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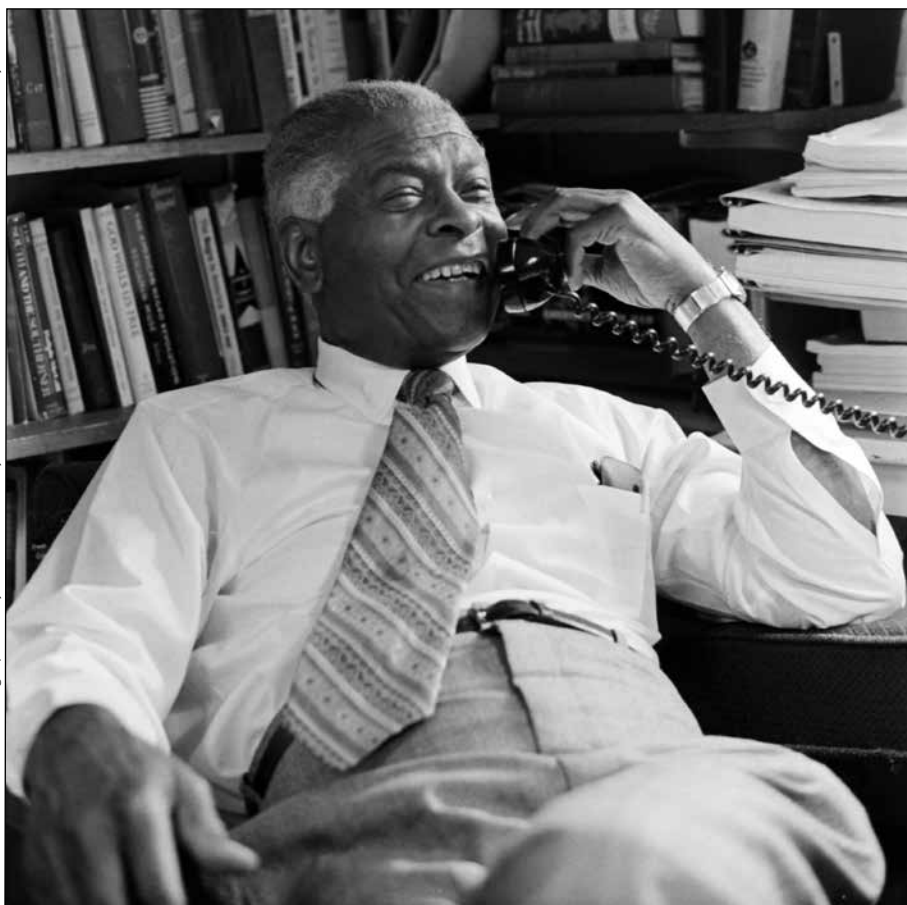
Reaching across the Color Line: Margaret Mitchell and Benjamin Mays, an Uncommon Friendship

Jearl Nix and Chara Haeussler Bohan

In 1940, Atlanta was a bustling town. It was still dazzling from the glow of the previous year's star-studded premiere of *Gone with the Wind*. The city purchased more and more trolley busses to meet the demands of a growing population. Residents emerged from the Great Depression and found Rich's Department Store a popular local place to spend their money. Baseball fans gathered at Ponce de Leon Park to watch the hometown Atlanta Crackers battle their opponents. Yet, for black residents, 1940 Atlanta looked very different. The movie premier was a whites-only event. Blacks were crammed in the back of the new trolley busses. Rich's did not allow black customers to try on clothes. And the Crackers' stadium was segregated when the all-white team played, but not when the Negro League Black Crackers played.

In Atlanta, the color line was clearly drawn between black and white citizens. This color line not only kept blacks and whites apart physically, but it also prevented blacks from attaining educational opportunities, economic equality, healthcare services, and many other public amenities readily available to white citizens. Most people, black or white, did not cross the proverbial color line. Yet, in 1940, in the heart of the segregated South, one black citizen did reach across the color line, and what he found was a white fellow citizen willing to do the same.

In 1940, Benjamin E. Mays became president of the historically black, all male, Morehouse College. Born to former slaves in South Carolina, Mays spent much of his life pursuing an education that was not available to most African Americans of his time. Mays eventually earned a PhD in religion from the University of Chicago. During his adult years, Mays was a professor and author of many books on Christianity and race relations. When Mays became the president of Morehouse, he was faced with the difficult task of saving the institution from financial ruin. Mays rolled up his sleeves and went to work raising money by enforcing tuition payments and soliciting monetary donations from the wealthy black and white residents of Atlanta.¹ One particular resident, Margaret Mitchell, had recently acquired fame and fortune. Mays believed she could help the financially strapped Morehouse College.



Benjamin Mays



Margaret Mitchell

A lifelong resident of Atlanta, Margaret Mitchell was the descendant of a Confederate soldier who fought to keep African Americans, such as Mays's parents, in slavery. Mitchell grew up in a prominent white family who employed African Americans for domestic jobs.² Mitchell only left Atlanta long enough to attend one year at Smith College. She returned home to take the place of her deceased mother as mistress of the household. Often viewed as a rebel, Mitchell was not well suited for the constraints of high society women in the South. An annulled marriage, an affinity for boyish or revealing attire, a job as a reporter, and a streak of progressive views prevented Mitchell from being fully accepted by Atlanta's elite.³

In 1926, bed ridden with a bad ankle and bored, Mitchell decided to start

Because of *Gone with the Wind's* glorification of slavery, Mitchell did not have a favorable image among African Americans. At the movie's 1939 premiere in Atlanta, blacks were restricted from entering the legally segregated Loew's Grand Theater...

writing a book. Ten years later, in 1936, *Gone with the Wind* was published. The book's content focuses on Atlanta during the antebellum period, the Civil War,

and Reconstruction. The novel's plot revolves around the loves and experiences of the main character, Scarlett O'Hara. The book sold one million copies in its first year, and in its second year, Mitchell won the Pulitzer Prize for literature. A few years later, the book was produced as a popular movie.⁴ Some African Americans found the content offensive. The book and movie portrayed slaves as happy and willing servants instead of showing the harsh realities of slavery.⁵ Mitchell always defended her work by noting that the black characters demonstrated more morality than those portrayed by whites.⁶

With the book and movie success, Mitchell became a prominent Atlantan. Benjamin Mays began requesting financial support from Mitchell in late 1941. In the summer of 1942, Mitchell

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

The correspondence between Mays and Mitchell highlights an association between two people who went against the expectations of their group in society—crossing racial barriers—for moral reasons that had far-reaching and long-lasting impact. The letters and their significance in the Jim Crow era, will bring home for students the impact that individual actions can have in creating change. The letters reveal specific challenges of segregation, such as medical care, educational opportunity, and the role of women.

This lesson addresses NCSS social studies themes ① CULTURE; ⑤ INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS; AND ⑥ CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES. Common core standards include writing short research focused projects and reading foundational U.S. documents as well as seminal works of American literature (e.g., *Gone with the Wind*). We provide several different opportunities for students and teachers to explore.

1. Have students read this background article and the letters of Mays and Mitchell. Students may also review Jim Crow in America from the Library of Congress's Jim Crow in America Primary Source Set, available at www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/civil-rights/pdf/teacher_guide.pdf, to gain a broader sense of civil rights issues in the 1940s. Discuss any race-related events in the 1940s that Mitchell and Mays would most likely have been aware of and that might have served as a context for their correspondence. Some additional events to consider include the 1940 publication of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, the 1945 election of Adam Clayton Powell, and Truman's 1948 Executive Order to desegregate the military.
 - a. Have students identify and label examples, from this story and letters, of segregation and changes in attitude towards race in the 1940s. Specific examples include the use of the terms "colored" and "negro," segregated practices in ballparks, department stores, hospitals and the *Gone with the Wind* movie premiere. Examples of changes are indicated in the Atlanta Urban League reports and Mitchell's efforts to improve healthcare for blacks.
 - b. Using the examples students have located in the article and the letters, ask them to write an essay about how black and white residents in the South responded to the burgeoning civil rights movement?
2. After students read the background information, allow them to view some of the images of Jim Crow signs found on the Library of Congress's collection, available at www.loc.gov/rr/print/list/085_disc.html. Lead students through an analysis of the images. For a guide of possible questions, use the *Analyzing Photographs & Prints* teacher's guide at www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/resources/Analyzing_Photos_and_Prints.pdf.
3. Have students conduct research on the lives and careers of Benjamin E. Mays and Margaret Mitchell. Students may find the online Georgia Encyclopedia www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Home.jsp to be a great source. Additional readings about Mays and Mitchell are located in the reference section of this article.

donated money to Morehouse College for the first time. In her letter to Mays dated June 29, 1942 (see letter #1 excerpt on p. 130), Mitchell enclosed a check for \$80, for "...some fine and deserving student." She noted that she could not guarantee the donation would be given annually because of the uncertain times of war. Finally, Mitchell made the request that her gift be kept anonymous. "I am sure you understand the reason behind this and I hope you will keep this matter confidential."⁷ Mitchell's request for secrecy had a lot to do with the potential backlash she could receive from

the white community for supporting a black college. Over the next three years, Mitchell continued her private donations to Morehouse College.

Mays' solicitation of Mitchell's financial support was scoffed at by some in the black community. Because of *Gone with the Wind's* glorification of slavery, Mitchell did not have a favorable image among African Americans. At the movie's 1939 premiere in Atlanta, blacks were restricted from entering the legally segregated Loew's Grand Theater which was decorated with white columns and confederate flags.⁸ The black actors

of the movie were not included at the Atlanta premier.⁹ At a segregated reception sponsored by the city of Atlanta, 10-year-old Martin Luther King, Jr., joined the Ebenezer Baptist Church choir in singing spirituals to entertain the whites-only crowd in attendance.¹⁰ However, Mays was not deterred. He had a plan and a vision for Morehouse, and he knew that gaining the support of a progressive like Mitchell would be beneficial to the college.

World War II changed Atlanta and the South. Agricultural based jobs in the South dissipated, thus blacks migrated

Excerpts of Letters from Margaret Mitchell

Letter #1: *Margaret Mitchell, letter to Benjamin E. Mays, June 29, 1942.*

"I have received your letter of June 22nd, requesting that I give a tuition scholarship of \$80 to Morehouse College and that I consider making this an annual donation. I am enclosing a check for \$80 and I hope it will be of assistance to some fine and deserving student. I am sorry that I cannot promise to make this an annual contribution. The uncertainty of the future based on the war as well as the heavy demands upon me make it impossible for me to promise to do any more.

Whenever I have made any donation to any cause or organization, I have done so with the understanding that no publicity of any type would be given to my contribution. I am sure you understand the reasons behind this and I hope you will keep this matter confidential."

Letter #2: *Margaret Mitchell, letter to Hughes Spalding April 17, 1946.*

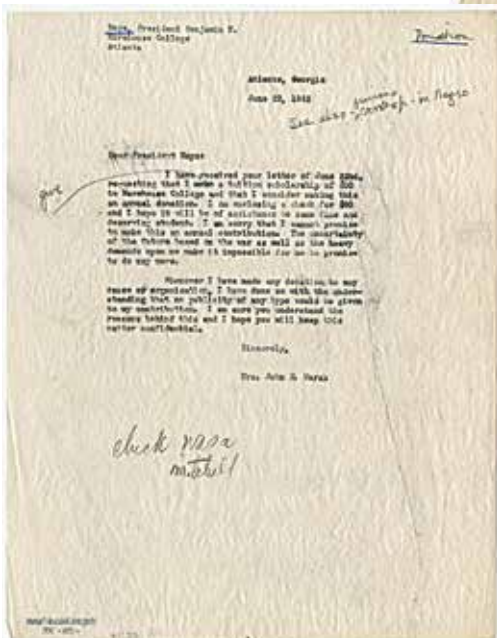
"I'm very interested in better hospital facilities in Atlanta, especially for colored people. Recently our colored laundress, who worked for us for over twenty years, died of cancer. ... It fell upon me to find a hospital bed in which Carrie could die more comfortably than at home. ... I do not want ever again to go through the agonizing experiences I had. There just were no beds. ... Carrie was like my own family and I would have paid all that I would have paid for a relative. ...

I do not think people who have not experienced so heartbreaking a time can realize the need for more beds for our colored population who are able to pay something for medical and hospital care. ... I hope so much that some thought will be taken of this particular problem. ... Atlanta is big enough now to have colored people in the white-collar class, and I wonder how many of them have been in the situation of our Carrie, willing to pay but being unable to buy a bed in which to die."

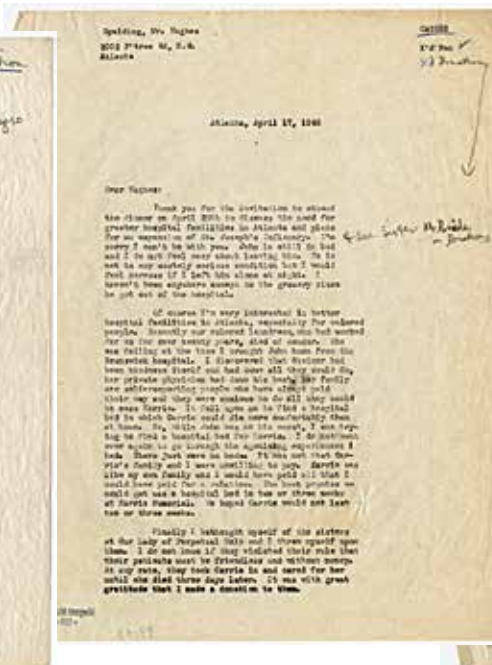
Letter #3: *Margaret Mitchell, letter to Benjamin E. Mays, October 23, 1946.*

"I want [the \$2,000 check] used to assist deserving students in acquiring medical and dental educations. I think I may speak for Carrie, as well as for myself, when I say that both of us would prefer the students to be chosen on a basis of character, good will toward their fellow man, and willingness to work, rather than on brilliance or high scholastic grades alone. ... Georgia is a huge state and is poor. We are poorer in Negro doctors, I am sure, than almost any other state. Therefore, I would definitely prefer that any boys who avail themselves of this money should practice in Georgia or at least give Georgia a trial of a year or so. ... but I ask that you make very clear to anyone who accepts this money for medical or dental training that it would be the wish of Carrie Mitchell Holbrook that they stay here and help their own people."

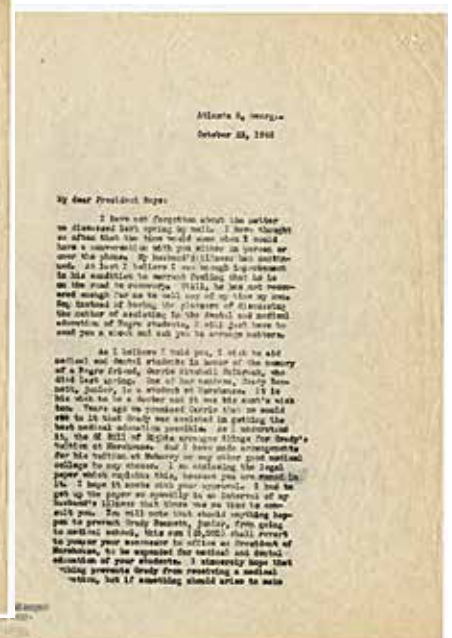
Letter #1



Letter #2



Letter #3



Courtesy of Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library/ University of Georgia Libraries.

to urban centers for employment. The Atlanta Urban League (AUL), an organization of local black leaders, worked in the 1940s to help these new residents find jobs, fight for educational opportunities, find housing despite the objections of vocal hate groups,¹¹ and improve hospital services for African Americans.¹²

The increase in the population brought the crisis of public healthcare for Atlanta's black residents to a climax. As the president of Morehouse, which included a school of medicine, Mays was aware of the substandard healthcare available to blacks. Public health facilities were severely lacking. Blacks made up 35 percent of Atlanta's population yet only had access to 391 hospital beds, according to a 1947 AUL report. There were few public hospitals to care for blacks who could not afford private care. Not only were facilities lacking, but there was also a severe shortage of black doctors. The AUL reported that for every 3,074 black residents, there was only one black doctor.¹³

In the spring of 1946, Margaret Mitchell had a first-hand experience with the poor quality of healthcare for blacks. Mitchell's African American laundress, Carrie Holbrook, died of cancer. Carrie Holbrook had been an employee of Mitchell's for over 20 years, and the two women had been close. Holbrook was in the final stages of cancer when her family and Mitchell searched for a hospital so that Holbrook could spend her final days in comfort. The wait for a hospital bed for Holbrook was two to three weeks. Mitchell, desperate to provide Holbrook with a peaceful end, quietly donated money to the Sisters of Our Lady of Perpetual Help hospital. The hospital administrators agreed to accept Holbrook who passed away three days later.¹⁴

This personal experience propelled Mitchell into action. On April 17, 1946, she wrote a letter (see Letter #2) to Hughes Spalding, a powerful and respected Atlanta lawyer and chair of the Fulton DeKalb Hospital Authority's board of trustees, recounting Carrie

Holbrook's situation and discussing the desperate need for more medical facilities for African Americans. She included a donation of \$1,000 towards the development of a public unit for Atlanta's black residents.¹⁵ Utilizing funds from donations such as Mitchell's, Spalding worked with the Atlanta Urban League to eventually open the Hughes Spalding Pavilion of Grady Hospital in 1952.¹⁶

Only a few months after Holbrook's death, in a letter dated October 23, 1946 (see Letter #3), Mitchell pledged a \$2,000 scholarship for deserving medical and dental students to Mays and Morehouse College. The scholarship did have some stipulations.¹⁷ First, the recipient should be selected based on good character rather than scholastic aptitude. Second, the recipient should practice medicine in Georgia. Dr. Mays agreed to Mitchell's terms and the scholarship was established. At the request of Mitchell, the donations remained private.

On August 11, 1949, Mitchell was crossing Atlanta's famous Peachtree Street when she was struck by a speeding taxi. She died five days later.¹⁸ Yet her death did not end her work with Mays and Morehouse College. In 1951, both Mays and Morehouse College received more than \$3,000 in donations from an arrangement made by Mitchell before her death. In March of 2002, Eugene Mitchell, the nephew of Margaret Mitchell, donated \$1.5 million to Morehouse College establishing the Margaret Mitchell Chair in the division of humanities and social sciences. This donation is one of the largest individual gifts in the history of Morehouse College.¹⁹ The Mitchell-Mays relationship symbolizes the courage of two individuals who reached across a line of hatred and mistrust to bridge a gap between black and white citizens. 🌍

Notes

1. Ira Joe Johnson and William G. Pickens, *Benjamin E. Mays & Margaret Mitchell: A Unique Legacy in Medicine* (Winter Park, Fla.: FOUR-G Publishers, 1996), 1-6.
2. *Ibid.*, 6, 8.
3. Anita P. Davis, *Margaret Mitchell: A Link to Atlanta and the World*, eds. Julie Bookman, Karen Kelly,

Mary Wilson, and Bonnie Garvin (Atlanta: The Atlanta Historical Society, 2006), 7, 13.

4. *Ibid.*, 19-20.
5. Gary M. Pomerantz, *Where Peachtree Meets Sweet Auburn: The Saga of Two Families and the Making of Atlanta* (New York, N.Y.: Scribner, 1996), 130.
6. Davis, 28.
7. Letter from Margaret Mitchell to Benjamin E. Mays, June 29, 1942; Margaret Mitchell family papers, Box 55, Folder 18, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, The University of Georgia Libraries, Athens, Ga.
8. Johnson and Pickens, 9-10.
9. Pomerantz, 133.
10. Davis, 29.
11. Alton Hornsby, Jr., and Alexa Benson Henderson, *The Atlanta Urban League, 1920-2000* (Lewiston, N.Y.: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), 39, 50, 56; Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005), 46.
12. Ronald H. Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 160.
13. *Ibid.*, 161.
14. Johnson and Pickens, 8.
15. Letter from Margaret Mitchell to Hughes Spalding, April 17, 1946; Margaret Mitchell family papers, Box 79, Folders 3, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, The University of Georgia Libraries, Athens, GA
16. Bayor, 163.
17. Letter from Margaret Mitchell to Benjamin E. Mays, October 23, 1946; Margaret Mitchell family papers, Box 55, Folder 18, Hargrett Rare Book and Manuscript Library, The University of Georgia Libraries, Athens, Ga.
18. Davis, 26.
19. Dahleen Glanton, "Of Race and a Southern Novel: Mitchell Family, Black College Renew Alliance," *Chicago Tribune* (March 31, 2002). doi: http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2002-03-31/news/0203310407_1_morehouse-college-black-men-mrs-mitchell.

Additional Resources

Change in the Wind A documentary on the Mays/Mitchell relationship created by Andrew Young. <http://andrewyoungpresents.blogspot.com/2010/12/new-on-dvd.html>

Margaret Mitchell: American Rebel A PBS Documentary on Margaret Mitchell, www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/margaret-mitchell-american-rebel/watch-the-full-documentary/2047/

Mitchell House and Museum www.margaretmitchellhouse.com/

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