other. After falling ill with a headache, a girl staying in her tent tried to comfort her. "I can remember crying quietly. She sat with me. I think, for the first



Alma Jackson, right, received an award for her work with the Council. After organizing a troop in 1945, she went on to chair the segregated District VII East.

time, I was aware how by myself I was," King-Shaw said. "I think I must have cried myself to sleep that night; but I did not want to go home."³⁴

Sarah Nash remembered how a white woman who lived near one camp threatened her and her campers. If any of the black scouts came over near her property, the woman threatened, her dog, who supposedly did not like black people, would bite them. Later that night, the white woman's property flooded. Nash and the campers adhered to the scout's honor to "help people at all times" and brought the woman up to the lodge. "I used to get a Christmas card from her every year; that [incident] changed her," Nash said. "When you've got to get out there and rough it together, [that's] when things change."³⁵ Black scouts' reflections on camp life highlight their feelings of isolation and hostility, but also the hope of racial harmony that could be achieved through integration.

The leaders of District VII wanted to offer their girls their own camp, so they started to raise money to build one. The historical record does not reveal where they wanted to build this camp and when this fundraising began, but sources suggest that it lasted until the integration of Camp May Flather in 1955. According to Ethel Harvey, who



Ethel Harvey, named first African American president of the Girl Scouts Council of the Nation's Capital in 1972, first led a Brownie troop in 1943.



Council President Gertrude Lerch pushed for camp desegregation.

in 1972 became the first black president of the GSCNC and the first black president of any council, the council was aware that District VII was building a camp fund. The organization would borrow money from District VII when it experienced financial lulls between the end of the calendar year and the annual cookie sale. The council always repaid District VII with interest, Harvey noted, but some members of District VII bristled at the fact that while the council borrowed their money, it took no steps to provide a camp for black scouts.³⁶

In December 1954, seven months after the *Brown v. Board* and *Bolling v. Sharpe* decisions that ruled segregated schools unconstitutional, the GSCNC's Committee on Established Camping recommended that camps in Washington and Montgomery County be open to all girls regardless of race or district jurisdiction. Alma Jackson recalled the tense discussions about whether to integrate Camp May Flather. They weighed the pros and cons and wondered how the camp's Virginia neighbors would react. "Discussions were hot," Jackson said, "but we thoroughly enjoyed them."³⁷ Margaret Coffin, a member of the board, created a presentation about why the camp should integrate. The details of Coffin's presentation have been lost, but Jackson recalled that it was compelling. In addition to Coffin and African American leaders in the GSCNC, Council President Gertrude "Bobby" Lerch also advocated for the desegregation of May Flather. Although, according to Jackson, it was evident that some members of the Board of Directors

remained opposed to integration, when it came time to vote one month later, the board accepted the committee's recommendation and officially desegregated May Flather.³⁸

The local Girl Scouts Council braced itself for backlash. In February 1955 the Camp Committee formed another special committee specifically to respond to calls or questions regarding integration. The council made clear in the camp materials that there were to be no racial divides within the camp. According to Lerch, they anticipated some pushback from white parents, so they came with a checkbook ready at bus pickup for any parent who wanted a refund. Lerch recalled that, instead of asking for a refund, one white mother instructed her daughter to stay away from the black girl that she saw getting on the bus. While at camp, the daughter wrote a letter to her mother describing how her best friend saved her from drowning in the "raging waters" (which according to Lerch, were really just one inch deep). When the scouts returned from camp, the daughter introduced her mother to the best friend who saved her. Much to the mother's chagrin, the best friend was the black girl she had told her daughter to avoid. The daughter then asked her mother if she would have preferred that the black girl just let her drown.³⁹

The desegregation of May Flather, though important, did not signal racial harmony in D.C.'s Girl Scouts Council. Although the desegregation process appeared smooth, there was backlash in at least one of the day camps. On February 28, 1957, the Camp Committee held a special meeting to discuss integrated day camping at Plato Place in Forestville, Maryland. The 1955 council statement had immediately desegregated overnight camping, but it appears that day camps seeking to comply had to present their case before their District Committee. The proposal to integrate day camping at Plato Place passed in January 1957, but the District Committees of Districts I, II, and IV objected. Instead they suggested that black scouts could camp on separate days. The members of District VII were so distressed at the thought of segregated camping that they threatened to withdraw from the lucrative annual cookie sale. Ultimately, the Camp Committee sided with District VII.⁴⁰

District VII, which by the 1950s had expanded into District VII East and District VII West, ceased to exist in 1957.⁴¹ Its dissolution meant that the Girl Scouts Council of the Nation's Capital was no longer segregated. Girls

could join whichever troop was closest to their home. Because troops formed in schools, churches, and community centers, however, they most likely remained composed mostly of one race.

Embedded racial discrimination continued to plague black troops. In 1960 Eurselene J. Martin and Lenora Smith, co-leaders of Girl Scout Troop 720, wrote a letter to GSUSA about “discriminatory practices toward the Negro girls of this area.” Martin and Smith informed national headquarters that they regularly received materials from the local Girl Scouts Council about activities in which the scouts could earn badges. But when Martin and Smith learned about a “Girl Scouts Swimmers Badge” that scouts could earn at the Ambassador Hotel at 14th and K Streets NW and contacted swimming coach Bill Armstrong, they were told that swimming at the hotel “was not an interracial activity.”⁴² Black scouts had access to the pool between 8 and 9:30 Sunday morning, while white scouts could use the pool Sunday between 11 am and 1 pm.

“As a volunteer scout worker, and a working mother, I find these hours set aside for the Negroes very inconvenient,” the leaders wrote. “Obviously, they are a means of excluding the Negroes.” Martin and Smith noted that this was not the first incident, and that similar issues arose for the ice skating and good grooming courses. Their frustration lay in the fact that the Girl Scouts Council did not check establishments’ policies before sending out information; as a result, black scouts and their leaders often “were put in an embarrassing situation.”⁴³ Martin and Smith urged national headquarters to mandate that the GSCNC do business only with establishments that did not discriminate.

The letter from Martin and Smith reveals that desegregation did not end racial tension among members of the council. Yet it also demonstrates that black scout leaders believed that the Girl Scouts should serve as an activist organization. By withdrawing support from segregated spaces, as Martin and Smith recommended, D.C.’s Girl Scouts Council would go beyond simple inclusion and make clear its support of full civil rights for African Americans.

When African Americans were invited to officially join the Girl Scout Council of the Nation’s Capital in 1934, black and white leaders alike were more concerned with inclusion and full access than integration. By the 1950s, however, the desegregation of camps became their primary focus. Black leaders, as well as the scouts themselves, were instrumental in the process of local



Integrated day camping came to Plato Place in Forestville, Maryland, in 1957, two years after the area Girl Scouts agreed to desegregate their facilities.



May Flather campers and counselors enjoy the camp tradition of the singing bench, 1983. Courtesy, Washington Post

Girl Scout camp desegregation. African American women and girls in scouting made claims that black girls were worthy of the same rights and privileges as white girls. The process of racial inclusion and desegregation in the GSCNC highlights the messiness, and push and pull, of the fight for equality in the nation’s capital.

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Notes

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35. Sandra King-Shaw and Sarah Nash, quoted in Laskin, “A Discussion of Black Women’s Contributions,” 2.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Laskin “A Discussion of Black Women’s Contributions,” 2.
38. *Ibid.*; “Mar. 3, 1953, Camp Committee Minutes,” “Dec. 2, 1954 Camp Committee Minutes,” Camp Committee Minutes, 1953–1955, The Ann Murray Collection II, GSCNC; Jackson Interview, May 13, 1985; “Jan. 6, 1955 Camp Committee Minutes,” GSCNC.
39. “Feb. 10, 1955 Camp Committee Minutes,” GSCNC; Gertrude “Bobby” Lerch interview with Jo Reynolds, May 16, 1988, GSCNC.
40. “Feb. 28, 1957 Camp Committee Minutes,” GSCNC.
41. *Ibid.*
42. “Letter from Eurselene J. Martin and Lenora Smith to Mrs. Charles U. Culmer,” Mar. 4, 1960, Civil Rights—Region III, GSCHP.
43. *Ibid.*