

1999

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Recommended Citation

Bartley, Abel A. (1999) "The 1960 and 1964 Jacksonville Riots," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 78: No. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol78/iss1/5>

The 1960 and 1964 Jacksonville Riots: How Struggle Led to Progress

by ABEL A. BARTLEY

As the 1950s ended and a new decade began, leaders of the civil rights movement grew impatient. Nearly six years had passed since the United States Supreme Court had laid the foundation for ending segregation. Nevertheless, for African Americans little had changed. Blacks continued to languish at the bottom of American society, systematically denied the legal protection afforded to even America's newest immigrants. Forced to endure second-rate educational and social services, southern blacks increased the pressure on policy makers.

In Jacksonville, Florida, Haydon Burns entered his eleventh year as mayor, an office he owed principally to the support of African American voters. But except for appointing a few black police officers and attending select African American functions, Burns gave blacks very few tangible rewards. He remained a staunch segregationist and actively resisted all efforts to integrate. Nevertheless, these small concessions brought Burns substantial support from black leaders.

When Burns entered Florida's governor's race in 1959, he championed conservative social issues, enhancing his position among white conservatives but jeopardizing his support among blacks. Burns reaffirmed his segregationist position just as Jacksonville's civil rights movement intensified. As Burns grew increasingly resolute in his opposition to integration, African American leaders reacted by organizing protests to force city leaders to integrate Jacksonville's public facilities and improve economic opportunities for blacks. By mid year 1960, the city faced massive protests sponsored by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Jacksonville had neither a chapter of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee nor of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; consequently the NAACP, which had a long and

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successful history there, led Jacksonville's civil rights campaign. Most black leaders in the city were active members. They felt comfortable handling racial problems locally because they were familiar with city officials.¹

In the 1960s Rutledge Pearson and the NAACP Youth Council led the NAACP-sponsored demonstrations, while Frank Hampton, an African American police officer, filed law suits challenging discriminatory practices in Jacksonville's parks and golf courses. Pearson, a Jacksonville native, was born September 6, 1929. He attended local schools before graduating from Stanton High School in 1947. He then attended Huston-Tillotson College in Austin, Texas, where he received a Bachelors of Arts degree in political science in 1951. While at Huston-Tillotson he served as a charter member of the Student Christian Association and as student representative to the World Religious Ecumenical Conference at the University of Kansas. Pearson, a wonderful singer with a booming bass voice, also sang with the college choir and quartet. He had natural leadership abilities, and during his senior year his classmates elected him class president.²

An outstanding athlete, Pearson excelled in many sports. However, baseball provided him with his greatest athletic achievements. In 1952 Abe Saberstein, a businessman who invested in African American baseball teams, signed him to a one-year contract to play with the Harlem Globetrotters baseball team. After a year, Saberstein shifted Pearson to the Chicago Giants of the now defunct Negro-American League, where he became a star first baseman. He impressed fans with his .310 batting average and flawless field play. After his mother became ill, Pearson returned to Jacksonville where, hoping to join the recently integrated major leagues, he accepted a contract to play for the Jacksonville Beach Seabirds in the previously all-white Class C Florida State League. Unfortunately, on the day before spring practice began, the local ballpark closed to

1. The NAACP had successfully organized African Americans for activities ranging from voter registration to cultural expositions. See B. H. Walch, *New Black Voices: The Growth and Contributions of Sallye Mathis and Mary Singleton in Florida Government* (Jacksonville, 1990), 75; "Jacksonville's Native Son," *Jet*, April 30, 1964, 52; Mary Ann Pearson, interview by author, Jacksonville, February 17, 1996; Program, NAACP Dinner Recognizing Rutledge Pearson, 1963, in Mary Pearson Papers, in her possession.
2. "Rutledge Pearson," *Missing Pages in the Jacksonville Story* (Jacksonville, 1973), n.p.

prevent him from playing. This act prematurely ended his baseball career and enhanced his hatred of segregation. The event, one former student remembered, was a "turning point" in Pearson's life.³

With his baseball career over, Pearson, like other educated blacks, had three choices. He could work for the post office, the railroads, or the school system. He accepted a job teaching social studies at Darnell-Cookman Junior High School. He also coached baseball for Stanton High School where he led the team to appearances in two state finals. Pearson subsequently taught at several schools in Jacksonville, and his popularity allowed him to advance within the school system. He eventually rose to head of the Social Studies Department at Darnell-Cookman and became vice president of the Social Studies Teachers Council of Duval County. As a teacher, Pearson had an opportunity to instruct black children on the evils of segregation and racism. He also served as advisor to the NAACP Youth Council, coordinating its protest activities in Jacksonville. Some felt that north Florida was too racist to have a strong NAACP chapter, and others argued that Pearson's quiet personality and teaching job disqualified him for NAACP leadership. Pearson wanted to silence these critics by building a viable NAACP chapter in an area populated with Klansmen, Sons of the Confederacy, and White Citizens Council members. Even whites were impressed with Pearson's courage. Years later, Martin Garris, a white police officer, remarked that the courage required to challenge segregation in the 1950s was unimaginable because violence against blacks regularly went unpunished.⁴

Although he faced automatic dismissal for active participation in NAACP activities, Pearson appealed to the consciences of minority teachers, recruiting a cadre of young educators to take part in civil rights demonstrations. He was the first person to enlist adults to work with the youth council. The teachers made the signs used by the students. His lectures inspired students to fight for social jus-

3. "Rutledge Pearson"; *St. Petersburg Times*, March 27, 1964; *Jacksonville Journal*, February 8, 1982; Rodney Hurst, telephone interview by author, August 26 and 28, 1995.

4. *St. Petersburg Times*, March 27, 1964; *Jacksonville Journal*, February 8, 1982; "Jacksonville's Native Son," 53; Commander Martin P. Garris, interview by author, Jacksonville, March 19, 1998; William Lassiter, interview by author, Jacksonville, March 18, 1998. Lassiter likewise was impressed by the courage shown by black leaders during that period.

tice and equality. Pearson made each student memorize the Declaration of Independence and challenged them to show how the United States followed its principles.⁵

Pearson, who described himself as a "man in a hurry," squared off with Haydon Burns, who obviously was in no hurry. Burns refused to compromise on segregation because he feared that it threatened his white power base. He was not alone in his opposition to integration. City officials and many whites strongly opposed desegregation. Some threatened violence to halt the protests and maintain the system.⁶

In late 1959, Rodney Hurst, a sixteen-year-old high school student, became president of the NAACP's Youth Council. An ambitious, restless young man, Hurst symbolized the young people in Jacksonville ready to force change. He sat in Pearson's classes, listening to the lessons on segregation. He vividly remembers Pearson saying, "The way to hurt segregation is to hit segregationists in their pockets." Five years of pressure had netted the civil rights movement very little in Jacksonville, but blacks were determined to end the humiliation they endured in white-owned stores. As Frank Priestly, a teacher recruited by Pearson, recalled, "Not only could we not sit and eat at some lunch counters, but at Stand and Snack, they wouldn't even allow us to stand and eat next to whites."⁷

In response, the NAACP began citywide protests and demonstrations. After witnessing the success of sit-in campaigns in North Carolina, Pearson and his assistants organized training sessions for students to lead sit-ins. He enlisted the aid of prominent young attorneys Earl Johnson and Ernest Jackson to counsel the students on their rights. By law, anyone had the right to sit at a lunch counter, but the storeowner did not have to serve them. The legal advice was followed by a series of lectures on the Christian principles of nonviolence delivered by prominent local black ministers.⁸

5. "Jacksonville's Native Son," 53; Frank Priestly, telephone interview by author, August 20, 1995; Marvin Dawkins, interview by author, Tallahassee, February 17, 1996.

6. *St. Petersburg Times*, March 27, 1964; Mary Ann Pearson, interview by author, Jacksonville, December 29, 1994; "Promise of Trouble," *Time*, September 12, 1960, 27.

7. Hurst, interview; Priestly, interview.

8. Lloyd Pearson, interview by author, Jacksonville, September 2, 1996, and March 9, 1998.

After the initial training sessions, NAACP leaders organized a series of sit-in demonstrations at lunch counters in McCory's, Kress, and Woolworth's. McCory's and Kress had whites-only lunch counters while Woolworth's had a black lunch counter hidden in the rear of the store. The early demonstrations floundered because whites refused to negotiate. These demonstrations quickly ended, but as summer approached, the NAACP promised to renew the campaign. The NAACP's Youth Council reopened its sit-in campaign on Saturday, August 13, 1960, and planned to continue demonstrations until store owners desegregated their lunch counters. The students again targeted the Woolworth store in downtown Jacksonville.⁹

Woolworth's had an eighty-four-seat white lunch counter positioned in front of the kitchen and a fifteen-seat African American lunch counter in the rear of the store hidden behind garden plants and tools. Rodney Hurst led eighty-two students in the first demonstration. They made small purchases from one counter and then sat at the white lunch counter and attempted to order lunch. They wanted to show the absurdity of being allowed to make purchases from every counter in the store except one.¹⁰

The store's manager, a sympathetic native northerner, apologized to the students and then closed the lunch counter, which was the demonstrators' goal. They wanted to close the lunch counter during the busy lunch period, costing the store crucial business. Pearson believed that if these lunch counters remained closed long enough, store owners would give in. Already there were some sympathetic whites who refused to purchase goods and services where blacks could not. Some white navy wives even held seats for the student demonstrators.¹¹

After a week, whites moved to end the demonstrations. The *Florida Star* warned city leaders that a restless spirit was moving over the black community. On August 24, 1960, editor Eric Simpson reported that "despite the relative calm that exists here the Negroe [sic] people in Florida, and particularly Jacksonville are faced with many . . . problems that have led to unrest in other parts of the country." He cautioned that unless city officials joined with the

9. Hurst, interview; *Florida Times-Union*, October 23, 1993.

10. Hurst, interview.

11. *Ibid.*

business community and met African American leaders, violence was unavoidable.¹²

Simpson's words proved prophetic. Two young demonstrators, running from the police, accidentally knocked an elderly white woman through a plate glass window. On August 26, a scuffle broke out between a white and a black woman in front of a store where the latter was picketing. The two women knocked several white women to the pavement during their scuffle. This incensed the white community, and some drove to the Sears and Roebuck department store and bought ax handles. Sears sold over fifty ax handles in one fifteen-minute period.¹³

On August 27, a group of Klansmen and White Citizens Council members from south Georgia and north Florida armed themselves with ax handles, baseball bats, golf clubs, and heavy walking sticks and held a rally in downtown Jacksonville. They warned merchants and others not to violate Florida's segregation laws. Police officers patrolling the area did nothing as the Klansmen passed out leaflets signed the "Segregation Forces of Duval County" and threatened downtown merchants with citywide boycotts if they gave in to African American demands.¹⁴

Pearson and a group of youth council members drove through downtown Jacksonville just before 9:00 a.m. to check out a report that men in Confederate uniforms were handing out ax handles at Hemming Park. The report proved to be accurate. The NAACP held a somber meeting at the Laura Street Presbyterian Church and decided to go ahead with a scheduled sit-in. However, they switched the site from Woolworth's to Grant's, another downtown store, located three blocks away at the corner of Main and Adams.¹⁵

At 11:00 a.m., about twenty-five students met at the Grant store, entered, made small purchases, and took seats at the white lunch counter. At 11:37 a.m. the store's manager closed the lunch counter and forced the students out. As the students left, they noticed between 150 and 200 white men armed with ax handles and baseball bats running toward them. Klansmen hid in the bushes outside of the store's entrance. The frightened teenagers immedi-

12. *Florida Star*, August 24, 1960.

13. *Ibid.*; *New York Times*, August 28, 1960; "Promise of Trouble," 27.

14. "Racial Fury Over Sit-ins," *Life*, September 12, 1960, 37; "Promise of Trouble," 27.

15. Hurst, interview.

ately ran, but nearby store owners locked their doors to keep the panic-stricken demonstrators out. The Klansmen brutally attacked every African American they saw.¹⁶

At noon, a few African American protesters gathered in the downtown area for a scheduled demonstration. The group grew to about 3,000 peaceful protesters. The demonstrators, who were joined by some black gang members, stood in the same location where the Klan had stood just a few hours earlier. The Klansmen taunted and then attacked them. Jacksonville police officers were conspicuously absent. White passers-by watched with obvious satisfaction as Klansmen pummeled unarmed, peaceful protesters. A Catholic priest asserted that "if Christ walked the streets of Jacksonville, he would be horrified."¹⁷

Calvin Lang, who was walking home after visiting his mother, who worked in a downtown store, vividly remembered watching a group of whites chase a young man down the street and hit him in the back of the head with a baseball bat. On his way home after his shift ended early at Morrison's Cafeteria because of the threat of violence, Nathaniel Glover was taunted by a group of white men. He responded. One of the men hit him over the head with an ax handle. Glover reported the incident to a police officer who had watched the attack but was told to leave town before someone killed him. Glover said the police saw the attacks but did not intervene. Teenagers tried to climb palm trees as whites chased them and beat them with sticks. The Klansmen chased the teens through the city and into black neighborhoods where the Boomerang gang attacked the Klansmen.¹⁸

Armed with guns, knives, sticks, bottles, and Molotov cocktails, the black gang chased the white men out of the area. Arnett Girardeau, a former activist, referred to the day as "Ax-handle Day." Blacks met violence with violence. "You had groups who were the prodding groups and then there were those who were the demonstrators. The demonstrators would take the abuse and the prodding groups would not take the abuse and would not allow you to abuse the demonstrators." Those were very difficult days for anyone seeking a peaceful solution to the crisis.¹⁹

16. *Ibid.*; Lloyd Pearson, interview.

17. *New York Times*, August 28, 1960; "Promise of Trouble," 27.

18. Calvin Lang, interview by author, Tallahassee, July 29, 1993; Nathaniel Glover, interview by author, Jacksonville, March 17, 1998.

19. *Florida Times-Union*, August 28, 1960, August 21, 1983; Walch, *Black Voices*, 74.

A *Florida Times-Union* reporter estimated that at least fifty people were wounded in the melee. By the time the police intervened many African Americans had suffered head injuries from ax handles. The sudden violent outbreak ended three weeks of peaceful NAACP-led sit-ins. The city used more than 200 police officers to quell the disturbance. The police arrested sixty-two people on charges ranging from disorderly conduct to inciting to riot. Of those arrested, forty-eight were black and fourteen were white. Officer Martin Garris recalled that there was an understanding on the police force at the time that during disturbances you arrested blacks because they were perceived as the troublemakers. By nightfall the police had the situation under control although sporadic violence continued.²⁰

Burns's recalcitrant attitude and political maneuvering had sparked the rioting. As Eric Simpson wrote, "It is clear that the disinterested attitude that our city fathers have shown to the Negro citizens' problems has brought on this terrible catastrophe that has visited us." He observed that lunch counter integration had come about in other cities with little resistance when the two sides sat down and talked. Then, quoting from the *Tampa Tribune*, he wrote, "Sadly for Florida's reputation, Jacksonville could have had it this way but Mayor Haydon Burns turned it down. He revealed that a variety of store operators came to him several weeks ago to open their lunch counters to Negroes, but he told them not to do so."²¹

Jacksonville's police department must share part of the blame for the violence. Police officers delayed in intervening and disarming the combatants. It is unclear whether Burns ordered them to wait or if sixty-two-year-old Police Chief Luther Reynolds made the decision on his own. What is clear is that police officials gave Klansmen time to attack the demonstrators and then arrested a disproportionate number of blacks. In a perceptive editorial, Simpson wrote, "It is the [duty of the police] to disperse both at the onset, not to wait until, weapons in hand, they head for each other. The constitutional right to peaceful assembly does not include sanction for guns, knives, baseball bats or ax handles at the gatherings."²²

20. *New York Times*, August, 28 1960, March 26, 1964; *Florida Times-Union*, August 28, 1960; *Jacksonville Journal*, August 28, 1960; Garris, interview.

21. *Florida Star*, September 3, 1960.

22. *Ibid.*; "Promise of Trouble," 27; *New York Times*, August 28, 1960.

State NAACP leaders immediately converged on Jacksonville to advise local officials. They also urged the Eisenhower administration to investigate the slow police response. E. Frederick Morrow, the administration's advisor on black affairs, contacted local leaders and expressed the administration's concerns, while Attorney General Herbert Brownell promised an official investigation. The NAACP's Atlanta office sent Ruby Hurley to conduct an official investigation into what had gone wrong.²³

Local NAACP officials asked Burns to create a biracial committee to discuss these problems. He flatly refused, arguing that biracial meant integration, and he would not foster desegregation. Meanwhile, state NAACP representatives announced an end to the sit-ins and a cooling-off period. Florida governor Leroy Collins placed the National Guard on alert, and Burns had all 400 police officers, along with Navy Shore Patrol units, patrolling the city. On August 28 local NAACP officials announced a citywide boycott of all segregated businesses. They also advised blacks against purchasing the *Florida Times-Union* because it published slanted news stories and ignored news about the civil rights movement.²⁴

Fearing the economic impact of a prolonged boycott so near to the holiday season, members of the Chamber of Commerce met with NAACP leaders at the Snyder Memorial Methodist Church to discuss a solution. Later, the Community Advisory Committee, an all-white organization, met with an all-black group with the same name. The two groups worked out an agreement that desegregated some department store lunch counters and promised better jobs for African Americans along with token desegregation in other areas. For example, Mary Ann Pearson and Willye Dennis were hired as librarians at the downtown branch of the public library, becoming the first two African Americans to work in public buildings.²⁵

The riots also prompted officials to make the judicial system more responsive to African Americans. In 1963 the United States Supreme Court handed down its decision in *Gideon v. Wainwright*. It held that any person accused of a crime had to be appointed a lawyer. In order to deal with the large number of black defendants, the

23. Hurst, interview.

24. *New York Times*, November 5, 1964.

25. Walch, *Black Voices*, 75; Mary Ann Pearson, interview by author, Jacksonville, August 27, 1995; Willye Dennis, interview by author, Jacksonville, January 1, 1995; Hurst, interview.

State's Attorney's Office hired Leander Shaw in 1963. Shaw proved to be a very effective lawyer. He was influential in desegregating the court house in 1964. Shaw defended African Americans accused of crimes, ensured fair treatment for black defendants, and served as a liaison between the demonstrators and the court system.²⁶

Pearson and his family paid a price for their protest activities. He lost his job as coach of the Stanton baseball team, and his wife and children were forced into hiding to escape the many threats the family received. The NAACP won a partial victory, however. In April 1961, Marjorie Meeks, secretary of the youth council, and Rodney Hurst, the council's president, went to the downtown Woolworth's every day for a week and ate lunch at the previously all-white lunch counter. Lunch counter segregation in Jacksonville's downtown stores had officially ended. Segregation in many downtown restaurants continued, but the owners gave vague promises about revisiting the issue later. The failure of these agreements led to renewed demonstrations in 1964 as whites equivocated on their commitments.²⁷

Because of his swift and decisive action during the riots, the state NAACP elected Pearson as its president in 1963, giving him responsibility for Florida's fifty-nine local branches. Pearson received a mandate to continue the struggle to end segregation in Jacksonville. NAACP leaders clearly hoped that Pearson could duplicate the success he had in Jacksonville and other communities. In two years he had turned the fledgling Jacksonville NAACP into a major force for civil rights, increasing membership from a few hundred to well over 2,000. He was the first state NAACP leader to build a broad coalition that included teachers, civic leaders, the business community, politicians, and ministers. In late 1962, James Rapley replaced Rodney Hurst as Youth Council president after Hurst resigned to join the Air Force.²⁸

26. T. Edward Austin, interview by author, Jacksonville, March 20, 1998; Leander Shaw, interview by author, Tallahassee, May 18, 1990; The *Gideon v Wainwright* (vol. 372, US 335, vol. 135) decision was handed down by the Supreme Court in 1963. Attorney Abe Fortas successfully argued that Clarence Earl Gideon had been denied counsel by the State of Florida in violation of his constitutional rights. See *Southern Reporter*, 2d series (1963), 746, and *United States Reporter* (Washington, D.C., 1963). The implications of this decision for blacks are obvious.

27. *Florida Times-Union*, February 3, 1991; Hurst, interview.

28. *Florida Star*, March 2, 1963; "Jacksonville's Native Son," 53.

The ineffectiveness of the 1960 agreements made it obvious that blacks would have to reopen their assault on local businesses to improve employment opportunities in downtown stores. The local NAACP planned a boycott to begin March 1, 1963. Again NAACP officials, including Earl Johnson, Leander Shaw, Eric Simpson, and W. W. Schell, met with select Chamber of Commerce members. They sought to find some way to improve economic opportunities for blacks without negatively affecting their businesses. In response the NAACP called off the boycott.²⁹

Although Martin Luther King Jr. continued to urge nonviolence, African Americans were becoming increasingly militant in their opposition to segregation. Impatient with the pace of the civil rights movement and tired of the nonviolent policy advocated by King and his followers, many young blacks moved rapidly toward a confrontational strategy that emphasized self-defense. As 1964 unfolded, the city again found itself in the midst of a violent and angry clash between whites and blacks.

For Jacksonville's blacks there remained many things about which to complain. Despite the desegregated lunch counters, most restaurants remained segregated and most whites continued to ignore forty-four percent of the city's population. The local newspaper devoted only two pages—the infamous “star pages”—to African American news. Black police officers could neither exhibit their guns in the presence of whites nor arrest whites. In 1964, the NAACP reopened its aggressive national campaign against segregation and discrimination. Across the nation violent incidents marred the civil rights movement's nonviolent image. Young African American men trapped in urban jungles violently vented their frustrations. Rioting erupted even as Jim Crow slowly began to crumble. In St. Augustine, Florida, Martin Luther King Jr., desperately trying to keep the movement nonviolent, led the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in a direct action campaign against city officials. Meanwhile, Jacksonville's NAACP leaders continued to protest peacefully.³⁰

Stepping up the pressure, in February 1964 Pearson led the NAACP in a five-week direct action campaign against businesses and organizations that continued to practice discrimination. The boycott unfolded during Burns's second run for the governorship,

29. Florida Star, February 9, 1963; Florida Times-Union, March 26, 1964.

30. “Jacksonville's Native Son,” 54.

and threatened to derail his campaign by bringing the mayor's civil rights record into focus. Almost immediately the controversy evolved into a battle of wills between Pearson and Burns, placing Jacksonville in the center of the civil rights struggle. There had been foreboding signs that race relations would be volatile in Jacksonville. For example, school board officials refused to formulate a fair plan for integrating the school system. The Duval County School system had made token integration in some schools, but the system remained largely segregated.³¹

They were not alone in their recalcitrance. White extremist continued to threaten violence. African Americans became frustrated with the city's delay, and those caught in the middle found very little room for compromise. Either the city made radical changes or it would face massive protests. If it made changes, the white community might react, but if it did not, the black community stood ready to erupt.³²

On February 16, 1964, at 3:00 a.m., a bomb exploded under the house of Iona Godfrey, an African American civil rights worker. Godfrey's six-year-old son Donald had integrated the formerly all-white Lackawanna Elementary School. Godfrey's presence upset many white parents, and they protested and threatened violence. The explosion alerted officials to the seriousness of these threats.³³

The Godfreys were not injured in the blast, but their home, reportedly worth about \$7,500, suffered extensive damage. The bomb "ripped a yard wide, 18 inch deep hole in the ground beneath the side of the house, splintering the floors under the dining room and kitchen." Most of the family's kitchen appliances fell through the hole in the floor. The Jacksonville Police Department joined with state and local fire marshals and the Federal Bureau of Investigation to launch an investigation.³⁴

Godfrey reportedly had received a bomb threat the previous December from an anonymous female caller who gave no reason for the threat. Godfrey had once been very active in the NAACP but had recently reduced her role, although she maintained her membership. She told reporters that the school had been picketed

31. Joshua Williams, interview by author, Tallahassee, September 24, 1992. The Florida NAACP backed Burns's opponent, Miami Mayor Robert King High.

32. Ibid.

33. *Florida Times-Union*, February 17, 1964.

34. Ibid.

by white women during the first few days, but her son had not complained about any ill treatment. The Godfrey bombing signaled the extent of white resistance and ended the relative calm that had followed the 1960 riots.³⁵

Pearson faced a very tenuous situation. He wanted to maintain the pressure on white businesses, but he did not want a repeat of the 1960 violence. Pearson leaned heavily on the local Ministerial Alliance for guidance and support. In return they offered him their churches, members, and service for the cause.³⁶

Reverend Charles Dailey, who came to Jacksonville in 1959 to pastor the Oakland Street Baptist Church, served as head of Jacksonville's Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance. Almost immediately he volunteered his organization in service to help fight for civil rights. The Ministerial Alliance worked with the NAACP and YMCA on issues such as busing in the urban core and better schools for black children. Pearson preferred to let the Ministerial Alliance sponsor protests because, unlike the NAACP, they could not be sued.³⁷

Twenty-seven ministers were jailed in Jacksonville for protest activity; none of them were white. Local white ministers chose to stay out of demonstrations. More members of the Ministerial Alliance went to jail than in any similar organization in the country. The protests usually began at a church where those involved received their instructions and prayed for success. Once the meeting ended, the demonstrators would move from the church to the protest site. Pearson used several churches for his meetings, and, according to his widow, he never had trouble recruiting volunteers. Nearly everyone agreed that he had charisma, something other leaders lacked. Pearson's personality made it very difficult to say no to him. Dailey described Pearson as the Pied Piper who played the music while the ministers marched behind him wherever he led.³⁸

On February 17, 1964, a group of black protestors picketed outside the whites-only Robert Meyer Hotel while four black ministers attempted to register as guests. The ministers were arrested and joined another group of ministers who had been arrested days

35. Ibid.

36. Mary Ann Pearson, telephone interview by author, February 16, 1996.

37. Charles Dailey, telephone interview by author, January 5, 1995; Lloyd Pearson, telephone interview by author, January 31, 1996.

38. Dailey, interview; Erick Dittus, "Jacksonville's Black Community is Still Searching for The Promised Land," *Jacksonville Today*, January 1988, 38.

before for staging a sit-in at Morrison's Cafeteria.³⁹ On February 26, Pearson promised that the direct action campaign would continue until the city accepted greater integration. He wanted a biracial committee established to study racial problems in Jacksonville, and he took a group of disgruntled African Americans to a city council meeting to air their complaints. The council meeting concluded without hearing his proposal. An infuriated Pearson accused local officials of shirking their responsibilities. "There were citizens who had come to voice support for their ideas," Pearson told a reporter. "This tends to indicate that the city government is failing to give direction and guidance to the community in the broad area of human relations." He promised to continue his direct action campaign, even threatening to increase the pace and intensity of the demonstrations. City Council president Clyde "Red" Cannon denied ignoring the group. He claimed that he thought the group had been a part of another body of citizens who had attended the meeting to discuss a zoning change.⁴⁰

In response to the snub, the NAACP increased the pressure on local officials. "Pearson felt that the city was ignoring him and his demands," political activist Joshua Williams remembered. "He had decided that no matter what happened he was going to force Burns to respond." Burns considered Pearson's protests a nuisance. He knew that Jacksonville's crucial position in Florida would mean that any racial strife would attract national coverage. He hoped to settle the issues before the problem got out of hand.⁴¹

On March 2, the Jacksonville Ministerial Alliance held a meeting attended by sixty-two ministers, five of whom were black. They voted unanimously to draft a letter to Mayor Burns asking him to appoint a biracial committee to deal with racial problems in the city. The letter came on the heels of a similar recommendation forwarded by the Community Advisory Committee, an organization made up primarily of businesspeople and backed by the powerful Chamber of Commerce, which had been sent to the city council.⁴²

The Ministerial Alliance hoped to force Burns to take the lead from the council in forging better race relations in Jacksonville. The city council, however, ignored the Community Advisory Com-

39. *Florida Times-Union*, February 18, 1964.

40. *Ibid.*, February 27, 1964.

41. Williams, interview.

42. *Ibid.*; *Florida Star*, March 14, 1964. Jacksonville had two ministerial alliances; an ecumenical group, which was predominantly white, and a civil rights organization, which was all black.

mittee's recommendation. The ministers hoped that by appealing directly to Burns they could open a line of communication. Race relations in the city were rapidly deteriorating.⁴³

On March 5, the FBI announced that they had made an arrest in the Godfrey bombing. William Sterling Rosecrans, a thirty-year-old laborer from Indiana, had planted the bomb, they said. Rosecrans had a long criminal history that included several burglaries and petty crimes. He became a suspect when his car was found near a cache of dynamite stolen from a local construction company. Police officers arrested Rosecrans in St. Augustine in connection with bombings of two Florida East Coast Railroad trains. The FBI reported that Rosecrans had bombed the Godfrey house to frighten the family into taking six-year-old Donald out of Lackawanna Elementary School. Rosecrans had been under FBI surveillance for some time. He apparently had connections to one of the five Jacksonville Klan organizations. The Klan boasted a membership of about 1,000.⁴⁴

After Rosecrans's arrest the FBI widened its investigation to find collaborators, concentrating its attention on Jacksonville's Klan leaders. On March 15, FBI agents ended the investigation by arresting six Klansmen and charging them as accomplices in the Godfrey bombing. The African American press praised the FBI's actions. A *Pittsburgh Courier* reporter wrote, "Seemingly, the arrests marked the first solid cases concerning the numerous bombings which have taken place in the South since post World War II days."⁴⁵

Despite these arrests, the NAACP continued its desegregation protests. Two days after Rosecrans's arrest, police arrested fifteen African Americans for picketing. Judges sentenced ten other black teenagers to five days in prison for violating Florida's anti-sit-in law. The arrests and subsequent convictions strengthened the NAACP's resolve. By then Jacksonville's civil rights struggle had gained national attention as black periodicals showed more interest in the fight. The *Pittsburgh Courier* praised the NAACP and specifically Pearson for continuing the struggle.⁴⁶

43. *Florida Times-Union*, March 3, 1964.

44. *Ibid.*, March 5, 1964; David R. Colburn, *Racial Change and Community Crisis: St. Augustine, Florida, 1877-1980* (Gainesville, 1985), 50.

45. *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 24, 1964.

46. *Ibid.*, March 28, 1964.

To save money and to avoid arrests, Pearson used hit-and-run attacks, in which demonstrators protested at a location and then left before the police arrived. It saved money and allowed the organization to cover more areas. Protesters used hit-and-run tactics at the Robert Meyer Hotel, Morrison's Cafeteria, and Leb's restaurant.⁴⁷

The NAACP's hit-and-run tactics came with a price. During one three-day period in March, thirty-seven black youths were arrested. Judge John Santora, who presided over the cases, chastised the youths and their parents for causing the disturbances. According to Judge Santora, "It is, to say the least, in poor taste for teen-agers to become involved in something like this which might lead to racial strife. . . . The parents of these children should be condemned." The situation intensified, but Burns refused to acquiesce.⁴⁸

Pearson decided to use the hit-and-run campaign to increase pressure on Burns. He organized a mass march on City Hall to protest civil service hiring discrimination and to force the city's leaders to get involved in the negotiations. The mass march worked better than expected. Pearson timed the march to coincide with rush hour traffic. The marchers stalled traffic as they sang freedom songs and blocked roads in their slow procession toward City Hall. White motorists blew their horns in an obvious attempt to drown out the protester's singing. The police did not try to stop the horn blowing even though it violated a Jacksonville city ordinance.⁴⁹

The march was peaceful except for one ugly incident in which a white female driver purposely tried to run over a young black marcher. Though police officers witnessed the incident they made no attempt to reprimand the driver. Instead, they laughed as the frightened youth leaped onto the car's hood and began jumping up and down.⁵⁰ By March 20, the hit-and-run tactic occurred frequently. The youths demonstrated at numerous local businesses. Jacksonville found itself in the center of the civil rights movement as Americans watched the city intensely.⁵¹

The racial disturbances in Jacksonville embarrassed Burns politically. His hopes for winning the governor's race depended in large

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. *Florida Times-Union*, March 24, 1964.

50. *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 28, 1964.

51. Ibid.

part upon his ability to handle Jacksonville's racial conflicts. The longer it appeared as if he was not in control, the poorer his chances of being elected. Burns knew that his opponents would make political hay out of Jacksonville's racial problems. He had to choose between the progressives, who wanted to solve the race problem, and the conservatives, upon whom his statewide election depended.

For Burns the decision was easy. He responded with characteristic resistance and deputized 496 firefighters to strengthen his police force in order to combat the NAACP's hit-and-run tactics. The NAACP's state office warned Burns that increasing the size of the police force would not decrease the protesting but rather would increase racial tensions.⁵²

Burns knew the show of force played well with conservative voters, and he desperately wanted to end the demonstrations. He announced the deputizing of the firefighters on local television and promised to tighten up on youngsters involved in hit-and-run tactics. He blamed the problem on youths who were being negatively influenced by adults. According to Burns, "certain adults in recent days have told some Negro youths that their civil rights entitle them to force their presence at certain hotels, restaurants and other businesses. As Mayor of all people, I want to set these youths straight. You do not have such a legal or civil right."⁵³

The NAACP refused to bow to Burns's threats and intimidation. African Americans blamed him for preventing a resolution. The extent of the crisis became evident the next day when a protester threw fire bombs and light bulbs filled with paint at a "Burns for Governor" campaign office. Blacks throughout the United States praised Pearson and Jacksonville's NAACP branch. Pearson told the *Pittsburgh Courier*, "There will be no letup in the drive."⁵⁴

In Tampa Robert Saunders, serving as state field secretary for the NAACP, sent telegrams to Burns, the Justice Department, and the Civil Rights Commission questioning the legality of Burns's action in deputizing the firefighters. He reminded the press that citizens had the right to hold peaceful protests against segregation without interference. Saunders asked the federal courts to decide whether Burns had the right to halt Pearson's protests. Burns ar-

52. *Ibid.*

53. *Florida Times-Union*, March 23, 1964.

54. *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 24, 1964; *Miami News*, March 24, 1964.

gued that he had no intention of halting peaceful protests, but he had an obligation to enforce local assemblage laws.⁵⁵

Finally, on March 21 at 6:00 p.m., Burns addressed Jacksonville's racial situation on local television. He called for calm and said that he did not need a biracial committee to help him solve Jacksonville's race problem. Instead, he felt that in his capacity as mayor and police and fire commissioner he should solve the problems himself. "I am the legally constituted head of government and the spokesman for this city. . . . I refuse to delegate or relegate this responsibility to anyone or any bi-racial committee or any other group. It is my responsibility and I will face it."⁵⁶

Burns said that he could not give African Americans what they wanted because he believed in segregation. He argued that the city officials had done everything they could. They had opened public facilities to all citizens, ended discrimination within civil service employment, and provided impartial city services. Therefore he saw no just cause for citizen complaint against the local government.⁵⁷

He admitted that some businesses still discriminated as a matter of policy. He argued that they were following the law and therefore were outside of his purview. Without praising or condemning them he also admitted that some businesses had opened to African Americans. In his view, Jacksonville was providing everyone with their civil rights because each person was making an informed decision dictated by their own conscience.⁵⁸

Burns warned that he would smash any attempt to integrate downtown restaurants or hotels. Longtime Burns friend and black political activist Joshua Williams believed that Burns had little understanding of the changes that had come to his city. Blacks refused to be satisfied with glorified second-class citizenship. According to Williams, "Burns asked Pearson time and again, 'What is it that you want?'" Burns felt that he had been good to African Americans and could not understand why they had turned against him.⁵⁹

55. *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 24, 1964; *Florida Times-Union*, March 23, 1964.

56. *Florida Times-Union*, March 24, 1964; *Miami News*, March 24, 1964; E. W. Kallal, "St. Augustine and the Ku Klux Klan: 1963 and 1964," in David Garrow, ed., *St. Augustine, Florida, 1963-1964: Mass Protest and Racial Violence* (Brooklyn, 1989), 132-33.

57. *Florida Times-Union*, March 24, 1964.

58. *Ibid.*

59. Williams, interview; "What's Behind Jacksonville's Race Violence?," *Jet*, March 28, 1964, 17.

Monday, March 23, 1964, began peacefully, but soon tragic events catapulted the city into rioting. In Washington, the United States Senate debated the civil rights bill passed days before by the House of Representatives. Southerners threatened to filibuster the bill to prevent a Senate vote. Sympathetic senators who supported the bill vowed to win support for the measure despite southern resistance. In Jacksonville, a false newspaper report accused four black men of severely assaulting and leaving unconscious Billy Leroy James, a twenty-five-year-old white man. James apparently fabricated the story and inflicted the cuts and abrasions himself. However, the story aroused anger among whites. Unfortunately, during this critical period that demanded firm, resolute action, Burns was more interested in getting elected governor than in handling the racial crisis. The mayor and the city council fiddled while Jacksonville's racial fires burned.⁶⁰

That afternoon a protest rally began at Hemming Park with about 2,000 people, but police officers moved them, intimidating the marchers by swerving their motorcycles into the group. The police arrested 200 young people for protesting at downtown stores. As they moved to different stores, the protesters recruited students from nearby black schools. A bomb scare forced school officials to evacuate New Stanton High School. Students poured into the streets where they encountered protestors. The students taunted a white milk man. He reacted by throwing a milk carton at the students. This touched off a riot. The students attacked white photographers. Some left the school grounds and joined other student protestors. The students clashed with police officers who tried to round them up and return them to school.⁶¹

Many students who did not return to school spent the day rampaging through the city. They were responsible for most of the petty damage reported that day. They attacked white businesses and those owned by conservative blacks. However, school board Superintendent Ish Bryant denied that students who attended classes during day had participated in the rioting. He blamed the trouble on students who did not attend classes.⁶²

60. *Florida Times-Union*, March 24, 1964.

61. *New York Times*, November 5, 1964; *Florida Times-Union*, March 24, 1964; *Miami News*, March 24, 1964; "What's Behind Jacksonville's Race Violence?," 18.

62. *Florida Times-Union*, March 24, 1964; "What's Behind Jacksonville's Race Violence?," 18.

Reverend G. Vincent Lewis, a student at Matthew Gilbert High School during that period, remembered that someone pulled a fire alarm at the school, and as they evacuated the building, some students ran into the streets. According to Lewis, it seemed like a thousand police officers were outside waiting for the students as they fled. The police attacked students with night sticks. "Any student who was standing up was hit. I noticed they were going after students who were standing so I fell to the ground."⁶³

Lewis believed that the riot got out of hand because of the way the police responded. They used white officers to arrest black students. This further irritated the students, who lashed out at the officers. He remembered that many students tried to get arrested because it was considered a badge of courage. They ran behind the police paddy wagon trying to get arrested. "I know that this is a fact because my sister, Jacquelyn Lewis, chased a paddy wagon for about a block trying to get it to stop so the policemen could arrest her," Lewis recounted. Once they got to the police station the children were allegedly beaten by the police.⁶⁴

The situation became even more volatile after Judge John Santora promised stiff punishment for those arrested. The Jacksonville Police Department attempted to end the demonstrations that rocked the city. Earlier that day, the police broke through the door of the Broad Street headquarters of the Jacksonville NAACP and arrested a group of twenty-three teenagers and adults. Police Chief Luther Reynolds insisted that the officers entered the building only after bottles and fire bombs had been hurled at passing cars from the second floor of the building. According to police reports, juveniles broke four windshields by throwing objects from the windows.⁶⁵

As a result of early morning disturbances, officers arrested twenty-three people and charged them with vandalism and unlawful assembly. The police used mass arrests in an attempt to quell the demonstrations and end the violence. Chief Reynolds established a temporary jail in the old Maxwell C. Snyder National

63. G. Vincent Lewis, interview by author, Tallahassee, September 29, 1993.

64. *Ibid.*; "What's Behind Jacksonville's Race Violence?," 18.

65. "What's Behind Jacksonville's Race Violence?," 18; *Florida Times-Union*, March 24, 1964.

Guard Armory. As the demonstrations progressed, the police arrested more than 200 people, seventy-five of whom were youths under the age of seventeen.⁶⁶

Later that evening four white men, J. W. Rich, age twenty-two, Wayne Chessman, age twenty-one, James Davis, age twenty-two, and Elmer Cato, age nineteen, went out driving, looking for trouble. Meanwhile, Johnnie Mae Chappell, a thirty-six-year-old African American mother of ten and Albert Smith, a friend, strolled along highway US 1, desperately searching for Chappell's lost wallet. Someone in the car said, "let's get a nigger." As the pair walked, Rich picked up a .22 caliber hand gun and aimed it at the woman. Suddenly, and without warning, Rich put the gun out of the car window and fired at the pair. The two pedestrians dove to the ground. Chappell shouted to her companion, "Help! I've been shot." Smith rushed to a nearby house to find help while Chappell lay on the side of the road, clutching her badly wounded side. Within minutes an ambulance arrived and whisked Chappell from the roadside, racing toward the hospital, but she died enroute. Rich was eventually convicted of manslaughter by an all-white jury and sentenced to two years.⁶⁷

In the wake of the shooting, frustrated black youths embarked on a campaign of wanton destruction. Racial clashes erupted across the city as frightened whites battled defiant blacks. Young blacks poured into the streets armed with rocks, bottles, firebombs, and sticks. During the night-long protest, rioters damaged four buildings with firebombs. An angry protestor piled rags in front of Burns's campaign office and set them ablaze. Roving bands of youths went through the city causing minor disturbances. The Florida Highway Patrol was called in when a group of youths began throwing rocks at passing cars on Highways 295 and 95. The Highway Patrol sealed off exits on both roads and increased patrols.⁶⁸

Mayor Burns did not blame the local NAACP for the rioting. Instead, he blamed his four gubernatorial opponents for creating

66. *Florida Times-Union*, March 24, 1964.

67. "INTEGRATION: Long Day," *Newsweek*, April 4, 1964, 20-22; "A Summer of Race Violence on the Highway: Where Violence Has Started: Jacksonville, Florida," *U.S. News and World Report*, April 6, 1964, 35-36; "Toward a Long Hot Summer," *Time*, April 3, 1964, 28-29; *Florida Star*, December 5, 1964; "What's Behind Jacksonville's Race Violence?," 19. *Florida Times-Union*, March 23, 1996, and July 17, 1997.

68. *Florida Times-Union*, March 26, 1964.

the hostile atmosphere. He told the *Florida Times-Union*, "Today's demonstrations by numerous Negro children of school age was not planned by the NAACP. I received information last Friday night that today's events would occur and that they were instigated by persons active in political camps of gubernatorial candidates in the current campaign." Burns argued that Jacksonville had exceptionally good race relations until his political opponents stirred up blacks with reports that race relations were terrible in Jacksonville.⁶⁹

Burns asked African American ministers to help restore calm. Reverend J. S. Johnson, president of the Interdenominational Alliance, agreed to appear with Burns on his telecast to ask African Americans to obey city laws. Burns later appeared alone on his paid telecast to blast his political opponents for their alleged instigation of racial unrest. He told the television audience, "It's regrettable that men seeking the highest office, that of governor, would resort to disrupting the peace of a community and to involving the immature youth of either race in such a spectacle as today."⁷⁰

His opponents immediately responded to the accusations. Senator John Mathews Jr. denied making any statements about Jacksonville's situation and renewed his promise not to comment on the racial disturbances during the campaign. Mathews and Fred O. Dickinson accused Burns of playing politics with the riots. According to Dickinson, "Mayor Burns has done an outrageous disservice to the city of Jacksonville and all Florida by injecting politics at a time when misery and fear are rampant in his city. The people of Jacksonville need leadership not rabbleroxing."⁷¹

Later, when asked about the March 23 racial incidents, Burns refused to admit rioting had occurred. Instead, he compared the disruptions to a group of rowdy students returning from a football game. Burns said the incidents stemmed from people assembling without a proper permit. He said the problems occurred when demonstrators refused to obey an order to disperse. He seemed confident the problems would shortly subside.⁷²

National NAACP officials appealed to President Lyndon B. Johnson to intervene. After consulting with his staff and top Justice

69. *Ibid.*, March 24, 1964.

70. *Ibid.*, March 26, 1964.

71. *Ibid.*

72. *Ibid.*

Department officials, President Johnson chose not to interfere because he also felt that the situation would be resolved soon. Johnson's press aide admitted that the president had people in Jacksonville monitoring events. Meanwhile the Florida press blasted Burns for his decisions. The *Miami News* expressed disappointment that demonstrations occurred while Congress debated the civil rights bill. However, the paper saved its harshest criticism for Burns. The paper editorialized, "We lament, too the attitude of a candidate for the job of governor of Florida who proposes to outlaw the rights of Negroes to express their feelings in Jacksonville—or anywhere else."⁷³

African Americans continued to press the fight. Tuesday, March 24, forty-two teenagers were among the more than one hundred African Americans arrested. The disturbances began when a group of students stoned police and fire vehicles at Mathew Gilbert High School. Stanton High School students overturned and burned a police car and set off on a rampage through nearby neighborhoods. Police officers called in to quell the disturbances were unable to catch all the students.⁷⁴

Jacksonville's African American neighborhoods bore the brunt of the rioting during the second day. Later that evening Martin Luther King Jr. sent an urgent telegram through Frank Hampton to Pearson offering SCLC's mediation services. King praised Pearson for maintaining a nonviolent stance and ignoring the provocations. He wrote, "I join with you in calling on the leaders of Jacksonville to bend every effort to persuade the Negro community to remain nonviolent no matter how sorely provoked." Although appreciative, Pearson declined King's offer because he believed that he had sufficient local resources to handle the situation.⁷⁵

By Wednesday, March 25, much of the violence had subsided, although the NAACP continued picketing at the Robert Meyer Hotel and the Amber Restaurant. Lester Phillips, a white man, suffered head injuries from a brick hurled by African American youths. Protesters also fire bombed two convertibles. Police arrested seventeen-year-old Carl Ford and charged him with posses-

73. *Ibid.*; *Miami News*, March 24, 1964.

74. *Florida Times-Union*, March 25, 1964.

75. Telegram, Martin Luther King Jr. to Rutledge Pearson, March 24, 1964, Mary Pearson Papers.

sion of a fire bomb. They also arrested seven other youths and charged them with unlawful assembly.⁷⁶

It was during this critical juncture that Pearson interceded and asked the children to end the violence. Speaking to a gathering during the riot he said, "This business of violence has got to stop. We've got downtown ready to negotiate, and we must stop this violence." After Pearson's request, the destruction stopped. The venting of frustrations gave the world a chance to see what the civil rights movement could turn into if responsible leaders did not take charge. According to Reverend Lewis, "Obviously, the city had two choices after 1964. They could continue as they were going or they could open a line of communication and try to solve some of the problems." Pearson called Burns's bluff.⁷⁷

Even the *Florida Times-Union*, which had traditionally opposed the civil rights movement, recognized the need for biracial communication to solve the problem. In an editorial entitled "Inter-racial Talks Are City's First Need," the author blasted the racial demonstrations because they had destroyed the spirit of Christian ideals espoused by the Holy Week celebrations. The paper blamed the incidents on a breakdown in communications between leaders on both sides.⁷⁸

Finally on March 25, Burns called for an end to the protests through biracial communication. He called on business and civic leaders to discuss the problems and promised to act on their recommendations. Burns said that he did not just want to arrest local offenders; he wanted to end the law breaking. He called the new body the Community Relations Committee (CRC).⁷⁹

Burns warned that he could not force a change in attitude in the city, but he could initiate dialogue between the warring factions. He believed that government had to act as an enforcer of laws, but the citizens were responsible for mediating differences. He said, "Government will not be successful in dictating any policy." By establishing the CRC Burns hoped to solve the city's lingering racial problems and reinvigorate his political campaign.⁸⁰

76. *Florida Times-Union*, March 25, 1964.

77. "Jacksonville's Native Son," 52; Lewis, interview.

78. *Florida Times-Union*, March 25, 1964.

79. *Ibid.*, March 26, 1964.

80. *Ibid.*

Burns refused to comment on the effect the rioting had on his run for governor. He continued to blame Jacksonville's race problems on his political opponents, again accusing them of producing a hostile racial atmosphere. He promised to suspend his campaign until Jacksonville's racial problems were solved.⁸¹

Summarizing the rioting Eric Simpson, editor of the *Florida Star*, wrote, "Jacksonville has been visited by another terrible outbreak that has brought death to one innocent mother of six [sic] children, injury to a score, and damage to property running into thousands of dollars." Simpson blamed the business community and the city leadership for failing to lead when the situation dictated. "They [city leaders] must take the lead . . . and not pussyfoot around."⁸²

Burns refused to be pressured by the NAACP and remained defiant. He attacked the demonstrations as unwarranted. The mayor accused the NAACP of trying to do away with segregation overnight. He reiterated that he had not retreated from his promises but instead had simply opened dialogue between the races. The new committee would have no official power and its recommendations would carry weight only as recommendations. He promised never to force its proposals on the city.⁸³

Seven people made up the new committee: four whites and three African Americans. The white members were all prominent businesspeople whose companies had financial stakes in quelling the racial discord in Jacksonville. They included Robert Millius, manager of the May-Cohens department store; Robert Feagin, vice president of the Florida Publishing Company; Claude Yates, vice president of the Southern Bell Telephone and Telegraph Company in Florida; and Charles W. Campbell, senior vice president of the South Central Home Office of the Prudential Insurance Company of America. The African Americans were W. W. Schell, a local physician and president of the Jacksonville Urban League; I. H. Burney II, vice president of the Afro-American Life Insurance Company; and Earl Johnson, a prominent attorney and NAACP official. Each of these men were highly respected in the African American community and all were members of the NAACP.⁸⁴

81. *Ibid.*

82. *Florida Star*, March 24 and 28, 1964.

83. *Florida Times-Union*, March 26, 1964.

84. *Ibid.*

Robert Millius, the committee's chairperson, wanted to create a very broad base of support. He began contacting professionals, the business community, food and restaurant companies, and the ministry to get perspectives on the issues. When asked what he viewed as the underlying causes of the current crisis, Millius contended that the crux of the city's problems revolved around the segregation and mistreatment of blacks. Almost immediately he angered blacks, however, when he announced that the committee would not limit itself to a discussion of integration.⁸⁵

Lacking any official status, the CRC was doomed from the start. It proved ineffective in dealing with the problems. Eventually its black representatives resigned over disputes about the committee's agenda. African American members wanted to discuss volatile economic and social issues, while white representatives wanted only to discuss social issues. It was not until Louis Ritter became mayor in late 1964 that a more cooperative agenda was introduced. Prejudice and discrimination did not disappear in Jacksonville, but the racial climate had changed.⁸⁶

By late May Jacksonville had returned to normal. Burns continued his run for governor, eventually winning the race despite losing almost all of his support among the state's black voters. As he left the city, African Americans shed few tears. Louis Ritter became mayor and continued to desegregate the city. His integrationist stance was a welcomed change.

Rutledge Pearson played a vital role in keeping biracial communications open in Jacksonville. As one reporter wrote: "He can wheel and deal with every segment. He holds this Negro town together. If he is killed, let's hope it'll be in an auto accident." Pearson continued to lead Jacksonville's protest movement. School officials mistakenly blamed him for the December 1964 school strike, but his brother, Frank Pearson, said that although Pearson supported the students' actions, he did not lead the walkout.⁸⁷

In 1965 the NAACP's national office announced a change in tactics for future civil rights activities. Roy Wilkins said that the time had come to put aside the street protests and move toward board room compromises. By then Pearson had risen to chair of the NAACP's Southeast region. His involvement in the student strike

85. *Ibid.*

86. *Ibid.*

87. "Jacksonville's Native Son," 52; *Florida Times-Union*, March 26, 1964.

prompted the County Board of School Trustees to file a lawsuit charging blackmail against Wendall Holmes, Charles Dailey, R. L. Jones, and Pearson.⁸⁸

The NAACP's New York office sent Joan Franklin, who litigated the case with help from Earl Johnson. The school board lost but then tried to suspend Pearson. After that failed, it sued him again. Judge Roger Waybright threw out the suit because the state school attendance law violated the constitution. In August 1966, two months after the court's ruling, Pearson resigned and took a job as a business agent and organizer with the Laundry, Dry Cleaning and Dry House Workers Union. The job paid more, provided a free automobile, and allowed him to reach more people.⁸⁹

Pearson continued his work with the NAACP, however, and in 1966 he became a member of the sixty-member national board of directors and its fifteen-member executive committee. Pearson had to do a great deal of traveling with his union job, and his years of protest had earned him several enemies who continued to threaten his family. Early in January 1967, a caller warned Pearson's family that he would not live to see the end of the year. On May 1, 1967, at 6:55 a.m., traveling at 80 mph, Pearson's car skidded off a rain-slicked road just outside Waynesboro, Tennessee, and crashed into an abutment. He was on his way to lead a strike against the New York Steam Laundry in Memphis when the accident took place. Pearson, then just thirty-seven years old, died instantly. The man who had always been in a hurry finally slowed down.⁹⁰

Everyone recognized the loss. Mayor Louis Ritter described Pearson's death as a tragedy. For so many years he had been the glue that had held Jacksonville's blacks together. Charles Lenwood Lee assumed the presidency of the NAACP. Hate mail continued to flow into the Pearson house even after his death. Just before the funeral, a letter arrived that read, "A dead nigger is a good nigger." More than 5,000 people crowded into the Shiloh Metropolitan Baptist Church to attend his funeral services.⁹¹

88. *Jacksonville Journal*, February 8, 1982; Lloyd Pearson, telephone interview by author, January 31, 1996.

89. *Ibid.*; *Florida Star*, April 15, 1967.

90. The Pearson Award, brochure, Pearson folder, African American files, Florida Collection, Haydon Burns Branch, Jacksonville Public Library; *Florida Times-Union*, February 3, 1991; *Jacksonville Journal*, February 8, 1982.

91. *Florida Times-Union*, May 2, 1967, February 3, 1991; *Jacksonville Journal*, February 8, 1988.

Replacing a leader of Pearson's caliber proved difficult. No other NAACP officer in Jacksonville captured the people's attention like Pearson. In September 1977, the city dedicated a bridge in his honor. Pearson had served as the driving force that eventually toppled segregation in Jacksonville. Although he never ran in a political race, Pearson's effort made it much easier for those who did. His emphasis on nonviolent protest and aggressive, uncompromising negotiations set the standard for Jacksonville's future black leaders. Had it not been for Pearson's firm, honest leadership, the divide between blacks and whites might never have been bridged. His efforts set the stage for electoral victories by African American candidates in 1967.