

2007

More Negotiation and Less Demonstrations: The NAACP, SCLC, and Racial Conflict in Pensacola, 1970-1978

J. Michael Butler



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

Butler, J. Michael (2007) "More Negotiation and Less Demonstrations: The NAACP, SCLC, and Racial Conflict in Pensacola, 1970-1978," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 86: No. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol86/iss1/6>

“More Negotiation and Less Demonstrations”: The NAACP, SCLC, and Racial Conflict in Pensacola, 1970-1978

By J. Michael Butler

The civil rights movement is a topic that continues to inspire a tremendous amount of scholarly research. One topic that remains relatively unexplored, though, is the post-1960s struggle for black equality. Traditional narratives typically use the 1968 assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as their symbolic conclusion.¹ Yet the fight against racial injustice continued beyond King’s death, and the next decade brought new issues for civil rights activists. One of the most fascinating concerns the role traditional organizations, particularly the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), played in local cam-

J. Michael Butler received his B.A. from Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama, and earned his M.A. and Ph.D. in History from the University of Mississippi. He is Associate Professor of History at South Georgia College. The author thanks Dr. F. Lindsay Moffett for his questions, comments, and critiques on earlier versions of this essay. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2007 annual meeting of the Florida Conference of Historians.

1. One of the few scholars who traces the legacy of the civil rights movement into the 1970s and 1980s is Timothy Minchin. In *Hiring the Black Worker: The Racial Integration of the Southern Textile Industry, 1960-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999) and *“Don’t Sleep with Stevens!”: The J. P. Stevens Campaign and the Struggle to Organize the South, 1963-80* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), Minchin argues that the civil rights movement provided black workers with experience in direct action protests that carried into their involvement with labor unions. Although my essay does not address the movement’s impact on southern labor, Minchin provides an example of how scholars interpret continuity in post-1960s civil rights issues.

MORE NEGOTIATION AND LESS DEMONSTRATIONS 71

paings for black equality. Differences between the goals and tactics each used during campaigns of the 1960s have been well documented. However, the effect those differences had on grassroots campaigns beyond that tumultuous decade is a narrative largely untold. One struggle that illuminates the organizational conflict took place in northwest Florida during the mid-1970s.

On February 24, 1975, approximately five hundred blacks gathered at the Escambia County Sheriff's Department in Pensacola, Florida, to demonstrate against what they considered a grave injustice. Two months earlier, Deputy Douglas Raines shot and killed a young black man named Wendel Blackwell from a distance of three feet. Despite substantial evidence that suggested foul play, a grand jury quickly declared the incident "justifiable homicide" and the sheriff, Royal Untreiner, refused to take any disciplinary action against Raines.² Blackwell's death represented the latest in a series of conflicts between the local white power structure and black residents, who had grown increasingly frustrated with their social and economic marginalization. Subsequently, the presidents of the county branches of the SCLC and NAACP, Reverends H. K. Matthews and B. J. Brooks, respectively, organized a series of nonviolent demonstrations that reminded many of the previous decade's civil rights campaigns. Blacks routinely gathered on the front lawn of the county sheriff's department, carried protest signs, sang familiar spirituals, chanted popular slogans, and prayed. The demonstrations that occurred nearly every evening for two months followed a familiar pattern. Matthews and Brooks knew that patience with the protests had grown thin, but they did not anticipate the severity of their retribution.

A jovial crowd formed for the February 24th protest. Protestors joked with each other, sang uplifting religious choruses, and conversed with deputies. As he had done numerous times on previous evenings, Rev. Matthews addressed the crowd through a bullhorn. He repeated black grievances, demanded the firing of Raines, and led the group in prayer. Another minister, Rev. Jimmie Lee Savage, took the bullhorn from Matthews and led the crowd in the same mantra that he had conducted at earlier demonstrations: "Two, four, six, eight, who shall we incarcerate? Untreiner, Raines, the whole damn bunch!" Soon after the chant ended, seventy

2. *Pensacola Journal*, 23 January 1975.

nightstick-wielding deputies moved into the crowd. They arrested forty-seven blacks on misdemeanor charges, including Brooks and Matthews; three days later officials added felony extortion to charges against the two leaders. Their cases went to trial the following June and an all-white jury found the two ministers guilty. The prosecution singled out Matthews as the more dangerous of the two, and witnesses testified that he alone threatened to “assassinate,” not “incarcerate,” the county sheriff and deputy. Subsequently, Brooks received probation while a judge sentenced Matthews to five years at hard labor in the Florida State Penitentiary.³ The controversial sentence launched a series of events that virtually destroyed the once-vigorous civil rights movement in northwest Florida.

The demonstrations and felony extortion trials of Brooks and Matthews highlight the roles national organizations played in local affairs and complicate our understanding of the situation with two additional sets of issues. First, it demonstrates that tensions within the NAACP distanced the local branch from its state and national offices. Second, the struggle in northwest Florida suggests that strains also existed between the groups involved in black grassroots activities, namely the NAACP, and the SCLC. Both conflicts eventually undermined and divided local leaders at the expense of their members. In fact, the self-interests of the NAACP and SCLC national offices, along with their mutual distrust and jealousy, proved as damaging to the Pensacola movement as the white resistance activists encountered. An examination of the Pensacola situation and the trial of Brooks and Matthews provides an opportunity to analyze the goals and influence of civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and SCLC in the decade after the 1960s.

The hostilities that surfaced in Florida’s panhandle between the SCLC and NAACP during the 1970s did not develop as the result of indigenous affairs alone. The organizational posturing and gamesmanship each organization practiced predated the Pensacola events and provided an element of historical continuity to the local struggle. An uneasy alliance had characterized the relationship between the NAACP and SCLC since the latter’s 1957

3. H. K. Matthews and J. Michael Butler, *Victory After the Fall* (Montgomery: NewSouth Books, 2007) 185-190; *Pensacola Journal*, 10 June 1975; *Pensacola News*, 17 July 1975.

MORE NEGOTIATION AND LESS DEMONSTRATIONS 73

formation. On several levels, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King created the SCLC as a response to NAACP strategies. The NAACP and its mercurial president, Roy Wilkins, emphasized deliberate legal actions against segregated institutions, most notably schools, as the key to bringing social change for blacks. King, on the other hand, stressed the importance of nonviolent direct action mass campaigns in obtaining racial equality. The recently concluded Montgomery bus boycott supported such reasoning, but Wilkins believed that mass actions would fail at the national level and intensify white resistance.

On a less philosophical level, the SCLC potentially jeopardized the NAACP's very existence. The SCLC use of the black church as its primary organizational institution threatened to pull a substantial number of members—and tremendous revenue—from NAACP rolls. The fact that the new group followed a charismatic and nationally recognized leader made that threat even more likely to Roy Wilkins. King recognized the potential conflict and carefully tried to avoid raising the animus of the older organization. For instance, he repeatedly stated that his group would only support and compliment NAACP activities. Initially SCLC even refused to accept individual memberships for the sake of organizational unity. However, NAACP leaders thought only one group could represent blacks and the national office tightened control of its state and local branches to deter cooperation with the SCLC. In fact, the NAACP established voter and member registration campaigns that directly rivaled similar SCLC programs as early as 1957. The discord that existed between the two organizations intensified with each of King's public campaigns, particularly in 1963. Jealousy, suspicion, and mistrust divided the NAACP and the SCLC for the remainder of King's life.⁴ The tensions that characterized the relationship possessed a historical foundation that reemerged in northwest Florida during the 1970s.

4. For more on the SCLC and its tumultuous relationship with the NAACP see Taylor Branch's magnificent trilogy of King's life: *Parting the Waters: American in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), *Bearing the Cross: American in the King Years, 1963-1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), *At Canaan's Edge: American in the King Years, 1965-1968* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006); see also David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King and the Southern Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986) and Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987).

The organizational circumstances that typified the civil rights movement on a national level also characterized the struggle for black equality in Escambia County. On June 15, 1919, the Pensacola Chapter of the NAACP held its first meeting. The branch formed to combat Florida's white primary—a tactic that effectively disfranchised black voters—through the judicial process and enrolled seventy-three members in its first year of existence. Consequently, Escambia County became the first location in Florida where blacks could vote since Reconstruction ended in 1877. The Pensacola NAACP conducted relatively few campaigns in the post-World War II era, but that changed when an energetic young minister named Rev. William C. Dobbins came to the city in 1959.

Dobbins, who transferred from a church in Montgomery, Alabama, to Pensacola's St. Paul United Methodist Church, made social justice the focus of his ministry and used Biblical teachings to justify civil rights activities. He spoke against the racial conditions that existed in Pensacola and became an active member of the local NAACP. He also revived the dormant local NAACP Youth Council and brought the sit-in movement to downtown lunch counters in 1961. The sit-ins represented the first indigenous direct action campaign in Pensacola during the post-World War II era and solidified a deep black mistrust of local law enforcement that later characterized the movement. During the June 17 sit-in whites burned protestors with lit cigarettes, doused them with battery acid, and sprayed insecticide in the eyes of one girl. Police arrested no one for the attacks and encouraged additional assaults by laughing at the actions. As the sit-ins and subsequent boycotts continued, officers arrested blacks on questionable trespassing, illegal boycott, public cursing, and disorderly conduct charges. On some occasions, officers retrieved items from targeted stores, placed them in demonstrators' pockets, and arrested them for shoplifting. Yet by the end of the 1961 summer, over thirty downtown stores succumbed to the economic pressure the sit-ins created and either hired black employees or integrated their dining facilities. When Dobbins left Pensacola for a church in Alabama soon after the sit-ins ended in 1962, one of his most trusted associates became the recognized leader of the local freedom struggle.⁵

5. "NAACP Branch files, Pensacola, Florida, 1919, 1921-28," Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., NAACP papers, volume I, box G42. Horace Harrison, telephone interview with author, Pensacola, Florida, March 13, 2006; Raymon

MORE NEGOTIATION AND LESS DEMONSTRATIONS 75

Rev. H. K. Matthews served as president of the NAACP Youth Council during the sit-ins and, for a brief period, also led the adult branch. During his tenure with the NAACP Matthews organized black voter registration campaigns, continued the struggle to integrate public facilities, supported strikes at two area hospitals, and demanded that the city and private business owners hire blacks in meaningful employment.

By the end of the decade, H. K. Matthews was a very public figure in Escambia County. He frequently appeared on a weekly community affairs television program in Pensacola where he voiced and explained the grievances of local blacks. Matthews used the show to “get the word out that there were things that blacks were not privileged to as citizens of the city” and often addressed controversial topics, such as the white use of derogatory language in addressing African Americans. In addition to the television program, Matthews also wrote frequent columns for the *Pensacola News Journal* and *Pensacola Call and Post*, the city’s only black newspaper. The opinionated minister spoke to both races in his articles, and did not change his rhetoric to make his stance more attractive to either race or any social class. Matthews began one of his first published essays by declaring, “Black American have waited and waited, and prayed and begged to be granted their full rights under the Constitution. We have become tired of waiting. We intend to have what belongs to us right now.” “The foot of the oppressor,” he concluded, “is on our neck, and we intend to get it off. No sacrifice is too great in order for us to do so.” His bold and direct language made Matthews a hero in the black community. He did not mince words when addressing local racism and confronted the local white power structure with little concern for his personal safety. According to one area publication, Matthews’ supporters considered him “a saint left here to fill in the holes of justice and defend the rights of black people to live, work, learn, and play in the mainstream of a wealthy America.” White residents in the Florida panhandle, however, despised Matthews more with each of his successful civil rights campaigns. Yet as the decade passed,

Harvey, telephone interview with author, Pensacola, Florida, March 15, 2006; “Newsletter,” NAACP Youth Council publication, July 8, 1961, private collection, Mary Harrison Washington. For more on the Pensacola sit-ins and the role Rev. W. C. Dobbins played in the area civil rights movement see Matthews and Butler, *Victory After the Fall*, 68-80.

Matthews grew increasingly frustrated with what he interpreted as a plethora of unnecessary rules, regulations, and restraints the NAACP imposed upon local chapters. He also believed that the state and national organizational hierarchy disproved of his bold and impassioned public pronouncements. His discontent with the organization mirrored the criticism other blacks, including King, had voiced earlier concerning the association. In short, Matthews recalled, "It was not the tactics, but rather the non-tactics of the NAACP that concerned me." He also perceived that local blacks "realized that the NAACP was just not as assertive as they had been in the past and people were voicing their concerns about the group's limitations to me."⁶

In January 1970, therefore, H. K. Matthews formed the Escambia County Chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and became the local branch's first president. Respect and admiration for Dr. King first attracted Matthews to the SCLC and he followed in his hero's footsteps. Matthews also admired SCLC tactics and its relatively autonomous relationship between the national office and local chapters. Despite the SCLC's decline as an influential civil rights organization on the national level following King's 1968 death, Matthews supported the group because he believed it presented the best opportunity for blacks to achieve racial equality in Pensacola. However, he remained a member of the county NAACP and served as its Youth Council leader. Matthews, like King before him, stressed that he did not intend for the SCLC to compete with the NAACP in any way. According to the minister, local blacks merely desired "a sense of belonging and equality" in northwest Florida that the NAACP did not provide for all. Matthews intended the SCLC to carry out many activities the increasingly cautious NAACP did not publicly support.⁷ Philosophical differences, rather than competition or hostility differentiated the organizations on a local level. For Pensacola activists, however, the tension that existed between the NAACP and SCLC on the national level during the previous decade would come to divide the local organizations.

Within its first year of operation, the Escambia SCLC attracted over 300 members. Many also belonged to the Pensacola NAACP,

-
6. H. K. Matthews, interview with author, February 13, 2002, Douglas, Georgia (hereinafter cited as Matthews interview); *Pensacola Call and Post*, 7 June 1969; *Broadview*, August 1971, 12-16; Matthews and Butler, *Victory After the Fall*, 110-13.
 7. Matthews, interview.

MORE NEGOTIATION AND LESS DEMONSTRATIONS 77

which had over 600 registered members. Local blacks possessed dual memberships because B. J. Brooks and Matthews, the presidents of the two organizations, emphasized the importance of activists joining both organizations. Matthews recalled, "We were just as one, basically, because the leadership and membership was so united. When we had mass meetings, we did not have a NAACP mass meeting or a SCLC mass meeting. We had a community mass meeting," which Matthews and Brooks jointly led.⁸

The two organizations worked together during two incidents that further polarized the races in northwest Florida. In December 1972, simmering racial tensions erupted and engulfed the largest and most segregated school in the area, Escambia High. The brawl that broke out between black and white students culminated weeks of contention over the school's use of Confederate symbols. The Florida NAACP sent its Field Director, Rev. R. N. Gooden, to Pensacola to assist local leaders in their response to the latest disturbance. When school board officials refused to acknowledge the divisiveness of the school's symbols, Gooden, Brooks, and Matthews organized a black student boycott of county schools to protest the Rebel mascot and accompanying Confederate imagery at Escambia High School.⁹

Later the same year, Pensacola NAACP and Escambia County SCLC continued their pattern of cooperation when five black boaters from Atlanta disappeared while fishing in local waters. The groups launched an investigation after suspicions surfaced that whites may have murdered the men. On a visit to Pensacola, Ralph Abernathy, the president of the national SCLC, claimed that the five "were taken and beaten and killed by racist, segregationist forces" in the "racist community" and demanded justice in the matter. Local law enforcement officials and political leaders dismissed Abernathy's allegations and refused to meet with any black leader concerning the case.¹⁰

Although the state NAACP intervened in the EHS controversy and the national SCLC directed the discourse concerning the "Atlanta Five" disappearances, the local chapters of both groups participated in protests concerning both incidents. The indige-

8. Matthews, interview ; Matthews and Butler, *Victory After the Fall*, 106-09.

9. Matthews and Butler, *Victory After the Fall*, chapter 5; *Pensacola Journal*, 13 December 1974.

10 See Matthews and Butler, *Victory After the Fall*, 153-162.

nous responses reveal the unity that initially existed between the SCLC and NAACP in northwest Florida. But the event that tested the organizational commitment to racial justice in Pensacola occurred on December 20, 1974 when, after a fifteen-minute high-speed car chase, Escambia County Sheriff's Deputy Douglas Raines shot an unarmed black man named Wendel Blackwell from a three-foot distance.

The Blackwell shooting represented the pinnacle of local black apprehensions concerning county law enforcement officials. The distrust that stemmed from the 1961 sit-ins had grown during the Escambia High symbols controversy, as black leaders accused deputies of once again standing by idly as whites intimidated and attacked black students. Local civil rights leaders, particularly H. K. Matthews, obtained testimony from black residents who claimed that white deputies pulled over their vehicles even though the drivers broke no laws, wrote tickets for non-existent offenses, and brutalized some motorists for questioning their motives.¹¹ Racial profiling plagued the relationship between blacks and area officers long before the term entered the nation's vocabulary, and suspicions that the sheriff's department conspired to conceal the true fate of the Atlanta boaters inflamed the already blazing black resentment of police officers in the panhandle. One national SCLC official accused local law enforcement officers of "suppressing crucial evidence" in "one of the biggest mass murders this state has ever seen." Although no evidence substantiated the claim, the accusation resonated with local blacks who believed county deputies had "whitewashed and covered up" past racial incidents in the city. As tensions reached a dangerously high level in the aftermath of Wendel Blackwell's death, State Attorney Curtis Golden personally investigated the Blackwell shooting and promised to meet with black representatives concerning his findings. However, Golden's conclusion that Raines shot Blackwell in self-defense deepened black suspicions that a white conspiracy existed within and extended beyond the Escambia County Sheriff's Department.¹²

Early in 1975, local NAACP and SCLC chapters organized the black outcry for justice in the matter of Wendel Blackwell's death.

11. H. K. Matthews, interview with author, February 13, 2002, Douglas, Georgia.

12. Matthews and Butler, *Victory After the Fall*, 173-74; *Pensacola Journal*, 13, 16, 17, and 18 December 1974; *Pensacola News-Journal*, 15 December 1974;

MORE NEGOTIATION AND LESS DEMONSTRATIONS 79

For over two months the organizations held nightly mass meetings at local churches, filling the sanctuaries with their calls for the termination of Deputy Raines and a meeting with Sheriff Royal Untreiner to discuss black concerns. In addition, the SCLC and NAACP initiated picket lines in front of the county sheriff's department and boycotted all stores in downtown Pensacola to bring attention to their grievances.

When Untreiner refused to acknowledge SCLC or NAACP leaders, most notably H. K. Matthews, the groups demanded that Governor Reubin Askew remove Untreiner from his position. On January 31, Matthews, Brooks, and Rev. R. N. Gooden, the Field Secretary for the Florida NAACP, led approximately 100 NAACP and SCLC members from Escambia County to the governor's mansion in Tallahassee to participate in a candlelight vigil for Wendell Blackwell. After thirty minutes of protest, Governor Askew, a Pensacola native, agreed to meet with Matthews, Brooks, Gooden, and two other members of the group.

During the hour-long meeting, black spokespersons told the governor that violence would engulf Pensacola unless he did something to alleviate racial tensions in the city. The black contingent insisted Askew suspend Raines and remove Untreiner from his position. One of those present told the governor that area blacks feared white police officers, armed themselves for protection, and claimed, "If another black is shot" by a white deputy in Pensacola "we are going to be walking in blood." Askew ended the meeting with no promises but told the group he would urge Sheriff Untreiner to meet with area black leaders.¹³ As a result of the Tallahassee trip, Pensacola activists encountered a new obstacle—the state and national NAACP.

In the days leading to the Tallahassee demonstration, Governor Askew received word of the coming caravan and called Florida NAACP president Charles Cherry. Askew, who had worked with Cherry on previous issues and considered him to be a close associate, requested that he prevent the protesters from carrying through with their plans. Cherry wished to maintain his influence with the governor and asked Gooden and Brooks, both NAACP officeholders, to postpone their trip. The two ignored Cherry's request. In turn, Cherry reported their perceived insubordination to the national office and the "March on Tallahassee," as the

13. *Pensacola Journal*, 1 February 1975.

NAACP called it, created a rift between the local and state offices that never mended fully. Although Gooden deemed the march a success because it captured the governor's attention, Gloster B. Current, the national NAACP Director of Branches and Field Administration, reprimanded the field secretary for his endeavors. In a letter to Gooden, Current admitted, "I was a little disturbed that a local branch would undertake such a venture without the knowledge and authorization of the state and national offices." Current promised to monitor the Pensacola situation but warned "it will be most important that the state, regional and national offices be kept advised of prospective actions before they are engaged in."¹⁴ Thereafter, mistrust and suspicion characterized the relationship between the Pensacola NAACP chapter and its state and national supervisors for the duration of local protests. An organization that initially supported the Escambia County freedom struggle soon became one of its greatest obstacles. While the NAACP imposed its chain of command upon local leaders, black protests continued in northwest Florida. The demonstrations peaked with the February 24 arrests of Brooks and Matthews.

Despite their impending trials, Matthews and Brooks continued their mass meetings and public protests while the national offices of the NAACP and SCLC remained silent. On March 8 the Florida NAACP's Board of Directors members met Pensacola leaders and appealed to the national office for legal assistance, organizational aid, and closer cooperation with the city branch.¹⁵ The association ignored the plea. H. K. Matthews expressed his growing frustration with both organizations and accused them of disregarding problems their Escambia County chapters faced, even though the groups "worked for every other city in Florida." Local disillusionment with national organization tactics became evident during mass meetings. Field Secretary Gooden echoed black irritation in one address by declaring, "We've been scuffling down here for almost four months, and it seems that the more we scuffle, the more we dig ourselves in a hole."¹⁶

14. Letter, Cherry to Current, March 6, 1975, "NAACP Branch Department Files, Florida, Pensacola Branch, 1974-77," NAACP papers, part VI, box C83; "NAACP Branch Department Files, Field Staff, R. N. Gooden Correspondence, 1973-75," NAACP papers, part VI, box C29.

15. *St. Petersburg Times*, 2 March 1975; *Pensacola Journal*, 27 February 1975; *Pensacola News Journal*, 2 and 9 March 2, 1975.

16. *Pensacola Journal*, 27 March 1975.

MORE NEGOTIATION AND LESS DEMONSTRATIONS 81

Local exasperation increased when the Florida Department of Transportation suspended B. J. Brooks from his \$200 per week job without pay for "conduct unbecoming a Department of Transportation employee." The department's county supervisor said the agency made the decision due to Brooks' felony charges, citing a Florida statute that banned anyone accused of a felony from state employment. The department conducted no investigation into the charges, but promised Brooks automatic reinstatement upon acquittal and immediate termination if convicted. The national NAACP called the suspension "an act of discrimination and a complete mockery of our system of justice." Questioning the department's decision more than a month after his arrest, Brooks maintained that he had never been convicted of a crime nor received due process and pled, "This is practically my whole livelihood they're playing around with." Although he owned a local service station, the business did not replace income Brooks lost due to his suspension. Whether or not the state intended to send Brooks a message with the suspension, he interpreted it as such and vowed to decrease his activities in the Pensacola movement. Brooks appealed his suspension to the Escambia County Career Service Commission less than two weeks after he received it.¹⁷ Matthews and Gooden continued to support their fellow activist, unaware that the NAACP national and state offices planned to fully withdraw support from the Pensacola movement.

Although the NAACP's defense of Brooks at a time when the organization planned to abandon the Pensacola movement appears contradictory, such was not the case. Indeed, Brooks's suspension and delicate financial situation strengthened the position of the national and state offices because it gave them unprecedented power of action in Escambia County. Simply put, Brooks had to follow order that filtered down through the NAACP hierarchy as long as his livelihood depended upon the legal support that the organization provided. This uneven power relationship had a tremendous impact on racial affairs in Florida's Panhandle as the national NAACP office placed its interests above the needs of those who participated in the local struggle.

17. *Pensacola Journal*, 27 and 28 March 27, 1975; "NAACP Legal Department Case Files, Florida, *Brooks v. Florida Department of Transportation*, April 1975," NAACP papers, part V, box 390.

The rift between the state and local NAACP that began after Gooden and Brooks led their pilgrimage to the governor's mansion on January 31, widened after the February 24 arrests, despite the fact that Rev. Gooden played no role in the jailhouse demonstrations. The primary reason Cherry wanted to distance his organization from the Pensacola movement was the presence of H. K. Matthews. On March 6, Cherry wrote a letter to NAACP official Gloster Current and explained his interpretation of the Escambia County situation to the national office. Cherry admitted that Pensacola blacks needed help from their group because "it is a very conservative town, to say the least, and has a long history of unsolved crimes committed by whites against blacks." Yet Cherry believed the NAACP could provide only limited assistance in the area. "The black leadership has been diluted," he wrote, "because the Regional Coordinator of the SCLC, Rev. H. K. Matthews resides in Pensacola." Cherry described Matthews as "the most vocal, outspoken, and perhaps the most articulate Black Civil Rights leader and minister in" the area. The state NAACP president perceptively recognized Matthews as the most powerful and influential black leader in Escambia County, but described him as an impediment to NAACP goals. His methods seemed too radical for Cherry, who claimed Matthews "refused to work with Brooks" and the local NAACP chapter. In addition, he claimed that Matthews' "credibility has been questioned and attacked by the community on several occasions." As a result of the influential role Matthews occupied, "ministers and other leaders . . . have been non-supportive of the Pensacola movement." Cherry concluded his erroneous observations on the Pensacola struggle by stating, "Most of the ingredients exist in Pensacola for a good branch. Organization, however, is lacking. Rhetoric and emotional appeal, as has been provided during the past 10 weeks, is not what is needed."¹⁸ As the exchange of letters suggests, the state NAACP not only limited the activities of its Pensacola chapter during a vital period; it also sought to undermine the local leader of its rival SCLC branch.

Correspondence between NAACP officials at the state and national levels reveal a deliberate refusal to intervene fully in the Pensacola movement while H. K. Matthews remained the area's

18. Letter, Cherry to Current, March 6, 1975, "NAACP Branch Department Files, Florida, Pensacola Branch, 1974-77," NAACP papers, part VI, box C83.

MORE NEGOTIATION AND LESS DEMONSTRATIONS 83

foremost black spokesman. National leaders had already reprimanded R. N. Gooden for circumventing their offices and held a degree of leverage in their relationship with the minister, as he served as state field director and ultimately answered to Charles Cherry. B. J. Brooks also provided few troubles for the organization and seemed unlikely to do so in the future due to his precarious economic situation. Yet the national office had no such control over the passionate and often controversial Matthews. Worse yet, he belonged to a competing organization that NAACP officials viewed as more radical and confrontational than theirs. The NAACP did not approve of the boycotts, demonstrations, or mass meetings that characterized the black freedom struggle in northwest Florida. The numerous restrictions the group imposed upon activists and the deliberate measures it took in combating racism provided the principal justifications for Matthews' formation of the Escambia County SCLC, concerns that similarly prompted Dr. King to create the organization nearly twenty years earlier. The NAACP became even more cautious in their campaigns during the 1970s, as movement goals and objectives experienced constant revision in a society where *de facto* racism had replaced *de jure* segregation as the major obstacle blacks faced in the United States. On a more practical level, Pensacola blacks recognized H. K. Matthews as their primary spokesman and followed his protest strategies, regardless of the NAACP's stance on such tactics. Furthermore, the NAACP possessed no authority over the popular firebrand and risked alienating its members—or worse—by publicly repudiating Matthews and his methods. Philosophical and personal differences, therefore, continued to separate the SCLC and NAACP in 1975 and limited the effectiveness both organizations had in the Pensacola movement. Cherry simply would not provide assistance to an area whose black residents followed the likes of Matthews and he did everything he could to convince the national office that his convictions were correct, even if it meant exaggerating, fabricating, or creating divisions within the black leadership ranks in Escambia County. Instead of working to improve the deplorable state of racial affairs in Florida's panhandle, the state NAACP spent its time and energies on institutional pursuits at the expense of local blacks.

The economic and organizational pressures exerted on B.J. Brooks produced the desired results. Less than a month after losing his job, Brooks publicly distanced the NAACP from H. K.

Matthews and the SCLC, declaring, "I can no longer support the ideas and philosophies of the present leadership of the protest." He explained that Matthews and Gooden "do not have the interest of our people at heart" and called their tactics "underhanded." Brooks summarized his decision by stating, "It is not the policy of the NAACP to encourage citizens to break the law, and it is not the policy of the organization to castigate citizens for non-involvement," tactics he claimed the others embraced. Brooks asserted that Matthews and Gooden "want to blow this thing up" in Pensacola despite NAACP pleas to the contrary. He denied that the Department of Transportation suspension influenced the leadership split, at the same time the NAACP provided legal counsel for Brooks and pledged to overturn his suspension. It is doubtful that the NAACP would have expended time and resources on a person who remained closely allied with someone it considered anathema to their philosophy. Regardless of his reasons, Brooks pledged never again to petition publicly for racial equality in Escambia County.¹⁹ His denunciation of Matthews, a man he once considered his best friend, demonstrates the degree to which the NAACP national office undermined the Pensacola movement as it created irreparable divisions between local leaders.

On May 2, the state NAACP followed the example set by the national office and dismissed R. N. Gooden as Florida Field Director of the organization. According to state president Charles Cherry, the NAACP terminated its relationship with Gooden because it did not agree with the methods he used to resolve tensions between area blacks and the Escambia County Sheriff's Department. Cherry stated that the NAACP asked its representatives to "use more negotiation and less demonstrations" in communicating with white leaders in the panhandle. Simply put, Gooden had "led too many demonstrations in Pensacola." Perhaps most importantly, Cherry claimed that Gooden "defected to the SCLC." He cited the fact that the NAACP paid for none of Gooden's seventeen documented trips to Escambia County as proof that the minister received payment from the rival organization, thus abandoning his responsibilities as an NAACP representative. Cherry denounced Gooden for joining in SCLC activities because the organization advocated direct action protests, while the NAACP utilized legal maneuvering and private negotiations to achieve

19. *Pensacola Journal*, 11, 24, and 26 April 1975; *Pensacola News*, 17 April 1975.

MORE NEGOTIATION AND LESS DEMONSTRATIONS 85

racial harmony. Cherry declared his organization's Escambia County branch "has had nightly marches and other direct action" protests "and we feel that is wrong."²⁰

Gloster Current endorsed Cherry's decision by deeming Gooden's actions "extremely covert," although no one from the national office met with Gooden or presented him with any evidence that he had broken NAACP regulations. Gooden also stated that he, not the SCLC, paid for his trips from Tallahassee to Pensacola and noted that he had served the NAACP without pay since he accepted the position of state field director in 1972. Gooden claimed that the "SCLC has by no means tried to divide the leadership in this community in order to build itself," despite Cherry's allegations. He concluded that his dismissal occurred "for reasons other than those submitted by Mr. Cherry." The public battle between Gooden and Cherry had an immediate impact upon the Pensacola movement. After his controversial dismissal and reprimand from the NAACP, Gooden returned to Tallahassee to spend more time with his church and ministry. The actions of Gooden and Cherry, and the earlier steps involving B. J. Brooks, demonstrated that the NAACP abandoned the Escambia County movement at its most critical juncture for tactical and personal reasons.²¹

B. J. Brooks protested the dismissal of R. N. Gooden from his position as state NAACP field director. He wrote a letter to the NAACP Board of Directors and explained why Cherry should reinstate the minister. According to Brooks, "Rev. Gooden is the most vocal voice for the NAACP in Florida" and his dismissal "ought not be tolerated by the national office." If the decision stood, Brooks argued, "the NAACP will be the loser in Florida and the SCLC would most certainly take advantage of this articulation and ability to corrale [sic] people." Finally, Brooks argued that Gooden "will continue to be actively involved (in the Pensacola movement), whether it is with the NAACP or not." He concluded his passionate note by further accusing president Cherry of being "remiss in his duties by not rendering assistance to the Pensacola branch. We pay our assessment and feel that we are entitled to whatever assistance the Conference can give."²²

20. "NAACP Branch Department Files, Field Staff, R. N. Gooden Correspondence, 1973-75, NAACP papers, part VI, box C29.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

The correspondence demonstrated a division within the NAACP and between it and the SCLC. The fact that Brooks criticized Cherry so harshly after following his earlier recommendation to distance himself from Gooden and Matthews suggests that Brooks did not fully agree with the order. It is very likely that the organization's leaders used Brooks's financial situation against him in their mandate to separate him from the controversial Pensacola ministers. Simply put, Brooks needed the NAACP to provide counsel for his appeal with the Department of Transportation and in his upcoming felony trial. He had a chance to express his frustrations with Cherry when the NAACP official dismissed Gooden and took advantage of the opportunity. He used the NAACP's struggle with SCLC to justify his anger by maintaining that the rival organization would use the Gooden situation to their potential advantage. Basing his criticism on the best interests of the NAACP, Brooks remained loyal to the national office and protected himself from the abandonment Matthews and Gooden experienced. Still, the letter illustrates that tactical and philosophical divisions embittered relationships within groups as well as between leaders of competing organizations.

The dissention within the NAACP branches and between its national office and the SCLC peaked in the days leading to the felony trials of B. J. Brooks and H. K. Matthews. The conflict between movement leaders undoubtedly provided a distraction for the two men and their NAACP-appointed lawyer, Ed Duffee, with predictable unsatisfactory results. Duffee ignored Matthews' demand to testify on his own behalf and, according to the opinionated minister, proved an incompetent attorney. Indeed, Duffee submitted his request to change the trial venue nine days after the legal deadline for such motions had passed, and called only two witnesses to testify for the defense. His passive strategy fueled Matthews' criticism. On June 10, 1975, an all-white jury found Brooks and Matthews guilty of extortion by threat after only forty-five minutes of deliberations, despite a paucity of evidence offered against them. The verdict surprised few. The two activists faced a maximum penalty of fifteen years in state prison for the second-degree felony conviction. Judge Kirke Beall delayed his sentencing until July 24 in order to conduct an inquiry into each man's background. In the meantime, Duffee appealed the verdict and the court released both men on \$20,000 bond each.²³

23. *Florida v. Brooks and Matthews*, case number 75-390, June 9-10, 1975, case file; *Pensacola Journal*, 11 June 1975; *Pensacola News-Journal*, 13 July 1975.

MORE NEGOTIATION AND LESS DEMONSTRATIONS 87

Matthews and Brooks responded to the verdict in a manner that reflected their conflicting personalities, leadership styles, and organizational affiliations. Matthews called the decision "Justice, Escambia County style" and "the penalty you pay for being black in this community." He predicted that the "conviction will be overturned and I will probably never serve any jail sentence" because "somewhere in the state there are people who would sit on an honest jury and listen to evidence proving" his innocence. He fired Ed Duffee and hired a local attorney, Paul Shimek, to represent him at future appeals. B. J. Brooks, on the other hand, refused to comment on the decision, promising local whites, "I'm just not going to make any statements relative to the conviction" and distancing himself from Matthews and his bold post-trial proclamations. Brooks rebuked Matthews' comments and maintained, "I'm not going to be criticizing jurors or the court." He also called Matthews' prediction of serving no prison time an "ultimatum" to Judge Beall that he [Brooks] would never make. Despite his non-confrontational and repentant attitude, the state Department of Transportation terminated Brooks' from his position two days after the jury declared him guilty of extortion. The NAACP pledged to fight the felony and misdemeanor convictions of Brooks because it could not allow "the likelihood of a branch president being incarcerated for a felony conviction while carrying out the program of the NAACP."²⁴ The organization made no similar promises concerning Matthews.

Despite his mounting legal problems and the NAACP's public repudiation of his leadership tactics, Matthews continued to organize local blacks via the Northwest Florida SCLC. He contacted Ralph Abernathy and asked the national SCLC to organize Pensacola for future demonstrations. Matthews admitted that he needed help from the Atlanta office to sustain the local struggle and hoped that national exposure would reveal the injustices that had transpired in northwest Florida to the nation. Abernathy seemed excited about the opportunity to intervene and promised Matthews he would travel to the area within a week. Matthews held a press conference on July 9 and announced SCLC intentions. He

24. *Pensacola Journal*, 11 and 13 June 1975; *B. J. Brooks v. Department of Transportation, Florida*, 77-2163, case file, Escambia County Court, Archives and Records, "Career Service Commission" hearing, Pensacola, Florida, January 12, 1976.

announced that, in response to the felony convictions, SCLC “will be cranking up our activities to include more peaceful protest demonstrations and picketing in Escambia County.” He stated that white efforts to silence him and cripple local activism “is simply not going to work” because he ignored threats, intimidation, “physical violence, and whatever else is being done to stamp out the black demonstrations.” Matthews confirmed that SCLC goals remained “equal treatment for all people and especially the removal of sheriff’s deputy Doug Raines” from his position. To accomplish the task, he promised that “Pensacola is going to have the biggest demonstration it had ever seen” on July 12 because “Ralph Abernathy is coming to town.” However, local SCLC officials canceled the proposed march the day after its announcement when Judge Beall revoked Matthews’ bond and ordered him jailed; Ralph Abernathy never again visited Pensacola.²⁵ The organization that had supported H. K. Matthews and the Pensacola movement abandoned them at the most critical juncture.

On the evening of July 9, as Matthews prepared to speak at St. Mark AME Zion Church in preparation for the upcoming rally, county officers arrived at his home with an arrest warrant. The officers stated that Matthews had violated his bond agreement and they escorted him to the county jail. At his hearing the next day, Judge Beall informed Matthews that he was revoking the bond because the minister continued to plan marches, boycotts, and demonstrations in the area. The judge stated, “I would have to be a damned fool” to “allow Matthews freedom while he continued the same activities he was convicted of.” Beall’s statement on his decision implied that he was of the opinion that the jury had convicted Matthews for organizing civil rights demonstrations rather than criminal extortion against the white power structure. An unrepentant Matthews told the judge that he had done nothing wrong and would continue his activism while racial injustice existed in Escambia County. In response, Beall declared him “a threat to the community,” and ordered him returned to prison until sentencing. The incredulous minister told the reporters, “I thought there was some justice around, but I found out there isn’t, especially when it comes to me.” Otha Leverette, vice president of the Escambia County SCLC, canceled the group’s scheduled demonstrations, although it is unclear whether he cancelled the protests

25. *Pensacola News*, 9 and 10 July 9, 1975.

MORE NEGOTIATION AND LESS DEMONSTRATIONS 89

because he feared suffering Matthews's fate, because local blacks withdrew from the scheduled demonstrations, or because Matthews proved irreplaceable as leader of such activities. Nevertheless, Leverette proclaimed that Matthews's imprisonment "lets us know we live in a racist community."²⁶

On July 17, 1975, Judge Beall sentenced B. J. Brooks and H. K. Matthews. He gave Brooks five years probation with the stipulation that he "not conduct or participate in any public demonstration in the state" during the term. In contrast, he sentenced Matthews to five years in state prison "at hard labor." The judge defended his decision by stating that his investigation unearthed "nothing adverse" in Brooks's past and that the people he interviewed had "very favorable" things to say about his character. The people he interviewed concerning Matthews, however, "had nothing good to say about him." Beall refused to make his investigation discoveries public and warned attorneys against criticizing the judgment in the press. Attorneys for each man appealed the sentences after their announcement.²⁷

Matthews ignored Beall's admonition and called his punishment "no surprise," because he believed "the judge has a personal vendetta against me." He further proclaimed, "I believe I will get out of jail pretty quickly." In a July 18 editorial, the *Pensacola Journal* questioned the discrepancy between the two penalties. In a headline that asked "Why was Matthews' treated differently from Brooks?," one writer called the minister's five year prison term "an exceptionally harsh penalty for someone who is, in reality, guilty of not much more than an excess of rhetoric." It suggested the verdict was a way to silence Matthews, who to many local whites "has long been a thorn bush obstructing the long and gingerly-trod road to racial harmony." It further urged Judge Beall to release his investigation findings to the public so the community could evaluate the reasoning behind the sentences and determine "whether justice has prevailed, or whether one more black man who has become a nuisance has been trod upon and kicked aside" by the white power structure. The editorial represented a surprising

26. *Florida v. Brooks and Matthews*, case number 75-390, July 10, 1975, case file; *Pensacola News*, 10 and 14 July 1975; *Pensacola Journal*, 11 and 12 July 1975; *Pensacola News-Journal*, 13 July 1975; Matthews, interviewed by author, October 27, 2000, Brewton, Alabama.

27. *Florida v. Brooks and Matthews*, case number 75-390, case file; *Pensacola Journal*, 15 and 16 July 15, 1975; *Pensacola News*, 17 July 1975.

reversal of the paper's usual habit of criticizing and deriding black activists, especially Matthews. Despite the paper's plea, Beall refused to release his findings or alter his decision. On July 24, the judge rejected a bail request from Matthews' attorney because the minister possessed "an utter and total disregard for law and the legal process and, more particularly, law enforcement officers."²⁸

While B. J. Brooks received financial and legal support from the NAACP, the organization provided no such assistance to H. K. Matthews. In addition, the Northwest Florida SCLC severed its relationship with Matthews after his sentencing and stated the fiery minister "is not authorized to speak, collect, or solicit funds for this organization." Its president, F. L. Henderson, stated that the SCLC "was designed to be a peaceful, nonviolent organization and this is still our aim." Matthews, according to the state representative, had made statements "which do not reflect the official position of the organization." Henderson justified his decision by portraying Matthews as a radical leader who had infiltrated and corrupted a peaceful group.²⁹

With the SCLC action, both civil rights organizations that Matthews once served abandoned him. More importantly, the Pensacola movement crumbled with no assertive leadership. However the national SCLC continued to exploit Matthews for monetary and political gains. In 1978 Atlanta congressman Andrew Young campaigned on behalf of political prisoners incarcerated in American jails. That same year, SCLC adopted the issue as its primary cause and named Matthews the nation's "Number One Political Prisoner." SCLC president Joseph Lowery deemed Matthews "a guy who was in jail because of an unfair, unjust system" and promised SCLC would ask the U. S. Justice Department to investigate "the criminal system that can produce this outrage." National SCLC spokesman Hosea Williams told members, "Matthews was persecuted on a trumped-up charge because he spoke" against racism in Pensacola and concluded, "It's absolutely amazing such a thing could happen" in the United States. The group once again vowed to help Matthews with his legal expenses but never fulfilled the promise, although SCLC used his name in

28. *Pensacola Journal*, 18 and 25 July 1975; *Florida v. Brooks, Billie Joe Sr. and Matthews, Hawthorne Konrade*, case number 75-390, case file, Escambia County Clerk of Court records.

29. *Pensacola Journal*, 10 December 1975.

MORE NEGOTIATION AND LESS DEMONSTRATIONS 91

their annual fund-raising drive later that year. In letters asking for donations to help with their fight against racism in America, SCLC named Matthews as the example that “the criminal justice system is still being used against us” and cited his sentence of “five years for singing a popular marching chant” to raise organization funds. He received no financial aid as a result of the campaign and learned of it only when an SCLC member gave Matthews a copy of the solicitation.³⁰

The legal ordeal of H. K. Matthews finally ended on December 13, 1978, when Governor Askew commuted the minister’s sentence to the time he had already served in state custody. It was the last act official Askew conducted as governor of Florida. Despite a protest letter from Sheriff Royal Untreiner calling the commutation “a gross miscarriage of justice,” Askew’s cabinet voted 7-0 to approve the proposal. The governor did not recommend a full pardon, he explained, because such a decision would nullify the opportunity for Matthews to appeal his conviction to the United States Supreme Court. Askew attributed the action to his adherence to free speech rights and stated, “This country must be large enough to entertain dissent.” The governor compared Matthews to Martin Luther King, Jr. in the harassment and persecution he endured over the previous years and told him, “I have the privilege of knowing you . . . and I don’t think anyone could have convinced me that you” chanted the infamous assassination line. Askew called the decisions rendered against the leader “bad law” and defended the right to protest by stating, “I know that it’s not a popular thing to lead an unpopular cause.” Matthews responded to the sentence reduction by declaring, “I will go to my grave saying I’m not guilty of any crime the Sheriff’s Department has accused me of.” He expressed his disgust with the two organizations that abandoned his cause by stating, “Never again will I go to the lengths of getting myself thrown in prison for people who just don’t give a damn.” Despite the hopes of Askew and Matthews, the United States Supreme Court never heard his appeal. In 1979 Florida Governor Robert Graham pardoned Matthews.³¹ The struggle for racial equality in the Florida panhandle never recovered from the blows it suffered during the turbulent decade.

30. *Pensacola Journal*, 18 August 1978; Letter, Reverend Joseph Lowery to SCLC Supporters, October/November 1978, Papers of H. K. Matthews, personal collection, Brewton, Alabama.

31. *Pensacola Journal*, 14 and 15 December 14, 1978;

The fact that national civil rights groups placed their own agendas before the interests of area leaders in Pensacola proved one of the local movement's largest tragedies. For organizations like the SCLC, Pensacola's conflicts offered an opportunity to reclaim lost prestige and present the problems of continuing racism to a national audience. Moreover, the Escambia County situation possessed elements familiar to the SCLC and NAACP. The protests provided visible targets in Doug Raines and Royal Untreiner, encountered police brutality and judicial racism, and implemented nonviolent tactics SCLC and NAACP activists had utilized during the previous decade. More importantly, the area movement could have benefited from the intervention of a national civil rights organization. It would have brought exposure, participants, and a degree of inter-organizational cohesion to the local movement.

Instead, the NAACP and SCLC revived tensions that had characterized their relationship since 1957. The NAACP's national and state offices expressed resentment, jealousy, and frustration in regard to their rival organization in Escambia County and its charismatic leader, H. K. Matthews. Consequently, the NAACP withdrew support from the Pensacola black freedom struggle and even used the fragile economic circumstances of B. J. Brooks, the president of its local branch, against him for the organization's self-interests. Soon thereafter, SCLC followed suit by denouncing Matthews and withdrawing all support from the movement in northwest Florida at its most crucial point. The local civil rights struggle thus collapsed while its foremost spokesman served a questionable prison term.

The actions of the NAACP and SCLC in Pensacola raise a number of issues for scholars of the civil rights movement. As the problems of racism transitioned from *de jure* to *de facto* segregation, Pensacola's experience suggests that organizational infighting between the earlier champions of integration inhibited local efforts to address injustices. More specifically, the abandonment of Matthews in his legal fight while simultaneously exploiting his situation in advertising campaigns suggests an indifference to personal sacrifice and a distance between black leaders and grassroots members that undermined further advances toward social justice. Further examinations of other post-1960s grassroots struggles will reveal if the Pensacola experience with national organizations is an aberration or tragically commonplace.