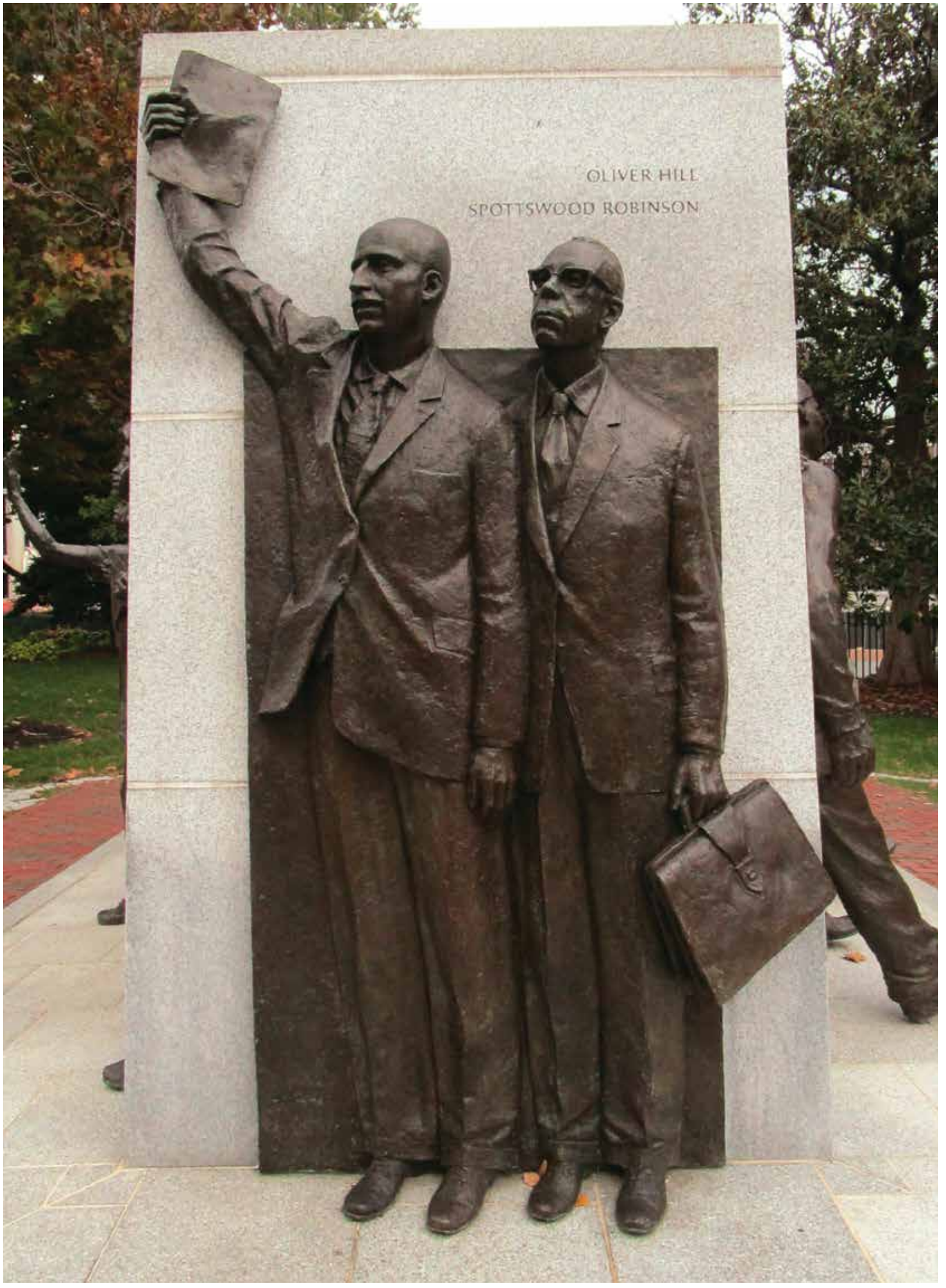
Civil Rights Heroes



WOMENARTISTUPDATES/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Granddaughter of Slaves, Congresswoman

Carrie Mae Pittman was born April 29, 1926, in Tallahassee, Florida, the daughter of a sharecropper and the granddaughter of slaves.

In 1979, the Florida A&M University and University of Michigan graduate decided to run in a special election when Florida state Rep. Gwen Cherry was killed in a car crash. That started a political career that saw Pittman, now Carrie Meek, take office in the U.S. House of Representatives.

FLORIDA SENATE

Before Meek joined the U.S. House, she won Cherry's former seat in the Florida House and then the Senate, becoming the first African American woman elected to the Florida Senate. A Democrat, she served on the education appropriations subcommittee and championed efforts to construct affordable rental housing in the state.

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

A 1992 court-ordered redistributing created three new districts in Florida. Meek ran for one of those seats, the 17th district in northern Dade County. She became the first black member of Congress — along with Corrine Brown and Alcee Hastings — to represent Florida since Reconstruction.

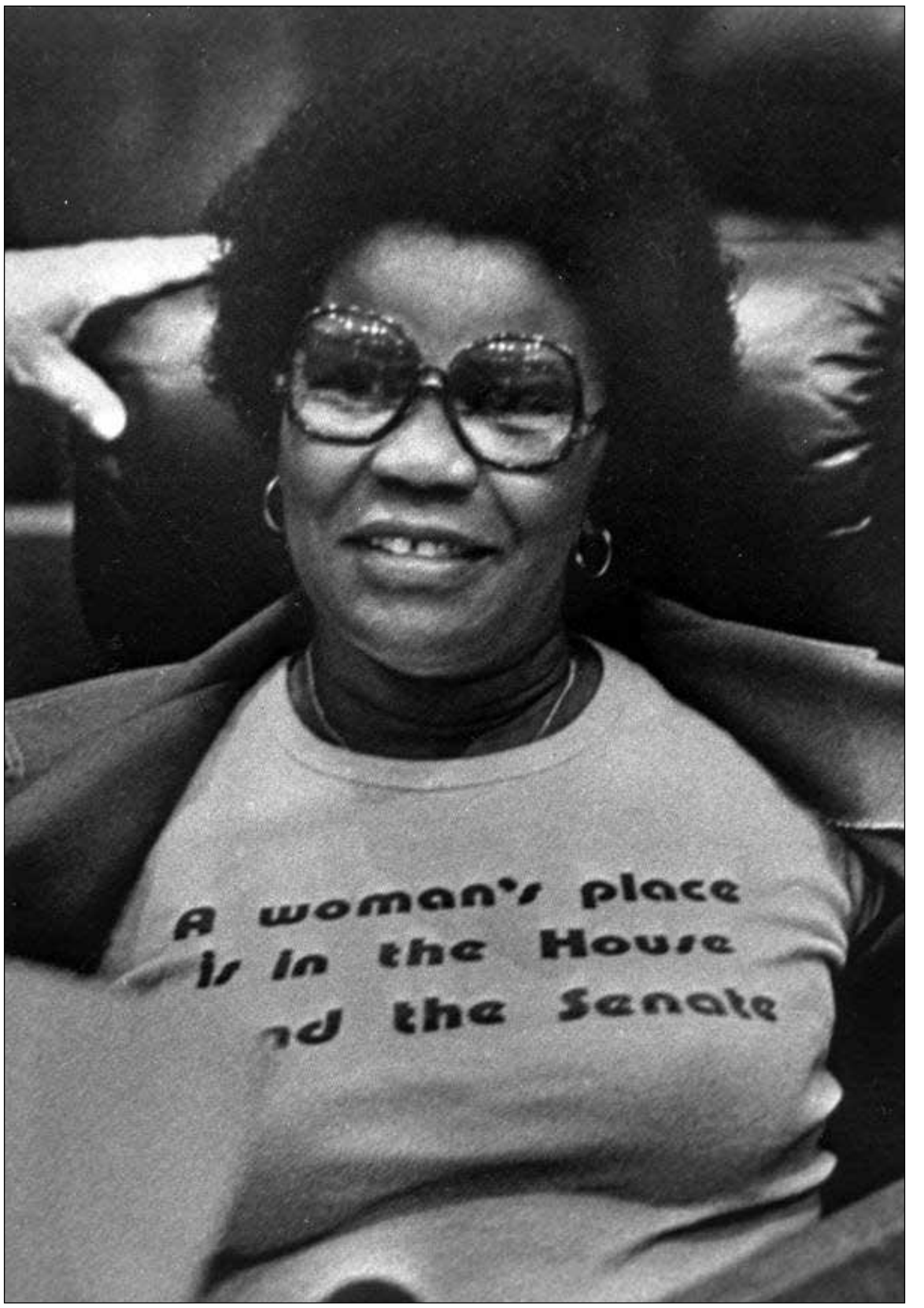
One of Meek's first orders of business was to get her district $100 million to rebuild from Hurricane Andrew. She also lead legislation to improve Dade County's transportation and to fund aviation programs at Miami-Dace Community College. She was an advocate for Haitian immigrants and, in the contentious 2000 presidential election, objected to the 25 electoral votes from Florida that gave George W. Bush the White House. Meek declined to meet with President Bush and other legislators in February 2001.

Meek retired from the House in 2003. Her son, Kendrick Meek, ran for her seat and succeeded her. Kendrick Meek served the district from 2003-2011.

RETIREMENT

After leaving the House, Meek spent most of her time running the Carrie Meek Foundation, founded in 2001 to help provide opportunity in Miami-Dade. She received honorary degrees from several institutions, including the University of Miami, Barry University, Florida Atlantic University, Florida A&M University and Rollins College. The Carrie Meek-James N. Eaton Sr. Southeastern Regional Black Archives Research Center and Museum at Florida A&M University is named in her honor.

Meek died Nov. 28, 2021, at 95.

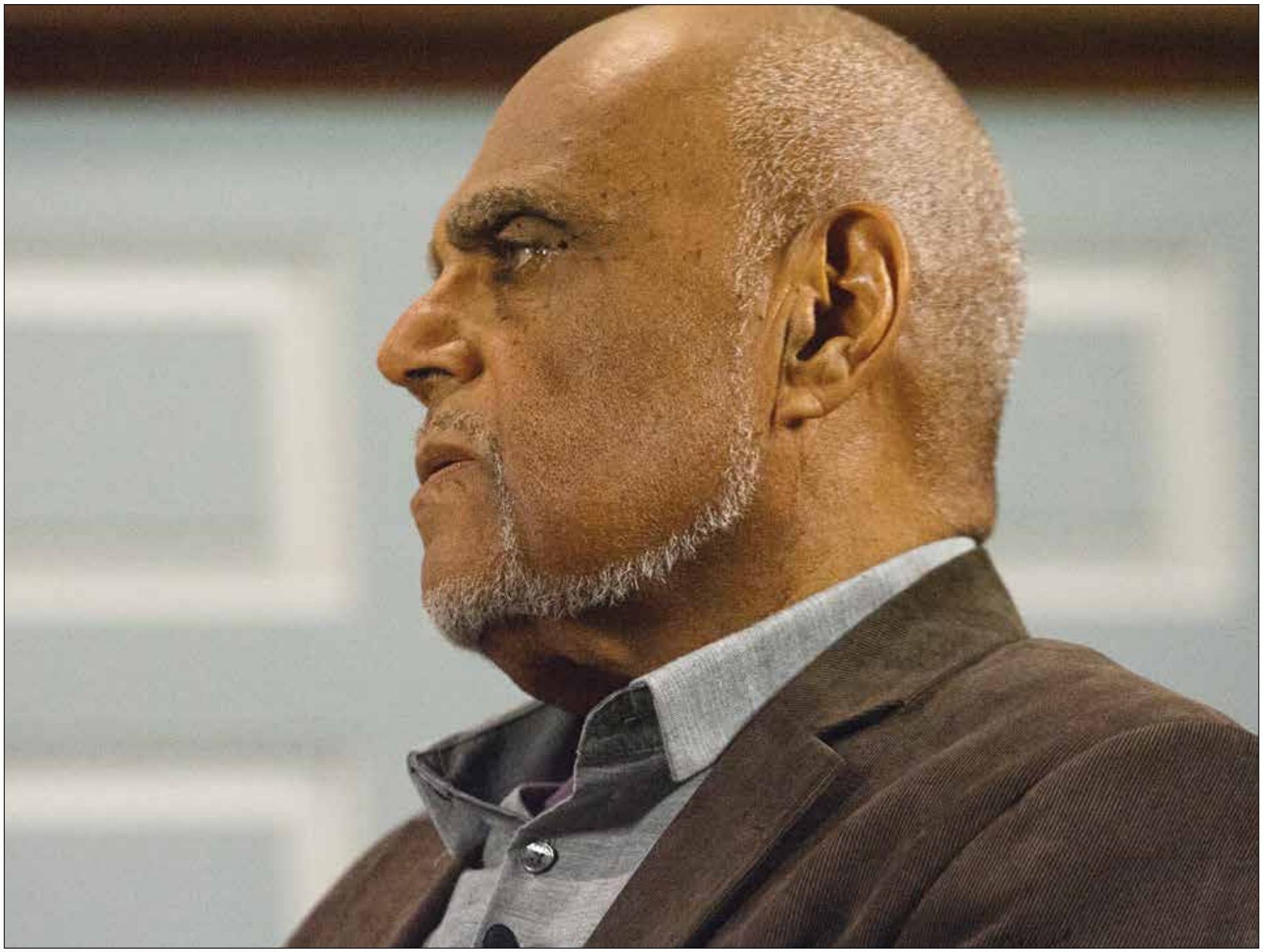


FLORIDA MEMORY/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Before Meek joined the U.S. House, she won a seat in the Florida House and then the Senate, becoming the first African American woman elected to the Florida Senate.

Activist Robert Parris Moses

Robert Parris Moses was born in Harlem, New York, on Jan. 23, 1935.



MILLER CENTER/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

His family migrated north from the Jim Crow South, selling milk from a Black-owned cooperative. Moses was a Rhodes Scholar who attended Hamilton College and Harvard University. During college, Moses was influenced by philosopher Albert Camus and his ideas about social change.

BACK TO THE SOUTH

In 1960, Moses went on a recruiting trip to the Deep South, eventually working with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, an organization central to 1964's Freedom Summer, where students registered voters across the South.

Moses was beaten and arrested in Mississippi's Amite County while trying to register voters. He directed the SNCC's Mississippi Voter Registration Project and helped organize the Freedom Summer. Moses helped organize the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to unsuccessfully challenge the all-white Mississippi Democratic delegation. After Lyndon Johnson allowed the white Mississippi delegation to remain, Moses became disillusioned and cut off all ties with white people, even the SNCC. He worked as a teacher and earned a doctorate in philosophy from Harvard before founding the Algebra Project.

THE ALGEBRA PROJECT

In Tanzania, Moses taught math and, as part of a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship, founded The Algebra Project in 1982. The Algebra Project is a mathematics literacy program designed to help low-income students and students of color learn math at a level that would allow them to enter college. It provides curricula, training and professional support for teachers along with community activities for schools to improve math education.

HONORS AND AWARDS

In addition to his work at the Algebra Project, Moses was the Distinguished Visitor for the Center for African American Studies at Princeton University and was a lecturer at the NYU School of Law from 2012-2016. He served on the Education Advisory Committee at the Mathematical Sciences Research Institute and received honorary degrees and as a principal investigator on National Science Foundation mathematics education research programs.

Moses died July 25, 2021, at his home in Florida. He was survived by his wife, Dr. Janet Jemmott Moses, and his children, Maisha, Moses, Omo Moses, Taba Moses, Malaika Moses and Saba Moses, along with several grandchildren.

Gloria Richardson

Gloria Richardson fought on the front lines during a year of martial law in Cambridge, Md.

JOHN F. KENNEDY PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM

For three years in the 1960s, Richardson organized protests against racial segregation and economic injustice on the Eastern Shore of Maryland.

EARLY LIFE

Richardson was born Gloria St. Clair Hayes in Baltimore on May 6, 1922. Her father was a Cambridge pharmacist. As a child, Richardson once refused to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance after lynchings along the Eastern Shore. She graduated from Howard University and worked in Washington, D.C., before returning to Cambridge where she had trouble finding work in her field.

CIVIL RIGHTS FAULT LINES

Richardson's work in Cambridge epitomized the struggle between a nonviolent civil rights movement, lead by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., and more aggressive leaders such as Malcom X. She called herself a revolutionary and used tactics from both sides, setting her at odds with mainstream civil rights groups and religious fixtures.

SNCC IN CAMBRIDGE

Richardson was 39 when the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Freedom Riders came to Cambridge in 1961. She became chair of the Cambridge Nonviolent Action Committee, an SNCC-affiliated group that, despite the name, believed violence could effect change.

Ebony magazine called her the "lady general" of civil rights as she pressured officials on desegregation, housing, jobs and health care.

In June 1963, Maryland Gov. J. Millard Tawes declared martial law and brought in the National Guard. Clashes continued in the town while Robert Kennedy brokered an accord calling for the federal desegregation of schools, housing and employment, called the Treaty of Cambridge. In 1963, a referendum on equal access was defeated in the town after Richardson persuaded her followers to boycott the vote. It was unfair, she said, to leave the constitutional rights of one group of people up to the popular majority.

Richardson left the Cambridge Nonviolent Action Committee in 1964 after President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

LATER YEARS

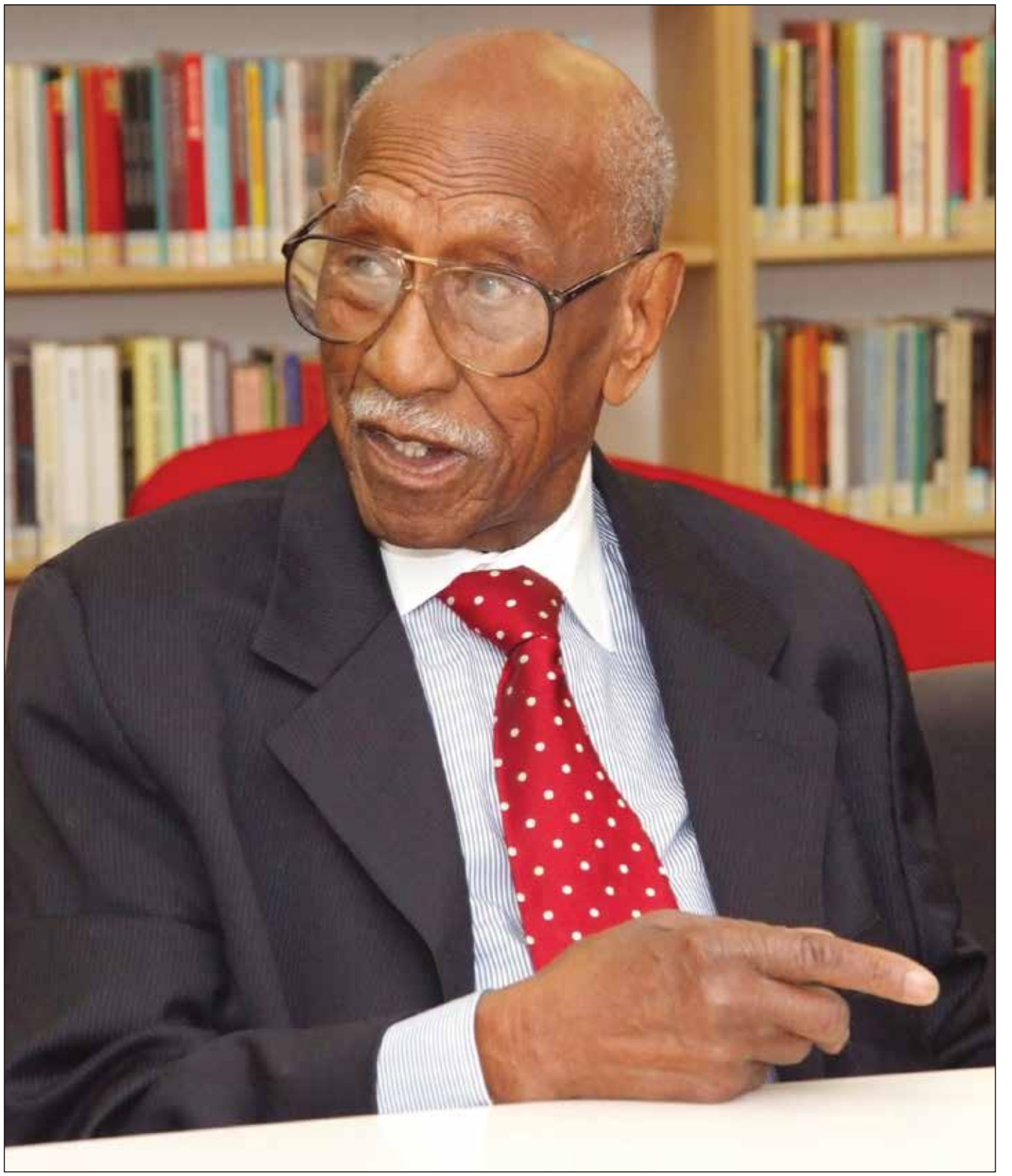
Even though she was out of the spotlight, Richardson maintained her approach to civil rights activism.

In 2020, Richardson called on protesters to do more after the killing of George Floyd. In 2008, Cambridge elected its first Black mayor and Richardson received the key to the city. A street in the town was also named for her.

Richardson died July 15, 2021, in Manhattan at the age of 99.

Timuel Black

Timuel Black died Oct. 13, 2021 at age 102. The Chicago historian marched with Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., campaigned for Chicago Mayor Harold Washington and mentored President Barack Obama.



CULTUREEL GELDERLAND/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

"Over his 102 years, Tim was many things: a veteran, historian, author, educator, civil rights leader and humanitarian," Obama said. "But above all, Tim was a testament to the power of place and how the work we do to improve one community can end up reverberating through other neighborhoods and other cities, eventually changing the world."

EARLY LIFE

Black was born Dec. 7, 1918 to sharecroppers in Birmingham, Alabama. His family moved to Chicago the following year, settling in a Black neighborhood called the Black Belt, where restrictive covenants kept Black residents away from white residents.

After being drafted into World War II, black fought in the invasion of Normandy and the Battle of the Bulge, earning four battle stars and the French Croix de Guerre. While he was in Europe, Black visited the Buchenwald, a visit he said changed his life.

"When we got up to Buchenwald, to see and feel and hear the cries, I was shocked," Black said in 2014. "I began to feel that this could happen to anyone, and that in the long run, this is what happened to my ancestors in an organized, systematic way. I was angry."

MARCHING WITH KING

Black graduated from Roosevelt University and the University of Chicago before settling down to teach high school in Gary, Indiana. In 1955, Black saw Rev. King speak on television and was so moved he flew to Montgomery, Alabama, to meet him. The next year, Black's church invited King to preach. By 1963, Black was organizing Freedom Trains that took Chicagoans to the March on Washington.

Back in Chicago, Black helped end segregation in Chicago Public Schools and, after King's 1968 death, became a community leader that would help elected Harold Washington as Chicago's first Black mayor.

MENTORING POLITICIANS

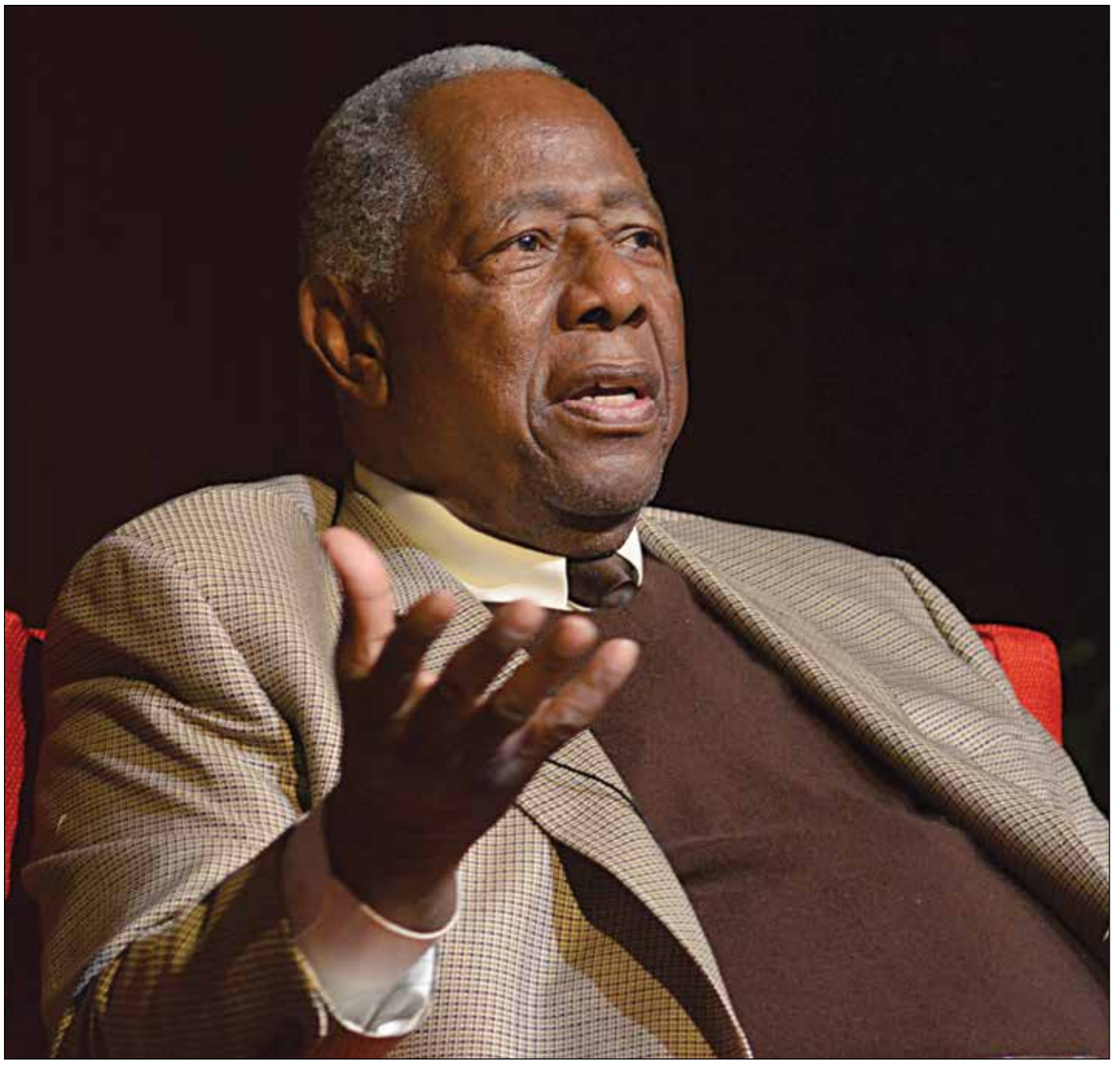
Obama wasn't the only politician Black took under his wing. He also mentored Carol Moseley Braun, who was the first African American woman to win election to the U.S. Senate. When Obama was elected president, Black and his wife attended the inauguration as the Obamas' guest.

"It was a great day, a day I never dreamed I would see, as magical as the March on Washington," Black wrote in his memoir. "Now I felt that the miraculous really had happened."

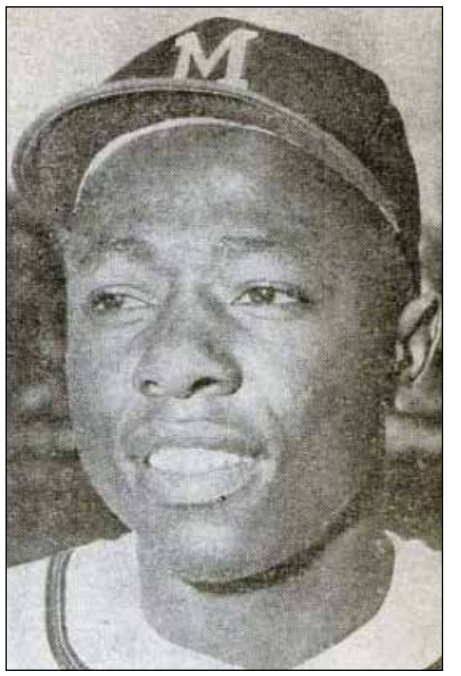
Black was instrumental in bringing the Obama Presidential Center to Chicago's South Side, where he hoped it would serve as an inspiration to others.

Hammerin' Hank Aaron

Henry Louis Aaron, widely called Hank, Hammer or Hammerin' Hank, was born Feb. 5, 1934, in Mobile, Ala.



LBJ PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY



PUBLIC DOMAIN/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

One of seven children, Aaron and his brother, Tommie, both went on to play Major League Baseball. They hold the record for most career home runs by a pair of siblings (768) and also were the first siblings to appear in a League Championship Series.

Hank Aaron, the more famous of the two, was mainly a right-fielder with the Milwaukee/Atlanta Braves and the Milwaukee Brewers. He had 755 career home runs, was a 25-time All-Star, won the Gold Glove Award three times and had his number 44 retired by both the Braves and the Brewers.

LIFE IN THE NEGRO LEAGUES

In 1951, Aaron signed a contract with the Indianapolis Clowns in the Negro American League for $200 a month. While the team was in Washington, D.C., Aaron recalled, the restaurant they ate at smashed the plates they ate on rather than use them for other customers.

MAJOR LEAGUES COME CALLING

The next year, Aaron signed with the Braves. He was assigned to a Class C team in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, then went to the Class A Jacksonville Braves. That team won the league championship that year and Aaron lead the South Atlantic League in runs, hits, doubles, runs batted in, total bases and batting average, taking the league's Most Valuable Player award.

But as he traveled with the team, he was often separated because of Jim Crow laws. While the team arranged for white players' hotel and meals, Aaron was often left to his own devices. He was moved up to the big league team in 1954, where he continued to rack up astonishing records year after year.

During the 1973-74 offseason, Aaron was on pace to break Babe Ruth's home run record. He was fielding more than just fly balls. Aggressive fans who didn't want to see a Black man break the white Ruth's record sent him death threats, eventually even sending threats to journalists who covered Aaron positively. Aaron received a plaque from the U.S. Postal Service in 1973 for receiving more mail than any person excluding politicians; it was thanks to the vitriol and the supporters countering it. Ruth's widow, Claire Hodgkin, denounced the racism and said Ruth would have cheered Aaron on.

Aaron hit home run number 715 on April 8, 1974, against Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher Al Downing. Dodgers announcer Vin Scully, calling the play, called it marvelous that a Black man was getting a standing ovation in the Deep South.

POST-MLB

After his retirement from the field in 1976, Aaron joined the Atlanta Braves as an executive. He was voted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1982.

He also served as a corporate vice president of community relations for Turner Broadcasting System and owned car dealerships and restaurants throughout Georgia and the country.

Aaron died Jan. 22, 2021, at age 86.

W. Sterling Cary

The Rev. Dr. W. Sterling Cary waded into the battle between the two Civil Rights movements — nonviolent and Black Power — in 1966 and was later elected the first Black president of the National Council of Churches in 1972.

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

EARLY LIFE

Cary was born in New Jersey on Aug. 10, 1927. He was one of eight children of real estate broker Andrew Jackson Cary and his mother, Sadie Walker Cary. Cary was ordained at a young age, in 1948, while he was attending Morehouse College in Atlanta, where he was also student body president. He graduated in 1949 and moved on to the Union Theological Seminary, where students there elected him the first Black student body president. He graduated with a master's degree in 1952.

NATIONAL COMMITTEE OF NEGRO CHURCHMEN

Cary was pastor of Grace Congregational Church in Harlem when he helped organize the National Committee of Negro Churchmen. The group supported the demands for Black Power issued by Stokely Carmichael, chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Many white clerics and mainstream civil rights leaders were condemning Carmichael's demands as anti-American and anti-Christian.

The churchmen said they didn't see power as either isolation or domination. But they did condemn officials who "tie a white noose of suburbia around the necks of" Black people, pushing them toward joblessness, dilapidated schools and lacking discrimination laws.

"We, an information group of Negro churchmen in America, are deeply disturbed about the crises brought upon our country by historic distortions of important human realities in the controversy about 'black power,'" the letter said. "What we see, shining through the variety of rhetoric, is. Not anything new but the same old problems of power and race which has faced our beloved country since 1619."

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

Cary was 45 when he was elected president of the National Council of Churches, the biggest ecumenical body in the U.S. He served in that role until 1975. Ebony magazine named him one of the most influential African Americans in the U.S. Cary was also the first Black person elected conference minister of the Illinois conference of the United Church of Christ. He lead the UCC's third-largest conference until his retirement in 1994.

Cary died Nov. 15, 2021, at age 94. His wife of 68 years, Marie, said he was a "warm, supportive, steadfast man" who loved the holidays, family and God. The couple had four children.

Lucille Times

Six months before Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus, Lucille Times got into a fistfight with that same bus driver after he reportedly tried to run her car off the road.

R. SCOTT GOLDEN/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

After the incident, she started a one-woman bus boycott, driving to bus stops around the city to give Black people a ride.

JUNE 15, 1955

Times was driving her Buick LeSabre to the dry cleaners that day when James Blake, the bus driver, tried to cause an accident three times, she said.

"The bus driver got angry and tried to run me off the road and into a ditch," Times said at the Rosa Parks Museum in 2017. They pulled over and got out of their vehicles, where Black swore at her. Times gave as good as she got, she said, and police were called. Neither party was arrested.

"My blood was almost boiling," Times told The Montgomery Advertiser. "I didn't even take my clothes into the dry cleaners."

THE BOYCOTT

The next day, Times started what eventually became the Montgomery bus boycott after Blake's employers didn't return Times' calls to demand he be punished. She drove to bus stops around Montgomery and offered rides to Black people so they wouldn't have to take the bus. The café she and her husband owned, the Times Café, became a meeting place for civil rights leaders.

"You've got to fight," Times said. "You don't get nothing for free. I've been a fighter all of my days."

Times marched 54 miles from Selma to Montgomery during a march for voting rights in 1965. She housed 18 marchers from around the country in her home.

"It's how you treat people," Times said. "Just be nice — be you."

EARLY LIFE

Times was born in 1921 in Montgomery County, one of seven children raised by her father after her mother died when she was young. She attended Alabama State College and Huntington College, earning certificates in licensed-practice nursing and mortuary science.

She married her husband, Charlie, in 1939. He would serve in World War II and the couple would help raise 25 children of relatives. They joined the NAACP shortly after they were married, holding meetings in their home after the state of Alabama outlawed the organization in the 1950s. After the bus incident, the Timeses contacted the NAACP chapter president, E.D. Nixon.

"I told Mr. Nixon what happened and told him we should boycott the buses," Times said. But she said Nixon wanted to wait. Times didn't, and started her own boycott immediately. Her movement became part of the larger bus boycott months later.

Times died Aug. 16, 2021, at 100 from complications of COVID-19.