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## Coming North to the South: Migration, Labor and City-Building in Twentieth-Century Miami

by Melanie Shell-Weiss

Over the past decade, scholars have worked to develop a rich array of transnational and global theories to better explain the cultural, social, and demographic processes that take place within nations, and which transcend them. As Shelley Fisher Fishkin reminded us in her presidential address to the annual meeting of the American Studies Association last year, “As the transnational becomes more central . . . we are likely to focus not only on the proverbial immigrant who leaves somewhere called ‘home’ to make a new home in the United States, but also on the endless process of comings and goings that create familial, cultural, linguistic, and economic ties across national borders.” The need for historical study of these processes, however, remains.<sup>1</sup> While

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Melanie Shell-Weiss is a postdoctoral fellow in the department of history at Johns Hopkins University. She thanks Colin Johnson, Nora Faires, Donna Gabaccia, Leslie Moch, and the participants in H-Florida’s online symposium for their comments. Special thanks go to Dawn Hugh at the Charles Tebeau Library in the Historical Museum of South Florida, and Timothy Barber at the Black Archives and Research Foundation of South Florida, Inc.

1. Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Crossroads of Culture: The Transnational Turn in American Studies—Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004,” *American Quarterly* 57 (March 2005): 22; Linda Basch, Nina Glick-Schiller, and Cristina Szanton-Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (Langhorne, Penn., 1994), 5-10. The need for historical study is underscored and developed in Michelle A. Stephens, “Black Transnationalism and the Politics of National Identity: West Indian Intellectuals in Harlem in the Age of War and Revolution,” *American Quarterly* 50 (September 1998): 592-608.

these processes may have deepened in contemporary times, for many migrants and border communities, transnationalism has long been a way of life.

Nowhere is this clearer than in Miami. Through the 1920s, Miami was home to a greater percentage of foreign-born black persons than any other city in the United States. Most of these migrants hailed from the Bahamas. Bahamian men working as carpenters and common laborers cleared the city's roads and built many of its homes and hotels between 1896 and 1920. Bahamian women staffed the city's growing number of hotels and service industries. Patterns of movement between Florida and the Bahamas remained relatively fluid. Simultaneously, in the streets, churches, on the job, and in the restaurants of Miami, West Indians and native-born African Americans began to forge a shared sense of identity as black Americans, over this early part of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> The legacy of these transnational ties shaped traditions of protest and political activity for generations to follow. How these patterns of movement and Miami's international black community developed is the focus of this paper.

By the turn of the twentieth century, North Americans were more geographically mobile than any earlier generation. Urban residents left cities across the East and upper Midwest and moved to newly developing farmlands in the West. Others sought livelihoods and greater in those same cities. International migration from China and Japan to the West Coast, from Canada, Mexico and Eastern Europe to the East and Midwest, accounted for some of the most important sources of urban population growth. By 1890, international migrants formed the majority population of most urban areas across the continental United States. Historians have estimated that by 1900, 87 percent of Chicago's population, 80 percent of New York City, and 84 percent of residents in Milwaukee and Detroit were foreign born. This movement coincided with an increasing interest—military, financial, and cultural—in life beyond the United States' borders. But this outward focus exacerbated inequalities within the Western Hemisphere, and beyond as well. As writer William Dean Howells observed in 1902, "The whole present tendency of American life is centrifugal.

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2. An important note on terminology. Unless otherwise specified, the term "African-American" is used to refer to native-born black Americans. "Bahamian" refers to first- and second-generation Bahamian migrants.

I do not attempt to say how it will be when, in order to spread ourselves over the earth, and convincingly to preach the blessings of our deeply incorporated civilization by the mouths of our eight-inch guns, the mind of the nation shall be politically centered at some time."<sup>3</sup> In Florida, the incorporation and development of Miami was both an unintended outcome and natural consequence of this new internationalism.

Located on the southern tip of the Florida peninsula, Miami developed in the early twentieth century as a border community. Separated by less than one hundred miles from the Florida Keys, Bahamian islanders traveled to Florida much the same way that they traveled between Nassau and the Bahamian Out Islands of Bimini, Abaco, Eleuthera, and Harbor Island.<sup>4</sup> Bahamian seamen salvaged treasures from sunken ships brought down by the treacherous Great Florida Reef. Others, primarily men, were drawn by seasonal work opportunities in the pineapple, lime, and citrus groves. Because the climate, vegetation, and topography of South Florida so closely resembled that of the West Indies, Bahamian migrants had a real advantage over Europeans and labor migrants from elsewhere on the United States' mainland. Florida's proximity, combined with its familiar climate and job opportunities, made it a logical destination for an already highly mobile Bahamian population.

In the late nineteenth century, however, both the frequency and duration of these visits increased. Over-farming and several harsh winters seriously undermined the Bahamian pineapple industry. Without a crop to export, this economic downturn reverberated across the nation's shipbuilding and carpentry industries as well. By contrast, Florida's booming cigar industries, open land, successful agricultural ventures, building boom, and growing range

3. William Rossiter, "Increase of Population in the United States, 1910-1920: A Study of Changes in the Population of Divisions, States, Counties, and Rural and Urban Areas, and in Sex, Color, and Nativity at the Fourteenth Census," *Census Monographs* (Washington, D.C., 1922): 76-83; William Dean Howells, *Literature and Life: Studies* (New York, NY, 1902): 3. For a detailed discussion of these transformations, see Thomas Archdeacon, *Becoming American: An Ethnic History* (New York, 1983); Roger Daniels, *Coming to America: A History of Immigration and Ethnicity in American Life* (New York, 1990).
4. James McElroy and Klaus de Albuquerque, "Migration Transition in Small Northern and Eastern Caribbean States," *International Migration Review* 22 (autumn 1988): 30-58; Howard Johnson, *The Bahamas from Slavery to Servitude, 1783-1933* (Gainesville, Fla., 1996); Ministry of Education, "The Bahamian American Connection," (Nassau, Bahamas, 1991).



of service industries created a demand for both male and female worker that seemed unlimited by the early twentieth century. Florida also offered the possibility of a regular wage, rather than pay via a “truck” or piece system, which was often irregular. And growth in the region showed no sign of slowing. “Miami, ‘the coming Metropolis of South Florida,’ the marvelous city only six months old with a population of over 2,500, with brick business blocks and mammoth hotels . . . already has a waterworks system and nearly ten miles of paved streets under way,” the *Miami Metropolis* boasted in October 1896. Stories of Bahamians teaching European and North American settlers how to live with the heat and mosquitoes, which fruits and vegetables they could and could not eat, and how to clear and work with the tough Florida pine, peppered the memoirs of Miami’s pioneers. By 1900, Miami was home to a higher concentration of Bahamians than any city outside of the Bahamas.<sup>5</sup>

Using migration as a primary family economic strategy was not peculiar to Bahamians. Many Caribbean scholars and historians have noted that labor migrations within the Caribbean basin were commonplace through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. West Indian labor migrants, most of them black or mulatto, formed the core workforce on banana, coffee, and sugar plantations across the Caribbean and Latin America. Cuba’s cigar industry also drew a large number of workers from Haiti, Jamaica, and the West Indies. Other migrants worked to construct a military base in South Carolina in the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup>

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5. Ministry of Education, “The Bahamas in the Late Nineteenth Century, 1870-1889,” (Nassau, Bahamas, 1987); Howard Johnson, “‘A Modified Form of Slavery’: The Credit and Truck Systems in the Bahamas in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 28 (October 1986): 729-43; *Miami Metropolis*, 23 October 1896, Florida Collection, Miami-Dade Public Library, microfilm; Ralph Munroe and Vincent Gilpin, *The Commodore’s Story* (New York, 1930); Arva Moore Parks, *The Forgotten Frontier: Florida Through the Lens of Ralph Middleton Munroe* (Miami, Fla., 1977): 111; George E. Merrick, “Pre-Flagler Influences of Lower Florida East Coast,” *Tequesta* vol. (March 1941): pgs. The significance of Florida as a receiving area for Bahamian migrants over this period has been well documented; see Paul Albury, *The Story of the Bahamas* (London, Eng., 1975); Michael Craton, *A History of the Bahamas* (London, UK, 1962); Jack Harewood, “Introduction and Background: Population and Migration” in *Contemporary Caribbean: A Sociological Reader*, ed. Susan Craig (St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, 1981); Louis Diston Powles, *The Land of the Pink Pearl: Recollections of Life in the Bahamas* (London, Eng., 1888).
  6. Richard Bonham, *Caribbean Migrants: Environment and Human Survival on St. Kitts and Nevis* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1983); S. Lieberman, *A Piece of the Pie: Black and White Immigrants since 1880* (Berkeley, Calif., 1980); Velma Newton, *The*

What made the Florida case unique was both the large number of women who formed the core of these migrations and the types of work they were doing. Wage work for women was particularly plentiful across the city's service professions. These job opportunities increased as the number of hotels and the city's tourism industry developed over the first decades of the twentieth century. For the native-born and Bahamians alike, these jobs were the primary source of wage work for black women in Miami through the 1920s. In the first decade of the twentieth century, such job opportunities seem to have drawn nearly as many women as men. Unlike the city's white immigrant community, where men outnumbered women by almost two to one in 1900, in Miami and Coconut Grove, Bahamian women and men appeared to be working in the area in relatively equal numbers.<sup>7</sup>

The experience of Isaac and Maria Roberts provides but one example of these early mobility patterns and migration strategies. Isaac Roberts came to the United States from the Bahamas for the first time in 1886 when he was 19-years-old and worked as a common laborer, most likely in the building trades. Martha, however, had been in the United States since she was a very young child. The two were married in 1891, when he was 24 and she was 18 years of age. All of their five children, including one son and four daughters, were born in Florida. Although no occupation is listed for Martha in the census, it is likely that she did some kind of paid labor within her home such as taking in washing, mending, or doing period domestic work in one of the nearby white homes.

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*Silver Men: West Indian Labor Migration to Panama, 1850-1914* (Mona, Jamaica, 1984); Malcolm J. Proudfoot, *Population Movements in the Caribbean* (Port of Spain, Trinidad, 1950); Jerome McElroy and Klaus de Albuquerque, "Migration Transition in Small Northern and Eastern Caribbean States," *International Migration Review* 22 (autumn 1988): 30-58; Rosina Wiltshire, "Implications of Transnational Migration for Nationalism: The Caribbean Example," in *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration: Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Nationalism Reconsidered*, eds. Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch and Cristina Blanc-Szanton (New York, 1992): 180-81.

7. This estimation is based on both quantitative and anecdotal evidence; see 1900 U.S. Census Manuscript, Coconut Grove, Precinct 4 and Miami City, Precinct 7 (Washington, D.C., 1904); Thelma Vernell Anderson Gibson, *Forbearance: The Life Story of a Coconut Grove Native* (Miami, Fla., 2000); Louise Stirrup Davis, Kate Stirrup Dean, and Lillian Stirrup Mason, interviewed by Harvey and Mary Mae Napier, Sam Bolldrick, and Arva Moore Parks, 29 May 1973, Oral History Transcripts, Charles Tebeau Library, Historical Museum of South Florida, Miami.

Occupations were listed for very few women in Dade County's census manuscripts, and when an occupation was listed, it differed significantly across ethnic and class lines. For middle- and upper middle-class white women, their occupation was most often listed as "keeping house." This designation was rarely used for black women, native- or foreign-born. In some cases, women are listed as laundresses, nurses, or maids, particularly after 1910. But in earlier periods, it was more common to have "occupation" left blank. Anecdotal evidence tells a different story, however. Most of Miami's early residents remember women working long hours, either alongside their husbands in the fields or taking in laundry or mending in their homes.<sup>8</sup> This pattern is the direct result of the dual-wage economy that developed and persisted for white women and women of color across the United States over the early twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> Even at a time when cultural prescriptions assumed men to be the primary breadwinner, because most jobs for black men were limited to service sector or low-paying "unskilled" jobs, it was very difficult for black men, foreign- and native-born alike, to support families on a single wage. Thus women's wages were often essential to family survival in the United States.

Men primarily worked in the construction trades or as fishermen, wreckers, or spongers. As one early South Floridian recalled, "All our heavy laborers were Bahamian negroes." Work on the Florida East Coast Railroad also proved a major draw despite Henry Flagler's own reluctance about depending on black labor. According to one Miami newspaper, Flagler even went to far as to

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8. Kate Stirrup Dean, interviewer unknown, Oral History Transcripts, Charles Tebeau Library. Reporting of married women's wage labor increased in the Census of 1900 and 1910 as a direct result of new qualifications given to enumerators that "[t]he occupation, if any, of a child, of any age, or by a woman is just as important, for census purposes, as the occupation followed by a man. Therefore, it shall never be taken for granted, without inquiry that a woman or child has no occupation"; U.S. Census Bureau, *Twenty Censuses: Population and Housing Questions 1790-1950* (Washington, D.C., 1979): 43. Conflict over this language caused it to be dropped in 1920.

9. For an extended discussion of these patterns and occupational reporting, see Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "Cleaning Up/Kept Down: A Historical Perspective on Racial Inequality in 'Women's Work,'" *Stanford Law Review* 43 (July 1991): 1337-38; Elizabeth H. Pleck, "A Mother's Wages: Income Earning Among Married Italian and Black Women, 1896-1911," in *A Heritage of Her Own: Toward a New Social History of American Women*, ed. Nancy Cott and Elizabeth Pleck (New York, 1979), 367.



fire all black laborers in 1904, with the hopes that he could replace them with Italian workers who he planned to recruit by opening offices in Chicago and New York City. By 1906, the influx of new European workers was being felt in many corners of the young city. As one journalist noted, "With the large importation of labor from the north, a good clear Irish brogue is becoming the language of Miami streets." Others complained that Greek was the language now heard most often in the city's courts. Overall, however, these attempts to replace native-born African-American and Bahamian men with European immigrants appear to have been largely unsuccessful. By 1910, European immigrants still made up only 6 percent of the total population in all of Dade County, a decline from 8 percent of first- and second-generation European immigrants who were reported by the census in 1900.<sup>10</sup> The largest numbers of foreign-born persons in Miami remained non-white immigrants from the Caribbean.

Between 1896 and 1924, more Bahamians traveled to South Florida seeking work than to any other location, with the number of migrants who chose Miami as their first destination only accelerating after its port opened in 1905. By 1910, more than 35 percent of Miami's residents were African-American; of those, roughly one-third was from the Bahamas or elsewhere in the West Indies. Some reports estimated that as many as two to three thousand migrants arrived in the city each year through the late 1900s and early 1910s. Residents of Miami compared these waves of migrants to "waves rushing upon the shore." Small schooners, "so crowded with people that there was barely standing room on their decks," arrived with fifty or sixty people at one time. Through the 1910s, black West Indians comprised nearly one-quarter of the city's pop-

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10. Thelma Peters, *Biscayne Country, 1870-1926* (Miami, Fla., 1981), 229; *Miami Evening Record*, 27 October 1904, quoted in Henry Marks, "Labor Problems of the Florida East Coast Railway Extension from Homestead to Key West: 1905-1907," *Tequesta* 32 (1972): 30. This debate about the dependence on black labor also occurred across Florida over this period; see George Pozzetta, "Foreigners in Florida: A Study of Immigration Promotion, 1865-1910," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 53 (October 1974): 153; *Miami Evening Record*, January 8, 1906, Miami Herald Collection, Charles Tebeau Library; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910*, Vol. II: Population 1910: Reports by States, with Statistics for Counties, Cities and Other Civil Divisions: Alabama-Montana (Washington, D.C., 1913), Table I: Composition and Characteristics of the Population for the State and for Counties, 320-21.



ulation, making it home to the largest percentage of black immigrants than any other city in the United States.<sup>11</sup>

Once in Miami, Bahamians played a central role in shaping the city. As lines of segregation hardened over the early twentieth century, most Bahamians had little choice but to settle in the city's designated "colored districts." The largest of these was "Central Negro District," known locally as Overtown and located in the heart of Miami's downtown. By one historian's estimation, Overtown made up roughly 15 percent of Miami's original area and, through the 1920s, was home to more than 25 percent of the city's population, making it among the city's most crowded areas.<sup>12</sup> Others settled in Coconut Grove, one of the oldest neighborhoods in the area, located just to the south of central Miami on the opposite side of the Miami River. Coconut Grove had the highest concentration of Bahamians, dating back to the 1880s. While some Bahamians also chose to live in Lemon City, the vast majority settled in Coconut Grove or Overtown through the 1920s.

Proximity to jobs was likely the biggest reason for these settlement patterns. Both Coconut Grove and Miami originally developed outward from the major hotels: the Peacock Inn and Flagler's Royal Palm, respectively. Thus, for laundresses and domestics, as well as a range of service and construction workers, living in these areas put them close to their jobs as well as city services. By 1900, Overtown boasted a range of black-owned businesses and services including six restaurants, five barbers, carpenters and dressmaking shops, four groceries and meat markets, ice wagons, blacksmith shops, two firewood contractors, fisheries, mechanics, a bicycle repair shop, cigar maker, fruit stand,

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11. Albury, *The Story of the Bahamas*; Craton, *A History of the Bahamas*; Harewood, "Introduction and Background: Population and Migration"; Richardson, *Caribbean Migrants*; 1910 United States Census of Population by State (Washington, D.C., 1913), 301; Table 1: Composition and Characteristics of the Population by County; *Miami Metropolis*, 12 June 1909, quoted in Raymond Mohl, "Black Immigrants: Bahamians in Early Twentieth-Century Miami," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 65 (January 1987): 271-97. Calculations based on 1910 United States Census Manuscript, Dade County, Precincts 8 and 9; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910*, Vol. 2: Population 1910: Reports by States, with Statistics for Counties, Cities and Other Civil Divisions: Alabama-Montana (Washington, D.C., 1913): Table 1: Population of Minor Civil Divisions: 1900, 1910 and 1890, 303-304.
  12. Paul S. George, "Colored Town: Miami's Black Community, 1896-1930," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 56 (April 1978): 432-47.



Historic Overtown Street Scene Circa 1915. Courtesy of the Black Archives and Research Foundation of South Florida Inc., Miami.

plumber, and tailor. Two boarding houses helped to meet housing needs in this growing community while organizations including the Eastern Star Lodge, the Masons, the Elks, the Odd Fellows, the Love and Charity Lodge, the Heroines of Jericho, the Friendship Garden and Civic Club, the Algonquin Club, the Collegians Club, the King of Clubs, the Egelloc Civic and Social Club Inc., also were at the center of Overtown's community life.<sup>13</sup>

Coconut Grove boasted a range of similar services and today bears the most lasting imprint of its Bahamian pioneers. Migrants in the Grove built several churches, including St. Agnes and Christ Episcopal. Through the 1920s, membership in both congregations remained almost exclusively Bahamian. Thus, they were commonly referred to as "Nassau" churches rather than "Episcopal" or "Baptist." Housing styles in Coconut Grove also provided a constant reminder of the strong ties between Miami and the Caribbean. Built in the style of their homeland, Bahamians' homes were distinctive single- and double-story structures made from Florida pine, with horizontal siding and elevated

13. Marvin Dunn, *Black Miami in the Twentieth Century*, 88.



Bahamian community in Coconut Grove, taken in front of the boathouse near the Peacock Inn in the mid-1880s. Courtesy of the Ralph Middleton Munroe Collection, Charles Tebeau Library, Historical Museum of South Florida, Miami.

on stilts. Through the 1910s, some homes also had windmills. These structures helped to pump water for washing, since few homes in any of the city's black neighborhoods had indoor plumbing until well into the 1920s or later.<sup>14</sup>

Bahamian families in Florida also frequently assisted extended kin and lodgers. Since all members of the household worked, including children, money was pooled to support those living in Florida, with additional funds set aside to send back to the Bahamas as remittances. This was an excellent strategy for family survival, but it also could be a source of tension, particularly for young men and women who hoped to save their own wages to buy their own property. Such was the case for Ebenezer Stürup. “[My father] said that what happened was . . . if you made a dollar and you were a young man, then fifty cents had to be left with someone

14. Gertrude Sampson Pratt, interviewed by Dorothy Fields, n.d., *Oral History Transcripts*; Marvin Dunn, *Black Miami in the Twentieth Century* (Gainesville, FL, 1997): 112; Davis, Dean, Mason interview.



at home," his daughter, Kate Stirrup Dean recalled; "So my father said he didn't like that, so he left Key West to come to Miami."<sup>15</sup> While familial and migration networks were important sources of support for new migrants and extended kin both in Florida and the Bahamas, they lost their usefulness for those who chose to remain in Florida over time. For those new migrants who became more settled, many wanted to pursue perceived economic opportunities and accumulate enough money to be able to set up their own households.

Lodgers were an important income source as well and provide yet another glimpse into the fluidity of movement and importance of transnational migrant networks within Miami's early Bahamian and native-born African American communities alike. Through 1910, 20 percent of Miami's black households had boarders. Roughly 40 percent of Bahamian households included boarders compared to 15 percent within native-born, black households. Joseph Portier's household provides one illustration. Portier was 24 years of age at the time of the 1900 census and worked as a "boater." Although Joseph was born in Florida, both of his parents were from the Bahamas. After his father died, his mother came to live with him in Miami where she worked as a washerwoman. To supplement their income, they also took in lodger Emma Whittaker, who worked as a cook in the city. Whittaker was 22 years of age, and although she had been married for one year, her husband was not living with her at the time of the census. While most lodgers were single men, in some cases single or unaccompanied women like Whittaker rented rooms for themselves and their children. The majority of lodgers in Miami's Bahamian community were unmarried and without children through 1920. Most were also recent arrivals from the islands or seasonal laborers.<sup>16</sup>

The practice of taking in lodgers was commonplace in both immigrant and African American communities throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and has been well documented through a wealth of historical studies of the United

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15. Davis, Dean, and Mason interview.

16. Tabulation based on 1900 and 1910 U.S. Census of Population, by State, Miami City, Precincts 4, 7, and 8 (Washington, D.C., 1912, 1922); Wava Rowe Wright, "1900 Census of Dade County, Florida with Index Added," (Washington, D.C., 1902), Microfilm Publication Dade T-623, Roll No. 167, transcription, in Florida Collection, Miami-Dade Public Library, 134-35.



States and Caribbean alike.<sup>17</sup> Although in the first years of Miami's development, it was relatively unusual for Bahamians to live as boarders in African American households or vice versa, as lines of segregation grew more rigid the divides between foreign- and native-born Black residents appeared to break down. In the city's earliest days, black residents lived in the same area, but restrictions were primarily informal although, by the 1920s, an elaborate set of legal regulations set curfew times and designated housing types. Streets within the city's black neighborhoods remained unpaved. Sanitation and indoor plumbing were rare or nonexistent.

The city's all white and predominantly native-born police force did little to prevent crime within the city's black neighborhoods, and instead were a source of consistent harassment and fear for black residents, native- and foreign-born alike. "Where I was born policemen were dressed in immaculate uniforms, carried no deadly weapon save a billy; here, shirt-sleeved officers of the law carried pistols, smoked and chewed tobacco on duty," one Bahamian man recalled of Miami in the 1910s. Another early migrant recalled how by the 1920s, members of the Ku Klux Klan rode through the center of town on their horses, cracking whips and threatening to beat any black man, woman, or child who dared to cross their path. Another second-generation migrant recalled how the angry native-born whites burned a cross in front of her home when she and her father, a prominent minister, registered to vote.<sup>18</sup>

Yet, Bahamians continued to assume the social cost of this migration to Miami in order to achieve higher economic standing

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17. E. Franklin Frazier, "Ethnic Family Patterns: The Negro Family in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 53 (May 1948): 435-38; Sandra Gunning, "Nancy Prince and the Politics of Mobility, Home and Diasporic (Mis)identification," *American Quarterly* 53 (March 2001): 32-69; S.J. Kleinberg, "Children's and Mother's Wage Labor in Three Northeastern U.S. Cities, 1880-1920," *Social Science History* 29 (spring 2005): 45-76.
  18. Paul S. George, "Policing Miami's Black Community, 1896-1930," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 57 (1979): 434-50; Ira De A. Reid, *The Negro Immigrant: His Background, Characteristics and Social Adjustment, 1899-1937* (New York, 1939), 189; Margery Wake, interviewed by Dorothy Jenkins Fields and broadcast as part of "In the Beginning," Program 1, *Legacy Project*, Black Archives History and Research Foundation of South Florida Inc. and Dade County Cable Vision Project (Miami, Fla., n.d.); Irene Sampson Pratt, interviewed by Dorothy Jenkins Fields n.d., Oral History Transcripts.

and stability. Increasingly, social ties among Bahamians and African Americans strengthened as well. Whereas, in 1900, it was relatively unusual to find examples of intermarriage or shared living arrangements among Bahamians and native-born African Americans, by 1920 roughly one-third of households with boarders included both native-born African Americans and Bahamian migrants. Rates of intermarriage increased as well. Of the 382 Bahamian households living in Miami's Eight Precinct (which included Overtown) in 1910, 12 percent represented unions between Bahamians and African Americans from Florida or neighboring states. In nearly three-fourths of all marriages among Miami's Bahamians and African Americans, the women were Bahamian and their husbands were native-born. While some historians have suggested that men's greater mobility resulted in a significant undercount of Bahamian men in the census findings, the high rates of women in these inter-ethnic marriages are consistent with recent findings by sociologists Zhenchao Quian and Daniel Lichter, whose studies of contemporary immigrants to the United States found that among immigrant racial minorities, women are somewhat more likely than men to marry outside of their group.<sup>19</sup> These Bahamian migrants then joined an international black community and forged new ties with other native- and foreign-born black residents alike as they negotiated the cityscape.

Of all the organizations and institutions founded in Miami by Bahamian migrants, one of the most striking was the Miami

19. Tabulation based on 1910 U.S. Census of Population, By State, Miami City, Precinct 8 (Washington, D.C., 1922). On patterns of marital assimilation among foreign and native born, see Guillermina Jasso, Douglas Massey, Mark Rosenzweig, and James P. Smith, "Assortive mating among married new legal immigrants to the United States: evidence from the new immigrant survey plot," *International Migration Review* 34 (winter 2000): 443-59; Zhenchao Qian and Daniel Lichter, "Measuring marital assimilation: intermarriage among natives and immigrants," *Social Science Research* 30 (winter 2001): 307-308. Bahamian migration to Florida and the United States has generally been understood as a primarily male phenomenon, where men migrated first and worked predominantly in agricultural work between October and March, before returning to the Bahamas; see Howard Johnson, "Bahamian Labor Migration to Florida in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," *International Migration Review* 22 (spring 1988): 93; Raymond Mohl, "Black Immigrants: Bahamians in Early Twentieth-Century Miami," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 74 (spring 1996): 284.

Chapter of the Universal Negro Improvement Association. Originally established in Jamaica by Marcus Garvey in 1914, the UNIA's national headquarters was relocated to New York City in 1918. Although the organization remained an almost exclusively urban movement, through the 1920s, local chapters of the organization were established across the United States, the Caribbean, and Central and South America. Their primary focus was on developing a range of black-owned and black-operated business enterprises, including a shipping company called "The Black Star Line" which the UNIA hoped would facilitate economic ties between the United States, the Caribbean, and West Africa. The organization also had a special interest in the Bahamas. Although few of these plans became realities for the organization, in the early 1920s, the "Black Star Line" tried to establish a regular shipping route between Nassau and South Florida. In 1921, the UNIA also formed a Bahamian Rejuvenation League to improve education in the islands.<sup>20</sup>

Miami's black communities, both native- and foreign-born, had long practiced Garvey's doctrine of black self-help and economic and political independence. But the UNIA's more explicitly political and race-conscious stance helped to bridge some of the divides that had separated the communities along lines of class and nativity. As violence against black residents accelerated, Reverend John A. Davis from the Ebenezer A.M.E. Church and Reverend Robert Burns Brookings, presiding elder of the Florida District A.M.E. Church, attended the August 1920 UNIA National Convention in New York City. Both ministers were native born. Davis was appointed as Miami's district organizer. Upon his return to Miami, he quickly worked to set up the first UNIA meeting in the city on September 16 in an Overtown church. Two

20. E. David Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Madison, Wis., 1955), 221-22; John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York, 1967), 489-92; Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Westport, Conn., 1976); Theodore Vincent, *Black Power and the Garvey Movement* (Berkeley, Calif., 1972); Theodore Draper, *The Rediscovery of Black Nationalism* (New York, 1970), 48-56. There has been surprisingly little scholarly attention given to UNIA activities in Miami. To date, the only other published work on Miami's UNIA is Kip Vought, "Racial Stirrings in Colored Town," *Tequesta*, 60 (2000): 56-76.



months later, Miami's black residents voted to officially establish a Miami UNIA Chapter.<sup>21</sup>

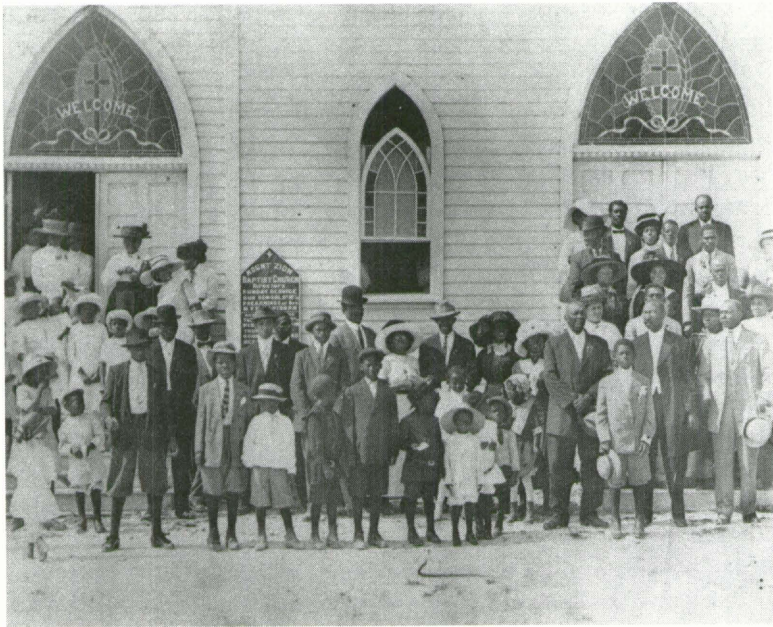
From its first organization meeting on November 14, Miami's UNIA chapter brought together a range of international black leaders. Percy Styles, a Bahamian and prominent businessman in Overtown, called the meeting to order and was appointed as Traveling Organizer. Dr. Alonzo Potter Burgess Holly, a Haitian-born doctor who lived and practiced in Overtown, gave a "fiery speech concerning the revolutionary activities" taking place in Haiti. Other leaders at the meeting included Reverend J.H. LeMansley, minister of the English Wesleyan Church, who "outlined some of the wrongs to the negroes," and Reverend George Emonai Carter, an African-American from the northern U.S. who served as secretary of Miami's black Y.M.C.A. and a member of the Colored Board of Trade. Two women, identified as Mrs. S. Johnson and Mrs. Maud Farrington, were also listed as being instrumental to the founding of Miami's UNIA Chapter.<sup>22</sup> Many more women were soon listed among its leaders. By 1921, the organization was meeting in its own building, in Overtown's Liberty Hall.

Membership grew quickly. By December 1920, four hundred members were meeting in a Baptist church in Overtown. The chapter attracted ever more attention from the Federal Bureau of Investigations. Within less than six months after it was founded, the FBI had appointed a separate agent whose sole responsibility was monitoring the chapter's activities. Within less than a year after its founding, membership in the organization had grown to more than one thousand members. While Bahamians and other

21. "Opening of UNIA Convention: International Conventions of Negroes Opens in Blaze of Glory," Liberty Hall, New York, 1 August 1920, in Robert Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, 12 vols. (Berkeley, Calif., 1987), 2: 476-87; "Reports by Bureau Agent Leon E. Howe," Miami, Florida, 6 July 1921, in Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, 3: 514, 515 n 2. Because Howe was primarily concerned about working with Immigration Authorities to deport black radicals, his report carefully distinguished which leaders of Miami's UNIA were "aliens" and noted all exceptions, including Davis whom he identified as "American." This distinction, however, may still have pointed to citizenship rather than ethnicity, but he repeatedly identified Davis as being "African American" rather than "Bahamian" or "West Indian" throughout his report.

22. "Report by Bureau Agent William C. Sausele," Jacksonville, Florida, 22 November 1920, in Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey Papers and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, 3: 91.





Miami's black communities outside the Mt. Zion Church in Overtown, 1915. Courtesy of the Black Archives and Research Foundation of South Florida Inc., Miami.

Caribbean-born black immigrants still made up the bulk of the members, an important core of native-born African Americans joined the organization as well.<sup>23</sup> This balance of foreign and native-born members remained true throughout the life of Miami's UNIA, unlike other chapters across the country like those in New York and Los Angeles.<sup>24</sup>

23. Leon E. Howe, Special Agent, Bureau of Investigation, Miami, Florida to Howard P. Wright, Special Agent in Charge, Jacksonville, Florida, 22 November 1920, in Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, 9: 42 n 1, 42 n 2. Howe was the investigative gent in Miami through 1926; see "Reports by Bureau Agent Leon E. Howe," 3: 513-16. According to Howe, native-born African Americans made up only about one quarter or less of the members in the Miami Chapter, although many of these individuals were in leadership roles. Membership information cited in FBI surveillance reports remain the only surviving source which describes who made up the Miami UNIA Chapter. The source for this information, of course, makes the numbers subject to some question. Given the FBI's interest in deportation and using citizenship as leverage, it seems like the numbers of foreign-born would have been exaggerated rather than underreported.

24. In contrast to memories of those like W.E.B. DuBois, who wrote that "Garvey established a little group of his own Jamaican countrymen in Harlem and

The Miami Chapter of the UNIA served a variety of community functions. Like other branches around the country, the Miami Chapter sold Black Star Line stock. Members paid dues of around thirty-five cents a month, ten cents of which was sent to the UNIA headquarters in New York City. The remainder was added to the local treasury and used to rent meeting space, pay speakers' fees, and support local activities. From their New York City headquarters, chapters could buy copies of the UNIA constitution, songbooks, photographs, flags, uniforms, and *The Negro World*, a newspaper published by the organization. Meetings usually began with prayers and songs, such as the "Star Spangled Banner" and religious hymns. In Miami, some Bahamian songs were usually sung as well. A series of talks and musical performances usually followed.<sup>25</sup>

Like other chapters, Miami enjoyed a separate Ladies Auxiliary, headed by Lily Farmington and Nettie Troublefield. Although in the context of the U.S.-based UNIA this was not unusual, in many of the Caribbean branches of the organization—including those in the Bahamas—women did not hold such central leadership roles. For Bahamian women, then, the opportunity to gain political leadership and organizing experience through Miami's UNIA paved the way to future activism and benevolence work in the islands. Frances "Mother" Butler and Lettie Tinker, for example, returned to Nassau after living in Miami for several years and founded the Bahamian "Mother's Club" in 1920. Although the organization was founded to aid hurricane victims, it soon became permanent, extending its mission to collecting used clothing and furniture for the needy and the aged. By the 1930s,

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launched his own program," most scholars have argued that by the 1920s, the UNIA was almost entirely native-born; see W.E.B. DuBois, "Back to Africa," in *Marcus Garvey and the Vision of Africa*, ed. John Henrick Clarke (New York, 1974): 109; E. Franklin Frazier, "Garvey: A Mass Leader," in Clarke, ed., *Marcus Garvey and the Vision of Africa*, 237; D. Cronon, *Black Moses*, 42; "Editorial," March 1925, in Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, 6: 128 n 4.

25. "Reports by Bureau Agent Leon E. Howe," Miami, Florida, 6 July 1921 and 12 August 1921, in Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, 3: 515, 656-57; Judith Stein, *The World of Marcus Garvey* (Baton Rouge, La., 1991), 223-26; Emory Tolbert, *The UNIA and Black Los Angeles: Ideology and Community in the American Garvey Movement* (Los Angeles, Calif., 1980); Howard P. Wright, Bureau Agent in Charge, Jacksonville, Florida, to Lewis J. Baley, Miami, Florida, 11 March 1921, in Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, 3: 244-47.

the "Mother's Club" also played a role in the blossoming trade union movement within the Caribbean.<sup>26</sup>

The chapter also had an active Juvenile Division that focused on the teaching of Africa but also emphasized teaching the history of the Caribbean and Bahamas. With the purchase of a motion picture machine in 1921, the Miami Chapter began to show films as well.<sup>27</sup>

While the chapter's membership may have started out as a "who's who" of Miami's black leadership, within a few short years, the organization had attracted a growing number of working-class members as well. Most notable was Bahamian labor leader James Nimmo who, in the 1940s and 1950s, became well known for his role in organizing Miami's black porters and cleaners through the International Laundry Workers and Transportation Workers Union. The tremendous participation of women in Miami's UNIA Chapter was also striking.<sup>28</sup>

The political alliances forged among Miami's foreign- and native-born black residents in the early 1920s, however, soon broke down in the face of increasing harassment by police and federal agents, growing immigration restrictions, and deepening divisions within the leadership of the UNIA itself. In July 1921, hooded white thugs kidnapped, beat, and threatened to lynch Reverend Reggie Higgs, a Bahamian and minister of Coconut Grove's St. James Baptist Church. Later that month, Archdeacon Philip Irvin, an Irish minister at Saint Agnes Episcopal Church in Overtown, was also kidnapped and nearly lynched by a white gang. Both ministers were ordered to leave town and immediately stop encouraging black residents to get better jobs and teaching "Negro members contempt for American institutions." At first, this brutality only served to strengthen the Miami chapter's membership. Nationwide, however, the UNIA continued to hear complaints that West Indians were shown favoritism within the ranks. Although the organization committed to promoting the leadership of

26. Michael Craton and Gail Saunders, *Islanders in the Stream: A History of the Bahamian People*, 2 vols. (Athens, Ga., 1992), 2: 256.

27. "Reports by Bureau Agent Leon E. Howe," 6 July 1921, 3: 514-15.

28. Life Notes on James Bertram Nimmo, Marcus Garvey Collection; James Bertram Nimmo, interview with Marvin Dunn, quoted in Dunn, *Black Miami in the Twentieth Century*: 124; Alex Lichtenstein, "'Scientific Unionism' and the 'Negro Question': Communists and the Transport Workers Union in Miami, 1944-1949" in *Southern Labor in Transition, 1940-1995*, ed. Robert Zieger (Knoxville, Tenn., 1997): 63.



“American Negroes,” particularly in the American South, Garvey’s 1922 decision to meet with white supremacist and Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard Edwin Clarke in Atlanta, and his praise of Jim Crow and racial purity, upset many of even his biggest supporters within the UNIA.<sup>29</sup> Garvey’s 1923 conviction of mail fraud and subsequent jail sentence in 1925 further undermined organizing efforts at both the local and national levels. A financial debate within Miami’s chapter about UNIA-owned rental properties created further divides.

In 1927, however, it looked as though Miami’s chapter was going to enjoy a revival. In March, Laura Kofey spoke to a crowd at Miami’s Liberty Hall; it was one of her first speeches in the American South. Kofey identified herself as an African princess from the Gold Coast, a daughter of King Knesiphi. She said she was inspired to come to the United States by Garvey’s editorials in the *Negro World*. A charismatic speaker, Kofey soon attracted larger and larger crowds across Florida. Division reports told of how she kept her audiences spellbound for hours. “Garveyism is spreading like wildfire down here in Miami,” one individual wrote to the *Negro World*; “Mrs. Coffey [*sic*] is marvelous.” Over eight hundred new members joined the Miami chapter in a single week. Crowds of thousands gathered on the grounds of Liberty Hall for a June meeting where Kofey was scheduled to speak. In Tampa, Jacksonville, and St. Petersburg, local communities had a similar response to her message and her presence.<sup>30</sup>

29. “Report by Bureau Agent Leon E. Howe,” Miami, Florida, 22 June 1921, in Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, 3: 244-45, 494-95; *Miami Herald*, 2 July, 30 July 1921; “Enclosure,” Miami, Florida, 11 March 1921, in Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, 3: 247 n 3; “Report by Bureau Agent Leon E. Howe,” Miami, Florida, 12 August 1921, in Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, 3: 656-57; “Report by Special Employee Andrew M. Battle,” New York, New York, 22 August 1922, in Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, 4: 949.
30. Marcus Garvey to J.A. Craigen, Atlanta, Georgia, 29 September 1927, in Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, 6: 594-95, 594 n 1; *Negro World*, 4 June, 2 July 1927, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., microfilm. For a discussion of Kofey’s impact on the UNIA nationally, see Richard Newman, “Warrior Mother of the Africa’s Warriors of the Most High God”: Laura Adorker Kofey and the African Universal Church,” in *Black Power and Black Religion*, ed. Richard Newman (West Cornwall, Conn., 1987), 131-45; Stein, *The World of Marcus Garvey*, 144-45. One Jacksonville reporter described how “the princess speaks every night in the week and twice on Sunday . . . at every meeting she holds, there are from four to fifty-two persons added to the UNIA”; see *Negro World*, 21 May 1927.



Yet, the national UNIA leadership was deeply suspicious of Kofey, particularly as she developed plans of her own to purchase ships and develop African saw mills—ideas that had not originated with Garvey or been approved by the UNIA national headquarters. On the local level, Kofey also came under fire from Florida chapters concerned about the large crowds drawn to her Sunday meetings. While Liberty Hall had long been a popular meeting place on Sunday afternoons, Kofey's meetings quickly became more like revivals and were all-day affairs. The larger her crowds, the fewer members attended Overtown and Coconut Grove's churches. This rankled many Miami ministers. Questions about Kofey's background, including skepticism about whether or not she indeed came from Africa, grew more direct. By late September, Garvey himself wrote directly to Florida UNIA chapters reminding them that he "would not be responsible for her activities" and had given her no authority to make her claims. "If people are so dense as to not be able to protect themselves I can do no more," Garvey wrote in one letter to the representative of Jacksonville's UNIA Chapter. A further notice forbidding any UNIA division or chapter from entertaining Laura Kofey; an ad demanding that division members have her arrested should she solicit funds ran in the *Negro World* in October. One year later, 8 March 1927 while speaking in Overtown's Liberty Hall, Kofey was shot and killed. No one was ever convicted of her murder. Although an organization called "The Garvey Club" resumed meeting through the 1930s, it never gained the membership or the popularity of the UNIA.<sup>31</sup>

31. Marcus Garvey to J.A. Craig, Atlanta, Georgia, 20 September 1927 in Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, 6: 594, 598, 599; *Negro World*, 22 October 1927; Marcus Garvey to Norton G. Thomas, Atlanta, Georgia, 10 October 1927, in Hill, ed., *Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, 6: 599 n 2; Life Notes, Marcus Garvey Collection; Newmann, "Warrior Mother," 140-41; Vought, "Racial Stirrings in Colored Town," 70-76. Claude Green, a native-born African American and president of Miami's UNIA Chapter, and James Nimmo were arrested and charged. Green was charged with being the triggerman, while Nimmo was charged with aiding and abetting before the fact. Witnesses at the trial, however, claimed that Nimmo was the triggerman, while Green gave the orders. Both men were acquitted on July 10. Nimmo returned to the Bahamas for a time to avoid Kofey's local supporters. He returned to Miami a few years later. Most of Kofey's followers joined the African Universal Church, which continues to have several small congregations across South Florida; see "Souvenir Program," African Assembly of 1931, Jacksonville, Florida, 8-15 March 1931, Black Archives and Research Foundation of South Florida; Newmann, "Warrior Mother," 140-141.

By the mid-1920s, Bahamian migration to and from Florida had also slowed. Federal immigration restrictions, including a rigid quota system, severely limited how many international migrants could cross into the United States each year.<sup>32</sup> Literacy tests and more extensive processing further discouraged prospective migrants. At the same time, job opportunities in the Bahamas increased, thanks in part to the birth of tourism, supported in no small part by Prohibition in the United States. If, prior to 1920, Bahamians were most likely to travel to and from the shores of the United States, after 1920, Americans were more likely to travel and from the Bahamas.

The legacy of these migrations remains a critical part of Miami's history and its present. As the experience of its international black communities makes clear, Miami has always been a transnational city, even if it only recently has become a global city. From housing, to economic and political organizing, ties across lines of nativity and ethnicity were central to the African American experience. As historian Benjamin Brawley wrote in his 1921 work, *A Social History of the American Negro*, "other races have come . . . but it is upon this one that that country's history has turned as on a pivot."<sup>33</sup> Miami provides but one example.

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32. As British citizens, Bahamians were not subject to migration restrictions as limiting as those experienced by Asian or Central American migrants; see Robert Zeidel, *Immigrants, Progressives, and Exclusion Politics: The Dillingham Commission, 1900-1927* (DeKalb, Ill., 2004), 9, 47, 122-23; *Congressional Record*, 62nd Congress, 2nd session, 18 and 19 April 1912, 4966-76, 5017-33.

33. Saskia Sassen and Alejandro Portes, "Miami: A New Global City?" *Contemporary Sociology* 22 (July 1993): 471-77; Benjamin Brawley, *A Social History of the American Negro* (New York, 1921), 3-4.