

African American Civil Rights and Educational Equality Organizing in South Carolina.

By Terence L. Johnson

On July 16, 1955, the leaders of the Orangeburg Freedom Movement, called for the desegregation of the public school system in many South Carolina cities and towns. In the mid-1950s, peaceful assemblies of well-dressed African Americans in the city of Orangeburg, the center of Orangeburg County, challenged businesses owned by whites who had generally been antagonistic or indifferent to the plight of its colored citizenry.¹

Nearly six months before the famous Montgomery Boycott, many counties in South Carolina served as ground zero in the fight for school desegregation. Many African American citizens in that city freely signed petitions requesting that white leaders comply with their demands for social progress between the races. Citizens Councils, the anti-thesis of the civil rights struggle, sought to compel the state of South Carolina to enforce desegregation laws. The Citizens Councils, dedicated to maintaining the status quo, vowed to keep all institutions separate but unequal throughout the nation's South.² When the names of African Americans who signed a petition to end segregation were published in several newspapers, the Orangeburg Citizens Council leaders reacted by punishing African Americans in the South Carolina cities of Elloree, Orangeburg, Summerton, and Sumter.³

In Elloree, many African Americans, who supported the petitions for social change, either voluntarily left their homes or were forced out of them by white landlords who supported racial segregation. Burgess Butler and James Shivers, local residents of Elloree, had to vacate

¹Felder, *Civil Rights in South Carolina*, 91-92; "Human Relations council faces Integration Task," *Progress-Index*, Sun, Nov. 27, 1955.

²James L. Felder, *Civil Rights in South Carolina*, (Charleston & London: History Press, 2012), 91; Robert Cook, *Sweet Land of Liberty? —The African-American Struggle for Civil Rights in the Twentieth Century*, (London & New York: Longman, 1998) 88, 91;

³"S.C. Teacher Loses Post," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Sat, Sep 17, 1955.

their homes with less than a weeks' notice. John A. Haigler faced foreclosure on his property unless he paid his mortgage ten days after receiving notification. Haigler was spared foreclosure, due to the fact that Victory Savings Bank, a black owned financial institution in Columbia, South Carolina, came to his rescue and paid his mortgage.⁴ Victory Savings Bank had additional financial backing from the NAACP, and a few predominately white organizations from the North, which allowed the lending institution to extend credit to numerous African Americans.⁵

In spite of the fact that black lending institutions like Victory Savings Bank received economic support from white northern benefactors, the Orangeburg Citizens Council hoped to subdue the African America's resolve to be treated as equal citizens, by going so far as to also fire the relatives of petition signers. The case of Grace Richburg serves as an example of the type of power that the Citizens Council had on African Americans in South Carolina. Grace Richburg, a native of Clarendon County, an educator, lost her job after her father in-law J. Haskell Richburg supported the petition to desegregate the public schools. The September 17, 1955 edition of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, an African American newspaper, quoted Mrs. Richburg as saying, "I don't know what I will do...My husband Joe, is a teacher, too, and he also signed the petition...we are afraid he will lose his job."⁶ At a city owned public utilities department in Orangeburg, Bennie Brown, another supporter of the movement for school desegregation, who had five children, lost his job at the store where he worked because "fifty cents was missing and

⁴Ibid.

⁵American Friends Service Committee Incorporated, Minutes, Board of Directors (Philadelphia, PA.: American Friends Service Committee, May 2, 1956), 6.

⁶"S.C. Teacher Loses Post," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Sat, Sep 17, 1955.

a wall was not clean.”⁷ The rationale for his layoff implied that he was incompetent in the exercise of his duties.

African American petitioners for racial equality, who own businesses, were refused loans and/or products, by white businesses. These loans and/or products would have enabled these people of color to continue the day to day affairs of commerce. Some national corporations, which included Coca Cola, Globe Dairies, Sunbeam Bread and the Taylor Biscuit Company, supported racial segregation, by using economic pressure to force African American businessmen to take a neutral position in regard to the civil rights struggle in South Carolina. Many African American businessmen, in the state, defied the demands of their local and national suppliers to abandon the petitions, and thereby remained faithful to the principles of racial equality.

When, for example James Sulton and Roy Sulton, two local businessmen of Sulton’s Esso Gas Station, in the city of Orangeburg, signed a petition calling for the desegregation of the city schools, the Orangeburg Citizens Council used its influence to cause the suspension of the two brother’s credit, which had enabled them to buy auto parts for their gas station. The two brothers were later told by an agent of Standard Oil Esso, the company that also supplied their filling station with gas, to take their names off the school petitions.

James Sulton, one of the leaders of the Steering Committee for the Orangeburg Freedom Movement and president of Orangeburg’s NAACP, never wavered in his resolve to fight the injustice that resulted from racial segregation. In a 1975 newspaper interview, James Sulton, a former World War II veteran, who performed duties in the Artillery and Quartermaster Corps for

⁷Ibid.

the United States of America in the European theatre, was reported to have responded to this request with the following statement: "I knew what I was signing and all the others did too." Refusing to remove their names from a petition, the two brothers instead transferred their business account from a local white owned bank in Orangeburg to the African American controlled, Victory Savings Bank in Columbia, South Carolina.

Members in the movement to end the practice of segregation often engaged in embargos in retaliation against the biased business practices devised by white segregationist. Many of these African Americans stopped making purchases at local white owned stores in Orangeburg County. Black teachers and well to do women of color boycotted Beckers Department Store, a prominent white Jewish place of business, when they learned that the store cancelled the account of an African American customer who had signed a petition.⁸ Boycotts of white owned institutions by African Americans had not been limited to Orangeburg.

In Ellore, many African Americans continued to join the NAACP and use the power of the Boycott in spite of the fact that the Orangeburg Citizens Council continued to use the threat of job loss to control the social and political ambitions of the black population. The September 17, 1955 edition of the Pittsburgh Courier reported that "already the pressure of the Councils is backfiring. In Ellore, most of the Negroes are buying their groceries from three Negro Stores. The action places the NAACP, the very organization which the Councils contend doesn't have the interest of the Negro at heart, in the role of Savior."⁹ A letter written by, Hassie Mack, the secretary and president of the Ellore branch of the NAACP regarding the Orangeburg Citizen's

⁸"S.C. Teacher Loses Post," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Sat, Sep 17, 1955; Cecil J. Williams, *Out-of-the-box in Dixie: Cecil Williams' photography of the South Carolina events that changed America (Orangeburg, SC: Cecil J. Williams Photography/Publishing, 2010), 119, 122, 124.*

⁹Ibid.

Council stated that “At our Sunday meeting about 200 members are determined not to bow to the W.C.C. or sign any Statement to get any help.” Because they were organized and very determined, African American farmers in Elloree were able to order carloads of fertilizers and distribute these farm resources amongst themselves.¹⁰ Some African Americans, who complied with the demands of the Orangeburg Citizens Council, by having their names removed from the petition, lost a great deal of respect from many African Americans and whites.¹¹

The September 17, 1955 edition of the *Pittsburgh Courier* carried a story about the African American’s involved in the struggle for racial equality, that it was ironic that “a government which will spend millions of dollars to prosecute someone because he read the *Daily Worker* in 1946 but shows no inclination to investigate a 1955 neo-fascist organization whose stated purpose is to negate the laws of this country by force if necessary.” The *Daily worker* was a news publication often considered to be a strong supporter of the socialist ideology, which opposed the ideals of American capitalism. However, the leaders of the Orangeburg Movement’s lack of understanding as to why the United States government’s often passive role in ending racial oppression, did not deter them from continuing grassroots efforts to fight against what they perceived to be America’s home grown fascist elements.¹²

The Orangeburg Movement operated on various fronts in African American and white society. The black youth of South Carolina supplied the movement with a robust source of followers as well as leaders. The elder leaders of the Orangeburg Freedom Movement, often

¹⁰ Lucile black to Hassie Mack, 19 February 1957, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Part II Box c142, Washington, DC.

¹¹“S.C. Teacher Loses Post,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Sat, Sep 17, 1955.

¹²*Ibid.*

helped to mentor young men and women, many of whom would later emerge as civil rights icons, in their own right. South Carolina State College and Claflin College, two historically African American institutions, attracted young people from all over the United States, who eventually came to protest laws that supported segregation. Willis T. Goodwin, president of the Claflin College Chapter of the NAACP, acknowledged how even before the famous Brown decision that ended legal segregation, “Claflin students went into the community in groups and into the community as individuals and made speeches before civic groups, church congregations, parent teacher groups and even used the newspaper boy to distribute mimeographed materials concerning their right to vote and participate in government.”¹³ When twenty-three white firms put economic pressure on African Americans store owners, Orangeburg civil rights leaders, high school students, and college students boycotted the bread and dairy products produced by those white firms.

In April of 1956, students entered Floyd Hall, South Carolina State Colleges’ dining room, and demonstrated their opposition to the white food companies when they “poured water on their food, trashed it, and left without eating.” They also supported the boycott, and protested food the college purchased from a member of the Orangeburg Citizens Council.¹⁴ In April 1956, at South Carolina State College, a predominately African American educational institution, more than one thousand students refused to attend classes, after state authorities investigated and questioned the legitimacy of the NAACP on the campus. Willis T. Goodwin observed that

¹³Willis T. Goodwin to Mr. Herbert L. Wright, 9 April, 1956, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Part II Box c142, Washington DC.

¹⁴“Students Strike at So. Carolina State,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Sat, April 14, 1956; Cecil J. Williams, *Out-of-the-box in Dixie: Cecil Williams' photography of the South Carolina events that changed America* (Orangeburg, SC: Cecil J. Williams Photography/Publishing, 2010), 129.

“Claflin students have refused to even go into town to buy anything...even the Negro Public school students have refused to eat and drink these products that is furnished them through their Lunch Program.”¹⁵ Students of the two educational institutions, Claflin College and South Carolina State University, also were asked by older leaders of the movement to have their parents send them clothing so that they would not have to cross the picket lines to purchase apparel or food products.¹⁶ Many more African Americans, who were not in college, were implored not to shop in Orangeburg’s white owned stores, but to instead purchase clothing through mail order catalogues.¹⁷ Many students from the two historically black colleges, not only boycotted white shops in Orangeburg County, but demanded an end to all oppressive racial practices.¹⁸

African Americans were not alone in their efforts to end the unequal practices associated with racial segregation. Some white organizations in the North supported the struggle for freedom and liberty. Perhaps one of the most significant organizations to get involve in the fight for equal rights in South Carolina was the American Friends Service Committee or AFSC as it was commonly called. The AFSC, composed primarily of white men and women, was founded in 1917. The committee was a Quaker organization that tried to “relieve human suffering and

¹⁵ Willis T. Goodwin to Mr. Herbert L. Wright, 9 April, 1956, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Part II Box c142, Washington DC.

¹⁶“Students Strike at So. Carolina State,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Sat, April 14, 1956.

¹⁷“S.C. Teacher Loses Post,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, Sat, Sep 17, 1955.

¹⁸“Negro Students Boycott Classes to Protest probe,” *Valley morning Star*, Tues, April 10, 1956.

resolve conflicts among individuals, groups, and nations.”¹⁹ The Rights of Conscience branch of the AFSC sought to protect the constitutional and moral rights of all human beings. The Rights of Conscience supported individuals and groups that championed social justice. This branch of the AFSC was also known to provide “financial aid available to a person, or persons, involved in litigation because they refuse to comply with measures which violate their conscientious principles.”²⁰ From 1956 to 1966, The Rights of Conscience coordinated its economic and political efforts for social change in the state of South Carolina with several grass roots African American organizations.

Frederick Fuges, a farmer and lawyer from Buck County, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, volunteered his services to organize with the American Friends Service Committee’s Rights of Conscience program. Fuges’ job, in the 1950s, was to protect and support minorities as well as whites who took on liberal positions for social change.²¹ Fuges frequently worked with African American leaders in South Carolina, which included James T. McCain of Sumter County.

James T. McCain sought to improve the condition of blacks in South Carolina long before he began his association with the American Friends Service Committee. From 1946 to 1948, McCain had been president and treasurer of the Palmetto State Teachers Association. In the early 1950s, this predominately black teacher association changed its name to the Palmetto Education Association or PEA, as it was commonly called, so as to include the support of not only African American teachers but also African American principals and college presidents.

¹⁹Quakers Help Meet Economic Needs in South, handout for immediate release, from the American Friends Service Committee, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Feb, 19, 1957.

²¹ “Frederick Fuges,” *Philly-Archives*, March 03, 2000.

The PEA championed race and sex equality for all teachers, while also developing educational programs for African American teachers and their students.²²

While James T. McCain had toiled to end racial discrimination in the teaching profession, he eventually lost his position as the principal of Palmetto High School in Mullins, South Carolina as a result of his affiliation with the NAACP.²³ McCain, who continued in a limited capacity as a member of the PEA, eventually labored as executive director of the South Carolina Council of Human relations, which tried to promote racial harmony by “working with about half a dozen local interracial groups across the state.” These groups were composed of “educators, attorneys, churchmen and business leaders.”²⁴ McCain specialized in gathering useful information in racially divided areas across South Carolina while also creating avenues for cooperation among interracial and interfaith groups.²⁵ Dr. Helen Amermen, Assistant Director Council for Civic Unity of San Francisco discovered that McCain, “conducted surveys on the voting strength of Negroes in South Carolina and the attitude of lay persons toward their school programs, the latter survey resulting in the organization of a lay-professional committee in our Association.”²⁶

²² John F Potts, Sr., *A History of the Palmetto Education Association* (Washington DC: National Education Association, 1978), 75.

²³Ibid, 67.

²⁴“Human Relations Council Faces Integration Task,” *Progress-Index*, Sun, Nov 27, 1955.

²⁵W.E. Solomon to Dr. Helen E. Amerman, 12 July 1957, letter in the hand of the South Carolina Education Association, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina; Unknown Author, 6 December 1955, letter in the hand of the South Carolina Education Association, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

²⁶Ibid.

When McCain became a member of the American Friends Service Committee, he served as liaison between African American farmers in South Carolina and members of the Rights of Conscience Committee program in Philadelphia. By 1957, McCain's activism had extended beyond the field of education, so much so, that Frederick Fuges could write to his American Friends Service Committee associates that, "Jim is known to the Service Committee and a member of the AFSC working party to consider the drafting of a statement on race relations. In addition, the Rights of Conscience program has used Jim to distribute material aids in South Carolina. As a result of our association with Jim we have every confidence in him and in the information which he supplies."²⁷

In another correspondence, McCain acknowledged the fact that Frederick Fuges and the American Friends Service Committee made several shipments of "dungrees and shoes" to African Americans in Orangeburg County. For example, in one of his correspondences, McCain made it known to Fuges that girl shoe sizes 5-6-7-8 were still needed in his community.²⁸ As early as December 6, 1955, a letter from an anonymous author, found among the Palmetto Education Association's records, noted that "At the office of the South Carolina Branch of NAACP, clothing, food, candy, Toys, etc., are arriving daily to help those individuals in Clarendon and Orangeburg counties who are suffering from the economic squeeze that has been brought against them because of the position they have taken on desegregation." The anonymous author went on to add that "Organizations in Philadelphia Pa., have sent at least 3 tons of food of

²⁷Fred Fuges to Hurford Crossman, 13 March, 1957, AFSC archives, Philadelphia, PA.

²⁸James T. Farmer to Fred Fuges, 6 March, 1957, AFSC archives, Philadelphia, PA.

all description.”²⁹ The efforts by which men like James T. McCain and organizations like the American Friends Service Committee who secured badly needed home supplies to African Americans in South Carolina, represented a larger network of concerned American citizens across the country, dedicated to ending racial oppression. McCain played a pivotal role in finding support outside of South Carolina for African American farmers affected by threats to their economic security.

From 1950 to 1959, African Americans farmers in South Carolina declined to about sixty-one thousand to thirty thousand members. These farmers, during the 1950s, represented a vanishing breed of men and women who produced food, but made up roughly ten percent of the agriculturalist working population. Through a correspondence with Frederick Fuges, Richard B. Gamble, a member of the Rights of Conscience program, learned of McCain’s effort to create the Sumter Loan and Investment Association, which provided farmers with much needed aid. Fuges then attempted to help African American farmers supported by the association through what he termed as “Individual sources,” while also supplying an attorney to provide the proper papers for all of the loans.³⁰ In a letter dated February 20, 1957, McCain wrote Fuges stating, “I have received several letters from farmers in the Orangeburg and Clarendon communities asking for help in the way of loans for their crops. Many of these farmers are land owners and will put up their land as securities until all loans are repaid.” Like the teachers and students in many of the counties in South Carolina, black farmers were actively involved in the struggle to end

²⁹Unknown Author, 6 December 1955, letter in the hand of the South Carolina Education Association, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina.

³⁰Vera J. Banks, *Black Farmers and Their Farms*, 59th ed. (Washington DC: United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 1986), 2 & 18; Fred Fuges to Dear Friend, 15 March 1957, AFSC archives, Philadelphia, PA.

segregation. White owned banks refused to give farmers loans unless they put in writing that they would denounce school desegregation and the NAACP.³¹ Frederick Fuges learned from James T. McCain that some farmers, who refused to sign any statements denouncing segregation or the NAACP, owned their own farms but required funds for fertilizer and seeds. He indicated to Fuges that the African American farmers required about \$4,500.00 to maintain their farms.³² Because the Rights of Conscience program had not been designed to provide economic assistance to anyone whose civil liberties had been challenged, The American Friends Service Committee sought support from individuals and other organizations interested in the plight of those farmers.

Other members of the Rights of Conscience Program, such as Richard B. Gamble, greatly contributed to networking with other organizations to aid the African Americans farmers in their efforts to maintain their farms. Gamble informed the American Friends Service Committee that he would be glad to put some of his savings in Victory Savings Bank in South Carolina in order to aid in solving “other problems in the South.”³³ The American Friends Service Committee leaders also suggested that the Little River Farm Committee might be able to assist the African American South Carolina famers. In the past, the Little River Farm Committee sponsored efforts to improve the economic productivity of tenant farmers in the southern portion of the United States. This committee had created cooperatives and eventually helped tenant farmers in South Carolina to purchase land.

³¹ James T. McCain to Dear Fred, 6 March 1957, AFSC archives, Philadelphia, PA.

³² Ibid.

³³Richard B. Gamble to Rights of Conscience Program, 11 March 1957, AFSC archives, Philadelphia, PA.

In regard to African American farmers, the American Friends Service Committee also suggested that if the Little River Farm Committee took up the task of supporting them economically, the Rights of Conscience program could provide the legal services needed to secure loans to those very same farmers. Time was of the essence due to the fact that the farmers needed to purchase their supplies and plant their seeds during the spring months.³⁴ In a March 22, 1957 correspondence, James T. McCain was informed by Frederick Fuges that the Little River Farm Committee would provide the farmers with the much needed loan of \$4,500 along with funds for a lawyer.³⁵

Fuges asked McCain to locate a white lawyer who was not part of the Citizens Council and who also had a history of providing his services to African American clients. It was McCain's role to locate a lawyer in Sumter whose last name ended with either Kay or Cade.³⁶ Taking on this task, McCain contacted attorney Ira Kay, of Sumter who would later serve as one of many consultants in cases involving African American teachers. Kay's major contribution to the efforts of the American Friends Service Committee lay in his ability to disburse loans to black Ellore farmers in an effort to help them pay off their mortgages.³⁷

³⁴ *1943 Annual Report, American Friends Service Committee* (Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1943), 17; *1945 Annual Report, American Friends Service Committee* (Philadelphia: American Friends Service Committee, 1945), 16; Hurford Crossman, Fred Fuges, Little River Farm Committee—Assistance to South Carolina, 13 March 1957, AFSC archives, Philadelphia, PA.

³⁵ Fred Fuges, Alan Howe to James T. McCain, 22 March, 1957, AFSC archives, Philadelphia, PA.

³⁶ Fred Fuges to James McCain, 15 June 1956, AFSC archives, Philadelphia, PA.

³⁷ Ira Kaye to Fred Fuges, 15 April 1957, AFSC archives, Philadelphia, PA.; Fred Fuges, to Mike Yarrow & Tartt Bell, 19 April 1957, AFSC archives, Philadelphia, PA.

After McCain received a loan of \$2500 for the farmers who owned their lands, he informed Fuges that “there is still need for those farmers who are renting land to farm with but who do not have the necessary real estate to put up. If these farmers can be helped, they will give a mortgage on their crops and what-ever form equipment they have.”³⁸ Because of men like Fuges and McCain, many African American Farmers in South Carolina, like other black citizens, were able to help desegregate American society even in the face of the possibility of losing their livelihoods.

Conclusion:

The Orangeburg movement was a grass roots effort that lasted for more than fifteen years and arose out of a genuine need to enforce the famous 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas decision. When the Federal Government hesitated to make states like South Carolina tear down its wall of segregation, African American businessmen, farmers, ministers, merchants, students, and teachers organized themselves around one major goal. African American activists in Orangeburg counties, which included the city of Orangeburg and the town of Elloree, used their economic power to make white business owners change their racist politics and support the desegregation of schools and all public institutions. In time, the movement spread to other South Carolina counties such as Summerton and Sumter.

African Americans in South Carolina suffered a host of economic reprisals at the hands of white businessmen and white employers who desired to keep alive racial segregation.

³⁸ James T. McCain to Dear Fred, 6, April 1957, AFSC archives, Philadelphia, PA.

Perhaps the two groups that fought the hardest and had more to lose in terms of their own economic stability, were African American farmers and teachers.

These members of the work force did not struggle against the agents of segregation alone. African American educators like executive director of the South Carolina Council of Human relations James T. McCain consulted with white leaders in the North, such as American Friends Society Committee director Fred Fuges.

The black citizens in the cities and towns of Orangeburg County received both funding and household goods and supplies from numerous local African American associations in South Carolina, and white organizations in the northern part of the United States. Their collective struggles for racial equality succeeded in weakening entrenched segregation laws that had fostered an unequal cultural landscape in America.

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