The nationwide struggle for civil rights, economic equality, and the full inclusion of African Americans into American society, during the early and mid 1960s, was a far reaching movement that had many effects and consequences. The once traditional timeframe of the Black Freedom Movement, roughly 1954 to 1965, has been challenged by scholars like Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, who argue that the Movement extends beyond such narrow parameters. Hall claims that the Black Freedom Movement is a long movement, its roots starting in the 1930s and reaching into the 1970s. Hall points out that the 1930s, with its radical labor agitation, is a better starting point for the Black Freedom Movement than 1954. By extending the end date of the movement beyond 1965, Hall notes that scholars are able to reexamine Black Power not as a separate movement, but as a different phase in the overall struggle for freedom.¹

Extending the end date of the Black Freedom Movement past 1965 allows for the inclusion of the history of Freedom Movement activities in small cities like Murfreesboro, Tennessee, into the overall narrative. Murfreesboro’s activity in the Freedom Movement appears to have gathered full momentum in the late 1960s and early 1970s, defying the once traditional timeframe of the Black Freedom Movement. Like in other African American communities across the nation, schools, churches, and groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the NAACP’s youth councils, sustained Murfreesboro’s African American community during segregation and after, providing a source of strength in its quest for educational and economic equality. Similar to other black communities, Murfreesboro African Americans participated in national church groups and associations like the NAACP, yet were also involved in unique community action groups like Murfreesboro’s Black Community Action

Committee (BCAC). It was these institutions and groups that provided the foundation for and nurtured Murfreesboro African American’s mission for educational and economic equality.

A Space of Their Own: Bradley Academy and Holloway High School; Murfreesboro, TN’s African American Schools

The importance of the African American school as a black community institution during segregation is hard to overemphasize. Despite being overcrowded and underfunded, African American schools provided black children and youth with a formal education. The significance of the African American school in the black community is stressed by Sonya Ramsey in *Reading, Writing, and Segregation: A Century of Black Women Teachers in Nashville*. Ramsey’s examination of the importance of black public schools and the female African American teacher to Nashville’s black community can be used as a tool to evaluate the significance of the black schools and teachers in Murfreesboro.

Ramsey argues that Nashville’s black female teachers’ professionalism helped to mitigate the effects that a lack of school equipment and supplies, as well as inferior facilities, might have had on African American students. *Reading, Writing, and Segregation* also points out that the responsibility of Nashville’s black female teachers extended beyond the classroom and into the community. Teachers were regarded as middle class by many in the African American community and therefore worked hard to maintain that reputation. Part of African American women teachers’ perceived duties as middle class professionals was to not only teach the community’s youth and children, but also to be a sustaining presence to the wider black community. As a result of their wide ranging accountability and importance to Nashville’s African Americans, black women teachers were an important part of the social fabric. Ramsey’s
arguments about the importance of the African American teacher in Nashville can be transposed to Murfreesboro’s black community and its teachers as well.²

In 1929 Holloway High School, Murfreesboro’s first and only high school for African Americans opened on South Highland Avenue. The school was built in proximity to a large portion of Murfreesboro’s African American community. However, Holloway High School was not intended for the sole use of Murfreesboro’s black population. Because Holloway High School was a county school, it served the entire African American population of Rutherford County, Tennessee, of which Murfreesboro was the county seat. Kathryn Knight, a resident of Murfreesboro, recalled that Holloway also served the African American students of other counties, including Cannon and Bedford. Former students note that Holloway High School was an integral component of Murfreesboro’s African American community.³

Like black female teachers in Nashville, African American teachers in Murfreesboro instilled a sense of pride and confidence in their students. Constructed in 1918, Bradley Academy functioned as an elementary school for African Americans. The school housed grades one through six, and was staffed by teachers who were stern but fair. Gerald Willis, also a citizen of Murfreesboro, specifically remembered a teacher at Bradley Academy by the name of Ms. Lily Belle Whitaker. Mr. Willis recalled that Ms. Whitaker “was a very, very good teacher, and she expected you to get her work or else.” Discipline at Bradley was far reaching. Gerald Willis remarked, “so you know, it was like if I messed up, she’s going to tell my daddy and momma

Sunday at church, and you going to get another whooping . . .” African American teachers in Murfreesboro, in short, expected the best out of their students.⁴

Murfreesboro’s African American teachers cared not only for their students’ educational progress, but also for their overall well-being. Gerald Willis recalled that one teacher at Bradley Academy was dogged in her pursuit to make sure that her students maintained good health by brushing their teeth. “And my first grade teacher was Myrtle Lord. She was a very good teacher and [a] very industrial teacher. . . . And she would ask, in the morning . . . “Who in here didn’t-brushed their teeth?” [S]o if you raised your hand . . . she would put a little baking soda in your hand and you had to brush your teeth.”⁵

The educators who taught Murfreesboro’s African American children and youth not only educated them within the formal confines of Bradley Academy and Holloway High School, they also welcomed them into their homes. Kathryn Knight states that “The interaction between teachers and students was phenomenal, because I cannot imagine a child now just showing up at their teacher’s house on Saturday, unannounced, but welcomed.” Ms. Knight remembers that she would visit one teacher in particular, Ms. Rogers, who often said “Will I see you girls tomorrow?” as Ms. Knight and her classmates departed. Although Ms. Knight’s story constitutes just one personal recollection about one teacher, it reinforces the argument that before the integration of school facilities in the south and across the nation, African American teachers were an integral component of the black community. African American teachers were part of a

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⁵ Ibid.
network that included, preachers, neighbors, and others, within the black community that guided, protected, and watched over its children and youth.  

By 1968, fourteen years after Brown v Board of Education, Murfreesboro’s public schools desegregated and Holloway High School ceased operation as a high school. After 1968, and until 1972, Holloway High School functioned as an annex for what was then the sole high school in Murfreesboro, Central High School. In recent years Holloway High School has hosted annual reunions of those who attended the institution when it functioned as an African American high school. Since its closure as an independent high school in 1968, Holloway High School has reopened. Now Holloway is described as a “non-zoned 9-12 school that utilizes the 4 X 4 block schedule and night school to provide accelerated learning.”

Despite the closure of Holloway High School and Bradley Academy, both serving decades worth of African American students, the lessons learned at the two institutions, including the necessity of working hard, taking pride in scholastic achievement and in one’s self, as well as the confidence instilled by the teachers at Holloway High School and Bradley Academy, carried over into the lives of their students, like Gerald Willis, Kathryn Knight, and director of Bradley Academy Museum, Katie Wilson. Although the end of separate schools for African Americans was the result of the integration of formerly all white schools, the demise of black schools led to the diminished importance and prestige of African American school teachers. Many teachers were either fired or transferred to white schools, removing them from their once integral role in the African American community. Later, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, many students who had attended Bradley Academy and Holloway High School

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6 Knight Interview.
participated in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)’s local youth council, and some even participated in a sit-in and walk-out at Central High School.

Organizational Involvement: The NAACP, NAACP Youth Council, Black Community Action Committee and Social Activism in Murfreesboro, TN.

Founded in 1950, the Murfreesboro branch of The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was a strong organization in the community during the mid and late 1960s, as well as the early 1970s. Katie Wilson, advisor to Murfreesboro’s NAACP youth council, recalled that during the 1960s and 1970s one of Tennessee’s NAACP state presidents was from Murfreesboro. The NAACP chapter in Murfreesboro was active, addressing economic inequality and issues of housing. In the spring of 1970 it protested the lack of employment opportunities and the scarcity of non-menial jobs for African Americans in all sectors of the city’s economy.8

Katie Wilson notes that in 1970 Murfreesboro’s NAACP chapter partnered with professor Tom Vandervault at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) in Murfreesboro, to conduct a survey measuring the number of homeowners to renters in the city. MTSU students, Vandervault, and Wilson visited homes throughout the city, interviewing families to determine whether they were renters or homeowners. A secondary purpose of the interviews was to ascertain the number of renters who would like to become homeowners if affordable housing was built in their neighborhoods. The survey showed that many in Murfreesboro desired to be homeowners but needed general information, like how to obtain homeowners’ insurance and

keep the policy up-to-date. Katie Wilson noted that eventually the city purchased run-down houses, destroyed them, and then sold the land for the construction of affordable homes. Wilson remarked that the newly constructed homes were low-income housing but not public housing. This idea of purchasing disused homes, demolishing them, and then constructing affordable houses available for private ownership is similar to Habitat for Humanity and was a precursor to that program in Murfreesboro.9

The employment of African Americans was also a prime issue on the Murfreesboro NAACP’s agenda. In 1970 it was evident to the local chapter that the unemployment rate of adult blacks in Murfreesboro was a problem. The NAACP’s Youth Council also believed African American unemployment in the south was an issue. In 1950, twenty years before the Murfreesboro chapter of the NAACP was addressing the economic needs of the city’s African American community, the issue of unemployment of black youth in the south caught the attention of the southeast regional NAACP Youth Council. At the southeast regional youth council’s annual meeting a lecture was delivered by the NAACP’s Washington D. C. bureau chief, and the organization’s primary lobbyist in the nation’s capital, Clarence Mitchell. The presentation was titled, “Discussion—‘Urban and Rural Employment Problems of Youth in the South.’” That the issue of African American youth unemployment was even considered an issue by the NAACP Youth in 1950 shows that the NAACP was a multi-faceted organization that did more than just pursue a legal strategy to end segregation.10

9 Ibid.
In 1970, twenty years after Clarence Mitchell’s discussion about the unemployment of black youth in the south, Murfreesboro’s NAACP chapter was pursuing equal job opportunities for African Americans in the city. Katie Wilson remarked that many adult African Americans were unemployed and those that were employed were given low and less than desirable positions. While blacks in Murfreesboro were employed at businesses and institutions as janitors, stockers, and other less-skilled positions, there were few African Americans employed as sales people, bank tellers, or in visible, more skilled occupations.11

The Murfreesboro NAACP, in conjunction with the local ministerial alliance, decided to hold a week-long series of meetings with businesses, banks, the Board of Education, and others, at different churches in the area to address some of the black community’s economic grievances. The purpose of these meetings was manifold, including the creation of a dialogue between Murfreesboro’s African American community and various employers and institutions. These meetings gave the black community a chance to voice its opinions, questions, and concerns, as well as allowed area employers the chance to make the African American community aware of jobs that were available, and the requirements for these positions, in their respective industries. At first local banks did not respond to the offer to participate in the community meetings. However, after NAACP members participated in a boycott of Murfreesboro’s two main shopping centers, area banks took notice. Wilson remarked, “I think they got the message.”12

Some NAACP members in Murfreesboro were part of a group named the Black Community Action Committee (BCAC). The BCAC was composed of young adult members of the local NAACP chapter who wanted to retain their membership with the NAACP but also have

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11 Wilson Interview.
12 Ibid.
a vehicle to pursue their own initiatives. Katie Wilson was a member of the BCAC and noted that there were twelve members, two women and ten men. The BCAC’s activities were varied, and included a city beautification program in Murfreesboro’s Paterson Park. Arguably, however, the BCAC’s most impactful program was the boycott it instigated in April 1970, of Murfreesboro’s two primary shopping centers, the Jackson Heights shopping center located on Broad Street and the Mercury Boulevard shopping center, anchored by Rose’s department store. The boycott grew out of Murfreesboro African American’s dissatisfaction with the lack of progress blacks were experiencing in their attempt to obtain better jobs at the two retail centers. After retailers participated in the 1970 town hall meetings with Murfreesboro African Americans, Wilson states the black community tested the shopping centers merchants’ commitment to hiring African Americans for non-menial, and more visible positions. African Americans of different ages and educational levels, including college students, went into the various stores located at the Jackson Heights and Mercury Boulevard shopping centers and attempted to apply for jobs. Katie Wilson noted that the only positions the applicants were allowed to apply for were stocking or cleaning positions. When it became apparent that the merchants of the two shopping centers were hesitant to hire blacks for positions like cashier or other positions on the sales floor, the support for a boycott grew.\textsuperscript{13}

The incident that finally set off the boycott was a meeting between the president of the Murfreesboro branch of the NAACP, William Butler, and the owner of Rose’s department store. The owner dismissed the BCAC as MTSU students, argued that most youth in Murfreesboro attended high school, and that as a result their parents, local residents, could easily be persuaded by their employers and other influential whites, to not support the boycott. Unfortunately for the

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. \emph{Daily News Journal}, April 7, 1971.
owner of Rose’s department store, his analysis of the participants of the boycott, and their resolve, was faulty. Katie Wilson remarked that for three weeks Murfreesboro blacks marched, primarily in the evenings, protesting at the Mercury Boulevard and Jackson Heights shopping centers.14

Katie Wilson noted that on any given night the number of marchers at the Mercury Boulevard shopping center averaged around twenty, while a group of a similar size protested at the Jackson Heights shopping center. Ultimately the decidedness of the protesters, the miscalculation of the strength of the protestors on the part of the owner of Rose’s department store, and the timing of the boycott, right before Easter, contributed to the success of the boycott. Wilson stated, “the black community really dress[es] up for Easter . . . .” By staging the boycott during the Easter buying season, Murfreesboro African Americans ensured that Rose’s department store was significantly impacted by the boycott. The boycott was supposed to last for two weeks, but in order to ensure that Rose’s Department Store could not recoup lost sales by selling its Easter merchandise after the holiday on sale, the boycott was extended an extra week. Wilson remarked, “By the time we got through, he couldn’t sell them [merchandise purchased for the Easter holiday]. . . . So changes [sic] came slow, but I guess within three months we saw people was being hired to be a salesperson . . . .”15

In addition to its adult membership the NAACP branch in Murfreesboro was composed of a sizeable number of youth and college students. The NAACP had a presence on MTSU’s campus in the form of a college chapter. Katie Wilson recalls that the campus chapter was active, attempting to change the names of certain campus buildings as well as successfully removing the

14 Ibid.
15 Katie Wilson Interview.
plaque of Nathan Bedford Forrest from Forrest Hall, the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) building on campus. Murfreesboro’s NAACP Youth Council chapter was especially active in the late 1960s and early 1970s, initiating a sit-in and walk out of Murfreesboro’s Central High School in 1971.\(^\text{16}\)

**African American Youth Activism in Murfreesboro, Tennessee: The 1971 Central High School Sit-In and Walk-Out**

School systems across the American south resisted the *Brown V. Board of Education* decision in 1954 to integrate public schools and facilities. The second *Brown* ruling in 1955 directing schools to comply with the Supreme Court’s judgment in the case as fast as possible was met with equal resistance. Despite the Supreme Court’s ruling, it was years before many schools integrated, including Murfreesboro’s. In her master’s thesis Melinda Johnson Lickiss notes that the process of school integration in Murfreesboro was slow, based on a system of gradual integration, and heavily controlled by the city council and the Board of Education. Katie Wilson remarked that it was fourteen years after the Supreme Court’s 1954 decision before Murfreesboro schools were entirely integrated.\(^\text{17}\)

Lickiss’s thesis argues that in addition to the Murfreesboro City Council and the Board of Education, it was superintendent Baxter Hobgood who controlled the pace and format of school integration in the city. Hobgood’s strategy was to remain one step ahead of federal government intervention. Besides integrating teacher in-services in 1954, Lickiss argues that “Hobgood waited to push succeeding steps only when it was evident that the government was going to force

\(^{16}\) Katie Wilson Interview.

\(^{17}\) Lickiss, 1-2. Katie Wilson noted that Murfreesboro schools were fully integrated in 1968; a date that coincides with the closing of the African American high school Bradley Academy.
them.” In 1958, four years after integration had been mandated by the Supreme Court, Murfreesboro continued to defy federal authority. Disregarding the Supreme Court’s desegregation order, the Murfreesboro school system incurred the extra expense of transporting African American children who lived on the edges of and rural areas around Murfreesboro to Bradley Academy, instead of allowing them to attend white elementary schools closer to their homes. Despite the attempts to keep Murfreesboro schools segregated, and the frustratingly slow pace of gradual integration, by 1968, the city’s schools were integrated. Lickiss remarks that “Several teachers recalled resentment on the part of the black community in that only black elementary children left their home school.”

Although there were some feelings of resentment and doubt regarding integration, by 1968 Murfreesboro’s schools were integrated, including Central High School. Despite the apparent relative smoothness of integration in Murfreesboro a period of adjustment was necessary before the newness and uncertainty of integration wore off. On April 21, 1971, the frustrations of African American students at Central High School reached a boiling point. The Daily News Journal, (DNJ) Murfreesboro’s main newspaper, reported that over 200 black students conducted a sit-in in the school’s lobby. One hundred of the protesting students sat on the floor, while the other hundred stood in a circle around them and sang. The DNJ noted that the sit-in was planned “several days ago”, and might have been more correct in its assumption then it realized. April 21, 1971 was a Wednesday. By holding the protest near the end of the week the students allowed for a cooling off period, ensured that there was a period of time in which they and the school board could discuss the various demands of the demonstration, and provided that a large amount of school time would not be lost to the walk-out.

18 Ibid., 55, 79-80, 59, 73.
The DNJ stated that the demands of the protesters were “more black cheerleaders, a black commencement speaker and a change in the name of school athletic teams.”

Interestingly, the students demanded that the school change the name of its sports teams from the “Tigers” to “Black Panthers.” Whether the demand to rename Central High School’s athletic teams to “Black Panthers” reflects a genuine interest in the goals and aims of the Black Panther Party, or just an appreciation of the projected image of the Black Panthers, it does speak to the widespread presence, and to some, appeal, of the organization during the 1960s and 1970s.

Katie Wilson recalled that in addition to the appeal for more African American cheerleaders, the protesting students had additional demands. The students felt that while they were being recognized for their athletic achievements their scholarly accomplishments were being overlooked. The students had further grievances, including the fact that while they were performing well academically they were underrepresented in academic clubs. Central High school African American students demanded full inclusion into the scholarly extracurricular life of Central High School, especially the various clubs and groups that had few black members.

After the sit-in, the protesting students marched the few blocks to the Allen Chapel AME Church to meet with its pastor Reverend Casi[sic], head of the Murfreesboro Ministerial Alliance at the time of the protest. When the sit-in and walk-out occurred Katie Wilson was a community worker employed by the Mid Cumberland Community Action Agency and advisor to Murfreesboro’s NAACP youth council. Wilson remarked that the protest activity at Central High School proved to be a boon to the Youth Council’s membership, “I think that walk out probably

20 Ibid.
21 Katie Wilson Interview.
had around 400 students that signed up to be part of the Youth Council for the NAACP because they wanted their issues to be heard by the school board.”  

In 1972 Oakland and River Dale High School opened on opposite edges of Murfreesboro. The building of the two new high schools diminished the power of both Murfreesboro’s NAACP youth council as well as the collective strength of African American students at Central High School. According to Katie Wilson many of the black students at Central High School were members of the NAACP Youth Council. Murfreesboro’s youth council met with the Board of Education to propose various educational programs, including the addition of black history to the curriculum at Central High School. Wilson remarked that the students were successful in their quest to have black history added to the list of courses at Central High School, but that once the African American students who attended Central High School were zoned to either Riverdale High School or Oakland High School, it did not stay on the curriculum for long. Despite the fact that black history was on the course list at Central High School for only a short time and that many of the black students who participated in the sit-in and walk-out eventually had to attend different high schools, the protest did have tangible results. The school board listened to the demands of black students, thereby legitimizing Murfreesboro African American students as an organized body, and acknowledging their attempt to gain a more inclusive education.  

Conclusions

Black Freedom Movement activities in Murfreesboro, Tennessee reflect much of the new scholarship on the Movement. Scholars like Timothy Tyson, in *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F.*

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22 Ibid. In 1972 the Mid Cumberland Community Agency changed its name to the Stones River Office of Economic Opportunity.
23 Ibid.
Williams & the Roots of Black Power argues that the aims of civil rights activists, and the goals of black power advocates came from the same source, and are not mutually exclusive. Murfreesboro’s Black Freedom Movement activities reflect this line of reasoning. While the NAACP was a strong organization in Murfreesboro, organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had little to no presence in the city. Yet the agenda set by the Murfreesboro NAACP chapter included addressing issues that have often been associated with Black Power demands. While African Americans in Murfreesboro attempted to work in cooperation with the city and its businesses to bring economic equality to blacks, it was willing to seize it through protest if necessary.\footnote{SNCC files and Katie Wilson confirm that SNCC did not have a presence in the city. Timothy Tyson, Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999.)}

The story of Black Freedom Movement activities in Murfreesboro also strengthens historian Christina Greene’s claim that by redefining leadership, and women’s contributions, it quickly becomes apparent that women were the backbone of the Movement. In Murfreesboro one such leader was Katie Wilson. In some aspects Wilson’s relationship with the NAACP youth council in Murfreesboro was akin to the one that Ella Baker had with SNCC. Ella Baker helped found SNCC and provided guidance to the organization, helping to shape its philosophy and aims, but allowing the students to ultimately lead and decide direction for the group. Based on this initial research, Wilson was not the figurehead of the Murfreesboro NAACP youth council, but rather its advisor. Wilson provided direction and organization to the group, helping to articulate its goals and demands, while largely letting students assume leadership. Evidence of student leadership is most visible in the 1971 sit-in and walk-out at Central high School. Katie Wilson is just one example of a Black Freedom Movement leader, who not only was a member...
of the NAACP, an NAACP youth council advisor, a member of a locally created and oriented African American organization focused on community action (BCAC), she was also a bridge leader between local communities and the federal government as exemplified by her work with the Stones River Office of Economic Opportunity. This research hints at the possibility of other women leaders in Murfreesboro and suggests that like Greene’s case study of Durham, North Carolina and this one of Murfreesboro, Tennessee, women in communities across the south were Black Freedom Movement leaders. A change in perspective and a redefining of leadership will reveal many other Black Freedom Movement women leaders like Katie Wilson, not only in Murfreesboro, but across the south.  

Although this research represents only the beginning of scholarly inquiry into the Black Freedom Movement in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, it speaks to the complexity of the Movement in small communities across the south. Even small cities like Murfreesboro in the 1960s and 1970s were marked by their complex involvement in the Black Freedom Movement. This paper urges historians to examine how small southern towns used community institutions like schools, and organizations like the NAACP to advocate and work towards educational and economic equality. Much like Timothy Tyson’s work on Robert F. Williams and the Monroe, North Carolina chapter of the NAACP and its less than ideal adherence to the directives sent down to the local branches from the national office, this essay explores how Murfreesboro’s African American

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community utilized its local NAACP chapter and its youth council as a vehicle to address and resolve community specific issues. Ultimately the story of Murfreesboro’s involvement in the Black Freedom Movement is marked by its complexity and similarity to how the Movement played out in other small towns; that is, the shape of the movement in each town was largely determined by the community’s specific issues, leaders, and available or created organizations to carry the goals of the Movement forward. This paper begins with a discussion of the integral role that African American teachers and schools played in the lives of their students, it is fitting then that the apex of the Black Freedom Movement in Murfreesboro is a walk-out of African Americans at a formerly all white high school in demand of an inclusive education that would challenge them to be better students, and that recognized them to be full citizens worthy of all citizenship rights, including a full education. As further research is conducted into the history of the Black Freedom Movement in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, the timeline set forth here is likely to change. Further research might also address what this essay only hints at; the role of African American churches in Murfreesboro’s quest for equality. This research is designed to provide a starting point for those who are interested in the history of black activism and Black Freedom Movement involvement in Murfreesboro and seeks to promote further inquiry into the topic.