



History of the NAACP in Pensacola, Florida (Escambia County)

It's easy to think that the NAACP has always been around, that it has always been fighting for the inherent rights of peoples of all colors, hues, and shapes. But, in fact, the NAACP was born in 1909, some 46 years after the Emancipation Proclamation was enacted in 1863 to give freedom and rights to all citizens. It has not been an easy fight. And now 100 years later, local chapters like the Pensacola Branch still fight for people of all colors in Escambia County. The fight is still not easy.

The national organization approved the formation of the Pensacola Branch as its first branch in Florida on July 14, 1919, because of the racial tension and injustices in the area. According to Robert W. Saunders, a former NAACP field secretary and author of *Bridging the Gap: Continuing the Florida NAACP Legacy of Harry T. Moore*, the legal case of Vernon McDaniel, then principal of Booker T. Washington High School, bolstered the Branch. Because of this NAACP case filed in January 1940, local [school] authorities faced a probable adverse decision and offered a compromise leading to salary equalization. This was an economic, justice, and moral victory for teachers, students and citizens of color of Escambia and fostered a kinship in the struggle for equality.

Amid Jim Crow laws and legal segregation, the Pensacola Branch continued to work through the 1950s to maintain, and at times, challenge those in power for the constitutional rights of its charges. Although efforts to form other branches along the Panhandle were tumultuous, Saunders states that Pensacola proved the exception because of its "freer climate" brought on by the freedom from serious threats of economic reprisals. This freedom was won because of the legal challenges of the NAACP in cases like the McDaniel filing and the case of *Augustus et al. v. The Board of Public Instruction of Escambia County*, commonly known as the Augustus case. The case was filed by Charles F. Wilson, a local civil rights attorney, and Constance Baker Motley and Thurgood Marshall of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in 1960 on behalf of 12 minor school children and forced the school board to meet the requirements of *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. After this legal triumph in the classroom, this action certainly tempered local and state politicians and provided for further expansion of the Branch and its activities to maintain the legal and moral rights already won and renewed their resolve for equality led to downtown store boycotts and lunch counter sit-ins for equal treatment and pay.

From the initial formation, organization and expansion of the Pensacola Branch to the present, many local citizens took the reign through both the presidency and prominent leadership positions. Among them were D.L. White, C.R. Harris, Rev. W.C. Dobbins, Abraham Tolbert, Robert Walker, Jr., Rev. B.J. Brooks, Edward Broughton, Rev. Dr. Michael Johnson, Charlie Knight and Elvin McCorvey. Many men, women and children stood up, some silently, against the overt and covert actions of institutional, cultural, and moral discrimination both outside and inside the Black community. And they still stand today.

In 1990, the branch held its First Annual Freedom Fund Awards Banquet to recognize organizations and individuals who have made significant contributions to improving the quality of life in the community through community service projects. This was also the first year the branch provided college scholarships to high school students as an investment in the future leadership of the community. Since that time, over sixty students have been awarded \$90,000 for their college education through the generous contributions of members and corporations who, in partnership with the NAACP, view education as a change agent. The general scholarship is named after Rev. B.J. Brooks, who was a branch president, minister, education advocate and civil rights activist. In 2005, the Pensacola Branch entered a partnership with Baskerville-Donovan, Inc. to provide an annual \$2000 Scholarship to an entering undergraduate student seeking a degree in civil or environmental engineering

Today the Pensacola Branch continues the fight in the halls of justice, corporations, and schools. From the courtroom to the boardroom to the classroom, the members today face the same challenges as did those who formed the branch. The place for the fight has changed from the street to the court and the white-collar workers and blue-collar workers stand together in the fight for equal pay, but the mission has not changed. The Pensacola Branch of the NAACP focuses on the protection and enhancement of the civil rights of African Americans and other minorities in Escambia County, fighting daily for rights all citizens have, lest anyone dare take them away.

*Based on article by Robin Woods Reshard, which originally appeared in **Images in Black II** (2007).*