

University of North Carolina at Asheville

Dr. Guion Johnson: One Woman's Part in the Civil Rights Movement



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“Welcome to Greenville Texas; Home of the Blackest Soil and the Whitest People,” were the words on the main street sign of the small Texas town that “commonly enforced the rules of racial segregation” where Frances Guion Griffis Johnson was born in 1900.¹ In this town she absorbed the southern assumptions of white superiority over blacks that was common during the beginning of the twentieth century. But Guion later said that early in her life she “gained respect for the status of the Negro” from her father and grandfather.² She learned from these men that “the Negro is an important member of the human race” and that he should live in equal capacity to a white man.³ Early on Johnson showed a willingness to venture outside traditional female spheres and conventional racial ideologies, a trend that would continue throughout the stages of her life. She held a man’s position in the UNC Chapel Hill History Department at a time when there were no other females studying history, was the first female Research Assistant in the field of history at the Institute for Research in Social Sciences, and was known for her inflammatory and shocking writings and speeches.⁴ Later in life Dr. Johnson would remember the main street sign of her childhood home and claim that it was her life in Greenville and the positive examples of her parents that prepared her for her lifelong fight against racism.⁵ It was the “curiosity and ambition developed as a child that would propel [her] beyond the racial slogans of her native region” and spur her convictions about the equality of blacks and whites in America.⁶

¹ Sarah Thusen, “Taking the Vows of Southern Liberalism: Guion and Guy Johnson and the Evolution of an Intellectual Partnership”. *The North Carolina Historical Review* 74 . July 1997.

² Mary Frederickson, Interview May 28, 1974, Dr. Guion Johnson. Interview G-oo29-1. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007), The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

³ Frederickson, Interview May 28, 1974.

⁴ Sarah Thusen, “Making Southern History: Guion Griffis Johnson’s *Antebellum North Carolina*”. Doctoral Candidate, History Department, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁵ Frederickson, Interview May 28, 1974.

⁶ Thusen, “Taking the Vows of Southern Liberalism”, 283.

Dr. Johnson⁷ was one of the few white southern women during the 1940s and 1950s to draw national attention to Jim Crow; her research and publications explored white domination and black subjugation in the South. Her influential writings and academic position made Johnson a significant force in the nascent southern, white, liberal, female response to Jim Crow segregation. As a social historian Johnson felt it was her duty to tell the entire story of southern history; in her works and her speeches she spoke of her desire to create a more racially inclusive view of the past. Titles like *Antebellum North Carolina: A Social History*, “The Impact of War upon the Negro”, “The Ideology of White Supremacy”, “Democracy”, and “Southern Paternalism towards the Negroes after Emancipation” present Dr. Johnson’s opinions and convictions about southern racism in a new and radical way and expressed her hope for black and white equality. These writings acted as her form of protest during the middle of the twentieth century.

There were three avenues for female anti-racist support in the twentieth century; direct, indirect, and intellectual. Direct protest took place in the streets of southern towns; women like Anne Braden were arrested and convicted for their street demonstrations against racism.⁸ Ladies who involved themselves in indirect resistance to racism volunteered at integrated facilities like the YWCA or were active in SNCC and SCLC and urged their communities to integrate.⁹ Women like Dr. Johnson used their academic positions and notoriety to further their anti-racist beliefs along the lines of the third

⁷ Dr. Johnson will be used in reference to Dr. Guion Johnson, references to Dr. Guy Johnson will be stated “Dr. Guy Johnson”.

⁸ Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and New Left* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 365.

⁹ David Chappell, *Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 1.

avenue of female protest. Most often the intellectual group felt their time and effort was best served in educating the public about racism, segregation policies, and the life experienced by African Americans. Dr. Johnson's writings and speeches exposed her readers to the wrongs of racism by creating an oppositional dialogue, a challenge to the understood notions of truth about southern race relations.

Dr. Johnson used her academic and intellectual place at UNC to challenge the prevailing racial ideologies of the twentieth century. There were three major sections of her life during which she made significant contributions to the anti-racist cause. In her early years she was a gender rebel who made her own path through the male dominated world at UNC. During the middle part of her professional life, the 1930s and early 1940s, Dr. Johnson confronted the typical ideas of race through her scholarship—she wrote critical articles and gave confrontational speeches informing her listeners of the need to educate themselves and take responsibility for ending southern racism. The final stage of her life of activism, the later 1940s, 1950s and 1960s Dr. Johnson worked on the Gunnar Myrdal study and created an oppositional dialogue that directly challenged racial politics. The academic position Dr. Johnson held allowed her to dispute racism on the intellectual level throughout the three stages of her life.

Dr. Johnson's early years, the 1920s and 1930s, were spent in UNC's History Department writing her dissertation, creating her own path through a man's world, and establishing her reputation as an intellectual anti-racist and a politically active educator. As Johnson aged she continued to write works that critiqued traditional southern black/white relations and that challenged whites to take responsibility for their racist convictions and actions. Her articles were read by the intellectual community and not

everyone agreed with her stance on racism. Johnson said that in some classes at UNC the professor would spend the entire lecture “talking about the inferiority of the Negro and attempt to indoctrinate the members of his class about it.”¹⁰ Dr. Johnson remarked that in the early 1930s there was a feeling at Chapel Hill that anyone who spent time studying the problem of African Americans or doing anything for the black cause was wasting his time.¹¹ Both Dr. Johnson and her husband were critiqued because of their stand against racism but there were times when she felt the criticism even more keenly than her husband because she also dealt with the stigma of being a female social historian.¹² Although Chapel Hill was one of the most liberal towns in the middle twentieth century, life for Johnson was not easy; there were times she felt ostracized because of her anti-racist beliefs.¹³

The change in the way history has been recorded is often altered by significant events in history. Happenings like wars, leadership successions, and equality movements have shifted the way historians think about history and have transformed the occupation of historical recording. Writings from the beginning of the twentieth century when Dr. Johnson was born looked different from historical writings from the 1970s when she retired from the historical profession. Most historians during her time were male and tended to focus on subjects like “politics, diplomacy, and war.”¹⁴ These men were only interested in the significant historical settings, the important dates, and the influential

¹⁰ Frederickson, Interview, May 28, 1974.

¹¹ Frederickson, Interview, May 28, 1974.

¹² Mary Frederickson, Interview, May 17, 1974, Dr. Guion Johnson. Interview G-oo29-1. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007), The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

¹³ Frederickson, Interview, May 28, 1974

¹⁴ Francis Courvares, Martha Saxton, Gerald Grob, and George Billias, Ed. *Interpretations of American History: Volume 2—From Reconstruction*. (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 1.

men who made great strides in battle.¹⁵ For researchers in the first four decades of the twentieth century, history merely served to uncover the economic basis for political ideas and had no real use to ordinary citizens.¹⁶ But modern historiography reminds the students of history that it is not a closed book, there is always something to debate and it is always open to change.

Beginning in the early 1940s a group called Progressive Historians rose to prominence—they identified themselves with the Progressive movement that took aim at American arrogance and political corruption.¹⁷ These historians strove for what they called “Total History: a history that recorded the myriad of experiences of people, not just the dramatic events that featured prominent actors.”¹⁸ The Progressives sought to explain changes in history by isolating the underlying economic and social forces that were responsible for transforming established institutions and structures.¹⁹ It was this group of men and women who started looking at the strength behind the important men and realized that influences like the protest of millions of Americans were often responsible for the changes in American philosophy.

Social History, an outgrowth of the Progressive History movement, was inspired by the Civil Rights Movement and is defined as the study of history from the bottom up. This new form of historical investigation began in earnest during the 1960s when students of history realized that it was the masses of little people behind the influential figures that made the sweeping changes to American politics. Even with the influence of

¹⁵ Courvares, et all. 4.

¹⁶ Courvares, et all, 18.

¹⁷ Craig Pascoe, Karen Lethem, Andy Ambrose. Ed. *The American South in the 20th Century*. (Athens: The University of George Press, 2005), 23.

¹⁸ Pascoe, et all, 45.

¹⁹ Courvares, et all, 30.

Progressive History's historians, writing as late as the 1950s still usually focused on the roots of black protest by examining only as far back as WWII and the Great Depression. Much of the origins of the Civil Rights Era remained unexplored.²⁰ Dr. Johnson focused all her works on the roots of Civil Rights and black unrest, but her time period extended far beyond the 1930s. She claimed that tensions between white and black Americans began during Reconstruction when whites enacted Jim Crow laws to keep the former slaves in their inferior positions. While her contemporary colleagues tended to focus their attention on the first part of the Civil Rights movement and claim that it was the *Brown* decision that finally sparked the official and militant Civil Rights Movement in 1954, Dr. Johnson held that the militancy of black Americans started long before the 1950's. Her article "The Impact of War Upon the Negro" contends that the New Negro movement that sprung up when black soldiers returned from WWI laid the foundation for future African American militancy. Johnson's work published in 1942 was on the cutting edge, she was a Social Historian studying the history of the little people before the term had officially been coined.

The Civil Rights Movement of the late 1950s and 1960s gave rise to Social Historians who began to write 'bottom-up' history and to explore the grassroots forms of protest rather than studying the national leaders.²¹ Dr. Johnson called herself a Social Historian in 1926 when she received her Ph.D, because her dissertation covered the lives of ordinary citizens of North Carolina and told the full story of life during Reconstruction. She saw in the 1920s that it was the uncelebrated people's lives, actions

²⁰ David Garrow, Nathan Huggins, Clayborn Carson. Ed. "The Civil Rights Movement: Top-Down or Bottom-Up?" In *interpretations of American History: Volume 2—From Reconstruction*. (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 307.

²¹ Garrow, et al. 308.

and decisions that shaped the national events; other historians did not begin to recognize this trend until the late 1970's.²²

Dr. Johnson was a woman ahead of her time. She correctly and aptly named herself a Social Historian decades before the term became popular and included the story of all people in her writings about history. She realized long before her contemporaries that it was the mass of ordinary citizens who caused a stir and enacted change. The role of female white sympathizers for the black American cause is still unclear, but Dr. Johnson with her politically active scholarship, her intellectual place in Chapel Hill and her willingness to stand up to opposition exemplify the liberal southern woman. She realized that her status as a woman was similar to that of blacks and knew that winning equality for blacks would eventually bring about equality for women.

Dr. Johnson was educated at Mary-Hardin Baylor College for Women, where she received her BA in Journalism in 1921, then her Master's degree from the University of Missouri, married her high school sweetheart Guy Johnson in September 1922, and the two of them taught in their respective fields at Mary-Hardin Baylor. In 1924 Guy Johnson received a request to move to Chapel Hill, North Carolina to work as a Research Assistant in the Institute for Research in Social Science (IRSS) at UNC under the direction of Howard Odum and to complete his doctoral studies in Social Science.²³ Guion Johnson refused to move without being offered the same position for the same compensation and the same opportunity to work on her Ph.D. Odum took some convincing because in the 1920s there were no female researchers at the Institute, but

²² Garrow, et al, 309.

²³ *The Atlanta Journal*. February 21, 1945. Collection #4546, Guion Griffis Johnson, Box 16, Folder 1550, "Newspapers 1945".

eventually he relented and the Johnson's packed their Model T Ford and began their journey to Chapel Hill.

Soon after their arrival Johnson realized that Social Science was not the field for her and transferred to the History and Legal department to complete her dissertation under the direction of R. W. Conner.²⁴ Most southern universities were exclusively male, UNC was among them, but Johnson hoped to chart her own course regardless of the fact that she was the lone woman at the IRSS and in the UNC History Department.²⁵ When Johnson entered the Ph.D program at UNC there were no undergraduate female students, only about 100 female graduate students and Ph.D candidates, and most of them were in the English Department because that was a "suitable field for women".²⁶ The history department at UNC was all male when she entered and Johnson's prospects as a female historian were uncertain and limited, but she pursued her studies with zeal.²⁷ She said later that she was "very unhappy here [at UNC] because at Baylor the entire faculty stressed the importance of education for women and here, you ran up against some pretty hardy characters who felt the other way."²⁸ But Johnson held out and continued her dissertation work under Professor Connor.

When Johnson confronted Howard Odum about her desire to switch to history he warned Johnson that it was "a dead end profession" and that she would "get no where with a PhD in History."²⁹ But she knew that learning American history would allow her

²⁴ Guion Griffis Johnson. "My Exploration of the Southern Experience". *The North Carolina Historical Review* 57 (April 1980): 203.

²⁵ Thusen, "Making Southern History."

²⁶ Frederickson, Interview, May 28, 1974

²⁷ Thusen, "Making Southern History."

²⁸ Frederickson, Interview, May 28, 1974.

²⁹ Jacquelyn Hall. Interview August 19, 1974, Dr. Guion Johnson. Interview G-oo29-1. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007).

to help southern people “cut lose from the dead past”; so she became the first Research Assistant in History at the Institute for Research in Social Science and pursued her goal of bringing the past into modern focus by including all races and genders in the stories she told.³⁰ As she stood to be hooded when receiving her Ph.D in 1926, Dr. Johnson was awarded UNC’s Smith Research Award in Social Science for her doctoral thesis “Social Conditions in North Carolina, 1800-1860”.³¹ Six men, including her husband, also received their hoods that day and Johnson took home the highly coveted award of recognition instead of them, an unheard of and shocking event at an almost exclusively male university.³² Winning the Smith Award was “shattering to the men around her” and gave Dr. Johnson a great deal of confidence. This victory proved to her and to the UNC faculty that a Ph.D in history was a good choice.³³ It was extremely unusual for a woman in the 1920s to be so highly educated and even more extraordinary for her dissertation to beat a man’s for an award.

For her dissertation Dr. Johnson “determined the trend of public opinion in the past toward social problems” by “obtaining the exact details of the problems [plaguing North Carolina] from 1800-1860”. She wrote about population movements, social customs, the family, schools, the church, African Americans, and reform movements of the Reconstruction period.³⁴ Dr. Johnson spent her summer’s working through archive after archive compiling mountains of data to be used in her final product; the North Carolina State Archive in Raleigh, the National Archives in Washington, D.C., the archives at UNC and at the NC College for Women in Greensboro. She examined court

³⁰ Hall, Interview August, 1974.

³¹ Thusen, “Making Southern History.”

³² Johnson. “My Exploration of the Southern Experience”.

³³ Frederickson. Interview, May 17, 1974.

³⁴ Guion Griffis Johnson. Collection #4546, Box 11.1, “Thesis Research”.

records from all over North Carolina, and all the newspaper and magazine sources available in the UNC Libraries.³⁵ From this intense labor she produced her award winning dissertation, one that would later become her first book and one that would officially launch her career as a noted anti-racist. Along with being known for her stance against racism within academic circles, Dr. Johnson also became known as a pioneer in bottom-up history because she chose to include the stories of all people when she wrote history.³⁶

Dr. Johnson began her career in anti-racism in 1926 when she submitted her dissertation to the UNC History Department. In this writing she established a new way of looking at history and challenged the traditionally accepted ways of studying history. Johnson explored the lives of the ordinary citizens of North Carolina and included the ‘little people’ into her story of history. While most of her male counterparts were still researching the important and influential men with the conventional sources Johnson was making a name for herself as she wrote the “most comprehensive social history of any Southern state in that it covers every phase of life and every social class.”³⁷ Dr. Johnson employed several hundred non-traditional sources in her research for her dissertation; the diaries of both men and women, letters, newspapers, popular periodicals, and court records. These sources derived from common people who lived in North Carolina during

³⁵ Johnson, “My Exploration of the Southern Experience”.

³⁶ Charles Tansill. Review of *Antebellum North Carolina; A Social History 1800-1860* in *The Journal of Negro Education* Vol. 10, No 1 (Jan., 1941), published by SAGE Publications Inc and the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences.

³⁷ Alex M. Arnett. Review of *Antebellum North Carolina; A Social History 1800-1860*, in *The Journal of Negro Education* Vol. 10, No 1 (Jan., 1941), 84. published by The Southern Historical Association. 229.

Reconstruction “allowed her to deal with the ‘small people’, and focused on the long-neglected ‘middle class’ in Southern society.³⁸

After completing her Ph.D work Johnson decided to expand her dissertation and include a few more chapters. Those few chapters turned into a 900 page book. This book, *Antebellum North Carolina: A Social History 1800-1860*, continued in the same vein as her doctoral thesis in that she crossed the lines of race, class, and gender in its writing.³⁹ She wrote on the rural life, religion, education, and class structure that characterized nineteenth century life in North Carolina.⁴⁰ Both the dissertation and subsequent monograph placed Dr. Johnson within the ranks of well-known historians and gave her recognition as a pioneer in bottom-up history and as one who disagreed with leaving blacks out of the story of American history.

Johnson chose to study people whose experiences had been formerly obscured by historians and through this she revealed the culture of the people of North Carolina’s small towns.⁴¹ Her observations of everyday life and everyday people presented in *Antebellum North Carolina* introduced a previously unexplored part of the southern past.⁴² The facts assembled by Johnson revealed the complexity of southern social life. “There are several different socio-economic levels of people living in North Carolina during Reconstruction; African Americans, poor whites who worked as tenant farmers, middle class whites who owned land, and elite whites who held what was left of Southern

³⁸ Avery Craven, Review of *Antebellum North Carolina: A Social History 1800-1860* in *The Journal of Negro Education* Vol. 10, No 1 (Jan., 1941), published by The University of North Carolina Press

³⁹ Thusen, “Making Southern History”.

⁴⁰ Julie Des Jardins, *Women and the Historical Enterprise in America: Gender, Race, and the Politics of Memory 1800-1945*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 95.

⁴¹ Des Jardins, 95.

⁴² A.R. Newsome, Review of *Antebellum North Carolina: A Social History 1800-1860*. Collection #4546, Box 11.1, Folder 1161.

money.”⁴³ Through logical explanation, excellent use of more than 2,000 sources, clear organization, and scientific method, Dr. Johnson gave an excellent account of conventional life during Reconstruction in North Carolina. There were chapters on every part of southern life; Religion, Family, Customs, Economics, and Folklore. Five of those chapters were dedicated to slavery and African American life, the breadth of coverage on these topics attested to Johnson’s desire to re-write southern history in a more racially inclusive fashion.⁴⁴ By writing in a racially inclusive manner, using the sources she used, and including a previously un-included portion of the population Dr. Johnson challenged the prevailing methods of historical writing and became a leader in social history, a field that would not be fully recognized until the 1950s and 1960s.

Custom and tradition were the chief motivators of southern people and changing either of those was slow or impossible. Many southerners refused to alter their attitudes about race relations simply because segregation, Jim Crow, and black inferiority were the way things had always been done. Dr. Johnson spent her life and intellectual career researching these southern practices, explaining her anti-racist convictions, and fighting resistance from fellow intellectual southerners who feared black power and a change in social norms. This fear was real to racist southern men and women because they believed that along with integration came economic, political, and social equality for blacks and that equivalence would threaten the white way of life.⁴⁵

⁴³ Guion Griffis Johnson, *Antebellum North Carolina; A Social History, 1800-1860*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1937), 23.

⁴⁴ Thusen, “Making Southern History”.

⁴⁵ Guy and Guion Johnson, *Research in Service to Society: the First Fifty Years of the Institute for Research in Social Sciences at The University of North Carolina*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 34.

Southern racism was both structural and institutional in that it excluded African Americans “from full participation in the rights, privileges, and benefits of society” and in the fact that vigilante violence was perpetuated against blacks.⁴⁶ The system of banning blacks from civil participation required a widely accepted ideology in order to work and most southerners agreed with the removal of blacks from all parts of white life, or, if they could not be removed, agreed with forcing blacks into inferior positions. Dr. Johnson believed that the system exacting racism must change, and to do so people must see and understand the unequal treatment of African Americans. Found among Dr. Johnson’s papers was an article, “Race Orthodoxy in the South” with a sentence underlined; “The real problem is not the Negro, but the white man’s attitude toward the Negro.”⁴⁷ Underlining this statement demonstrated Johnson’s convictions about racism, segregation, and Jim Crowism in the South. She felt that whites were to blame for racism and that when whites decided to let go of the customs of Jim Crow life for black Americans would change. Johnson disagreed with the ideas and customs of racist southern whites, and spent her time in academia explaining her reasons.

The American Association of University Women, AAUW, is a group of intellectual women known for its forward-looking stance and for advancing the equality of United States minority groups. When Dr. Johnson joined in the 1930s she found her niche with other academic women who shared her anti-racist ideologies. This group felt it was important to educate both its members and the public about the wrongs of segregation. Johnson became a speaker at their meetings and a member of the Board of

⁴⁶ Joe Feagin, *Living with Racism: The Black Mid-Class Experience*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 2.

⁴⁷ Thomas Bailey, “Race Orthodoxy in the South, and other Aspects of the Negro Question”. Collection #4546, Box 11.1, Folder 1199, “Guion Griffis Johnson”, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Directors all the while still maintaining her position as the only female historian researching for the Institute for Research in Social Sciences.⁴⁸ Soon times would change for the Johnson's as the Great Depression hit the United States and changed the way the family lived.

The Great Depression touched the lives of every American citizen, even those in academia like Dr. Johnson. Because of the Depression the IRSS was forced to make budget cuts and decided that the female researcher and the female secretary were no longer needed since the salary of their husbands who were on the IRSS payroll could support their families. In 1934, after ten years of researching for the Institute Dr. Johnson was let go as a researcher but her monograph, *Antebellum North Carolina*, was not yet complete. Every day she continued to work to finish the book "without being paid a cent" in the office she shared with her husband until it was sent to the publishers in 1936.⁴⁹ Between the submission of the manuscript and its printing in 1937 the Johnson's welcomed their first son Guy Benton Johnson Jr. "Benny". Although Dr. Johnson no longer held her position as a Research Assistant and had a son to care for, she did not permanently give up researching and writing about southern racism.

The second section of Dr. Johnson's life began after losing her position as a researcher when she was invited to join the Gunnar Myrdal study of the Negro in America in 1938; her scholarship from this period exceedingly challenged the prevailing racial ideologies. Myrdal was a Swedish Economist hired by the Carnegie Corporation to complete a "comprehensive study of sociological, economic, anthropological, and legal

⁴⁸ Frederickson Interview, May 17, 1974.

⁴⁹ Frederickson, Interview, May 28, 1974.

data on black/white relations in the United States.”⁵⁰ This study produced a large volume entitled *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* published in 1944. Dr. Johnson joined the study in 1938 to “complete the racial ideology study” on whites who had written in the field of race and race relations.⁵¹ This study concluded that the Negro problem is a white man’s problem and that “whites as a collective were responsible for the disadvantageous situation in which blacks were trapped.”⁵² The dilemma named in the study’s title was that white Americans said they “believed in human freedom and equality but systematically denied freedom and equality to their own African American population.”⁵³

Myrdal’s study was positive in its outlook of the future of race relations in America claiming that “democracy would triumph over racism”, and the study laid the ground work for future policies on racial integration.⁵⁴ Dr. Johnson’s contribution to the study was to show that there was a vicious cycle in America; whites oppressed blacks and then pointed to the black’s poor performance as reason for their oppression.⁵⁵ The study argued that the way out of the cycle was to either “cure whites of prejudice or improve the circumstances of blacks.”⁵⁶ *An American Dilemma* pointed out that “the South continued to disenfranchise the Negro, contrary to the clear precept of the American Creed and Constitution. The masses of whites kept blacks from political participation” but there would soon be a “gradual destruction of popular theories behind race prejudice”

⁵⁰ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1944), 1.

⁵¹ Frederickson, Interview, May 28, 1974.

⁵² Myrdal, 14.

⁵³ Obie Clayton Jr. Ed., *An American Dilemma Revisited: Race Relations in a Changing World*. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996), 4.

⁵⁴ Clayton, 18.

⁵⁵ Myrdal, 1011.

⁵⁶ Myrdal, 1012.

and interracial relations would slowly begin to change.⁵⁷ Gunnar Myrdal made his prediction in 1944 when his study was published but it took almost two decades of work by anti-racists like Dr. Johnson for his prophesy to come true.

For a short time after completing her section of the Myrdal study in 1941 Dr. Johnson dropped her intellectual pursuits and took up the volunteer aspect of anti-racism. After Pearl Harbor was bombed Dr. Johnson felt pressured to take time away from writing to join the war effort.⁵⁸ During this break she worked for the Orange County Rationing Board issuing ration booklets and establishing an integrated child-care center. This center would care for the children of mothers of both races who went to work while their husbands were overseas. Johnson was “bitterly blocked and violently opposed by some women of Orange County” who did not want their white children to associate with black children at a nursery.⁵⁹ Johnson fought against women who attempted to use their influence and authority to curtail the opening of the day-care center. She asked the county for the building, petitioned for and received federal funding to pay the staff, and asked mothers in the community who supported integration to donate old toys for the children to play with.⁶⁰ This nursery, Home Days, is still operational in Chapel Hill; it was opened as an integrated child-care center and remained so even through the harsh days of the Civil Rights Movement.⁶¹ Opening this nursery in Orange County proved that although Dr. Johnson had well established herself in the sphere of intellectual protest, she could occupy the sphere of direct action and defy southern racist traditions to open a racially mixed day-care center.

⁵⁷ Myrdal, 1003.

⁵⁸ Johnson, “My Exploration of the Southern Experience.”, 212.

⁵⁹ Frederickson, Interview, August 19, 1974.

⁶⁰ Frederickson, Interview, August 19, 1974.

⁶¹ Frederickson, Interview, August 19, 1974

Also while on her writing hiatus Dr. Johnson was an instructor at UNC's V-12 Program. V-12 was a joint agenda with the United States Naval Training Program that offered young men the opportunity to study and qualify for naval commissions while in college. Dr Johnson taught American History and Naval Strategy and was once again the only female on staff. It was exceptionally unusual for a woman to be recruited to teach male naval students but "teachers were desperately needed" since most men were overseas, and Dr. Johnson had already proven herself a capable educator.⁶² Johnson said that she enjoyed the work and the men she taught studied diligently and all of them qualified for their commissions. In 1944 the administration in the History Department changed to Dr. Hamilton who said his "History Department would never permit a woman to lecture or be a professor," so Dr. Johnson was dismissed.⁶³ Teaching in the V-12 program had nothing to do with racism and the fight against it. Blacks were not allowed in the classes at UNC in the 1940s and were certainly not allowed Navy commissions, but Dr. Johnson was fighting in a different arena, women's equality. She was the lone female instructor on the V-12 staff and she made a name for herself with the men she taught, but nonetheless she was let go because she was a woman.⁶⁴

Upon her dismissal from the V-12 Program Dr. Johnson returned to her calling; writing shocking but educational articles about southern racism. The first article she published was "The Impact of War Upon the Negro", 1942, in the *Journal of Negro Education* in which she pointed out the "specific inconsistencies in American

⁶² Frederickson, Interview, May 28, 1974

⁶³ Frederickson, Interview, May 28, 1974.

⁶⁴ Frederickson, Interview, May 28, 1974.

democracy” and in the white American attitude toward blacks during war time.⁶⁵ Her article said that blacks were urged to enlist during WWI on the assumption that the American war-time philosophy with its emphasis on self-determination and democracy would sift down and elevate their status.⁶⁶ More than 500,000 African Americans fought in WWI but all of those who returned home found that they had to face the same ridged caste they had left when embarking for the battle front.⁶⁷ Johnson points out the contradiction in America, blacks fought for the equality for men abroad but were denied equality in their own country. Already tense black and white relations became even more strained as black soldiers returned home with a new sense of militancy and urgency for their battle for equality to be fought on American soil.

Two major movements grew from the tense racial relationships, the New Negro Movement and the Interracial Movement, both were precursors to later black Civil Rights Movements. Johnson wrote that the New Negro Movement “simply meant that the Negro has resolved himself that he would write his own meaning of democracy rather than accept the empty and false version handed down to him from whites” who meant to keep him in his place.⁶⁸ New Negro supporters grew in number and were the beginnings of the militant movements that would come in later years like Black Power and the Black Panthers. Johnson said it was the sense of militancy gained from war experience that spurred the open and direct action of blacks to gain civil equality.⁶⁹ The Interracial Commission was the peaceful side of the 1940s integration movement. Its supporters

⁶⁵ Guion Griffis Johnson, “The Impact of War Upon the Negro”. Collection #4546, Box 11.1, Folder 1199 “The Impact of War Upon the Negro”.

⁶⁶ Johnson, “The Impact of War Upon the Negro.”

⁶⁷ Johnson, “The Impact of War Upon the Negro.”

⁶⁸ Johnson, “The Impact of War Upon the Negro.”

⁶⁹ Johnson, “The Impact of War Upon the Negro.”

were men and women who organized themselves to “help ease the friction between blacks and whites” by using the democratic system.⁷⁰ The stated task of the Commission was to work within the existing social structure to elevate the status of blacks. Johnson wrote that both the militant and cooperative arms of the movements would make significant gains for the status of blacks following World War as they gave “the Negro for the first time a foothold in American democracy and equality.”⁷¹

“The Impact of War Upon the Negro” was an explanatory article about race relations following American wars that foretold of the future of race relations. Within its lines Dr. Johnson explained the beginnings of the militancy that would later come to full fruition in the Civil Rights years, she laid out the foundation for the now commonly accepted themes that prefaced the American Civil Rights Movement. The article is concluded with Johnson’s statement that “the implication of the present crisis [World War II] in which the United States is asked not only to make the world safe for democracy but to preserve democracy itself” is ironic, and in order for the United States to fully realize its mission of the preservation of world democracy it must first extend democracy to all its citizens.⁷² Dr. Johnson warns her readers that the German talk of a super-race that will dominate the world was the same “ideology that the Negroes have been fighting throughout their history in America.”⁷³ It was this last statement, the comparison of the American treatment of blacks to Hitler’s Aryan race, that demonstrated Johnson’s true attitude toward American racist policies. She agreed with them just as much as the rest of America agreed with Germany’s treatment of non-Aryans. She

⁷⁰ Johnson, “The Impact of War Upon the Negro.”

⁷¹ Johnson, “The Impact of War Upon the Negro.”

⁷² Johnson, “The Impact of War Upon the Negro.”

⁷³ Johnson, “The Impact of War Upon the Negro.”

believed that American blacks should have the same privileges soldiers over seas were dying for; equality, freedom of choice, and democracy.

In 1949 *Essays in Southern History* printed another piece of Dr. Johnson's politically aware writing that was intended to educate her readers on the origins of racism and on her disagreement with this southern custom. "The Ideology of White Supremacy" was "an attempt to give Southerners a look into their past and bring to light the reasons why they believed in Negro inferiority."⁷⁴ Southern white ideology in the middle twentieth century contended that it was "necessary for whites to have constant supervision of blacks"—this meant superiority. Johnson concluded that "all of the old assumptions used to justify the legal enslavement of the Negro were being used to defend his civil enslavement" and to force him into a place of inferiority and out of political equality.⁷⁵ Southern whites defended their disenfranchisement of African Americans with zealous determination because social equality between whites and blacks would inevitably lead to race mixing and the eventual deterioration of the white race.⁷⁶ Johnson adamantly stated that the belief in the permanence of black inferiority, the subsequent mistreatment of blacks, and the acceptance of white supremacy was detrimental to the South.⁷⁷

"The Ideology of White Supremacy" emphasizes that throughout American history blacks have suffered at the hands of racism and tyranny. Dr. Johnson claimed that "it was morally wrong to deny the Negro the basic rights of mankind" and without reservation she told her readers that blacks should have the full rights of American

⁷⁴ Guion Griffis Johnson, "The Ideology of White Supremacy, 1876-1910." Collection #4546, Box 11.1, Folder 1208.

⁷⁵ Johnson, "The Ideology of White Supremacy."

⁷⁶ Johnson, "The Ideology of White Supremacy."

⁷⁷ Johnson, "The Ideology of White Supremacy."

citizenship and equality.⁷⁸ In a paraphrased version of Thomas Jefferson's draft of the Declaration of Independence Dr. Johnson based her claim for racial equality on the theory that "the laws and nature and of nature's God endow every man at birth with the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Happiness for blacks meant equality. This piece of politically engaged scholarship explained the underlying reasons for white supremacy in America and Johnson's hope that "after learning of its past actions, the South would be able to move forward and beyond racism."⁷⁹

On many occasions Dr. Johnson was called upon to make speeches concerning her convictions about racism. She would stand in front of a group of her intellectual peers and urge them to realize the wrongs of segregation and to take a stand against it. This action fell well within the realm of intellectual activism because most of her speeches were given to women's groups like the AAUW. On one occasion in 1948 Dr. Johnson told her fellow University Women that "Southern women should certainly know and understand the movement of the Negro, [and] the desire of the Negro for equal opportunities."⁸⁰ The chief objective of this speech was to educate the women on the situation of blacks in America as they faced the trials of racism and Dr. Johnson shocked her listeners when she told them they "should understand the status of the Negro because the status of Southern women has always been somewhat comparable."⁸¹ The women in her audience silenced in shock at Dr. Johnson's statement. "It was outrageous! The very idea of comparing a white woman to the status of the Negro!" but Johnson tells in a later

⁷⁸ Johnson, "The Ideology of White Supremacy."

⁷⁹ Johnson, "The Ideology of White Supremacy."

⁸⁰ Frederickson, Interview, May 17, 1974.

⁸¹ Frederickson, Interview, May 17, 1974.

interview that shock was exactly the reaction she wanted.⁸² Unsettling her female audience “pulled them awake and spurred them to action for the Negro’s cause.”⁸³

Another unsettling speech about anti-racist activity was given to the women of AAUW in 1950. Dr. Johnson informed her listeners that it was “each one’s individual responsibility to help bring about peace and equality among Americans both black and white.”⁸⁴ This speech, entitled “Democracy”, was given to well-educated women and Dr. Johnson insisted that before a woman may take a stand against racism she must take the responsibility to familiarize herself with the facts on racism and segregation. Johnson felt that the positions AAUW members held in intellectual circles would allow for considerable influence in the fight against racism. She was a politically active educator who believed that knowledge could make a person powerful and would prepare him/her for the fight against racism.⁸⁵

The 1950 speech to AAUW heralded the third and final section of Dr. Johnson’s activist life. During this time she used contemporary political dialogue and her place as a public intellectual to challenge the current racial policies. Activism in the 1950s was beginning to hit its fevered pitch in all arenas; more people than ever before were arrested for open protest, volunteer numbers were at an all time high, and much more scholarship was written on the part of blacks and against racism. Dr. Johnson’s writings during this period were meant to engage in oppositional dialogue, to offer opposition to accepted southern notions of race relations.

⁸² Frederickson, Interview, May 17 1974—author’s original punctuation.

⁸³ Frederickson, Interview, May 17, 1974.

⁸⁴ Guion Griffis Johnson. “Democracy” Speech, Collection #4546, Box 13.1, Folder 1015

⁸⁵ Frederickson, Interview, May 17, 1974.

Integration supporters were jubilant when legal segregation came to an end with the *Brown v. BOE* decision. This land mark case that overturned the *Plessy* decision quoted and referenced the Myrdal *An American Dilemma* study that Dr. Johnson had been apart of almost ten years earlier.⁸⁶ Blacks were given the legal right to occupy the same places as whites. As with all legislation concerning black Americans there was protest against the forced integration demanded by *Brown*, even from the North Carolina Govenor. The Luther Hodges administration implemented the Pearsall Plan as an attempt to forestall the compulsory education of the public school system. This Plan allowed parents who did not want to send their white child to an integrated public school to apply for and receive vouchers for private school that were exempt from the mandated integration.⁸⁷ The women of the Chapel Hill AAUW, including Dr. Johnson, were the only group to openly oppose the Pearsall Plan. This Association of influential women used their connections and powerful status' to sway public opinion and reduced the number of vouchers issued to Orange County parents.⁸⁸

Dr. Johnson had another article that included her anti-racist leanings published in 1957. "Southern Paternalism Toward the Negro Following Emancipation", printed in the *Journal of Southern History*, opened with Johnson's assertion that "when the old social and economic structure fell with the Civil War, the South quickly picked up the philosophical tools bequeathed by the slavery regime and fashioned the racial structure of the New South."⁸⁹ The tools left over from the Antebellum Years were subjugation and

⁸⁶ Murray, Gail. Ed. *Throwing off the Cloak of Privilege* White Southern Women Activists in the Civil Rights Era. (Gainesville: The University of Florida Press, 2004), 65.

⁸⁷ Murray, 93.

⁸⁸ Hall, Interview, August 19, 1974.

⁸⁹ Johnson, Guion Griffis. "Southern Paternalism Towards the Negro Following Emancipation", Collection #4546, Box 11.1, Folder 1214.

the supposed inherent inferiority of blacks, and the South's newly fashioned social structure was Jim Crow. Johnson proposed that "it was only logical that the old relationships should continue as before" and that through Jim Crow whites would attempt to subordinate blacks as they had always done.⁹⁰

"Southern Paternalism" insisted that the federal government could not prevent the curtailment of black civil rights during Reconstruction because "all Southern states passed Jim Crow laws that called for racial separation and segregation."⁹¹ Johnson wrote that these laws were immoral because skin color and race were not true measures of ability and the separation of the races was one of the most significant causes for the slow growth of the South during Reconstruction. She contended that race relations were a phenomenon of status that they could be altered if whites chose to allow black equality and integration.⁹² The significance of "Southern Paternalism" lies within Johnson's blatant statement that "racism is wrong and the patronage of paternalist Southern whites has only served to retard the growth of blacks in the South."⁹³

As the South headed toward the Civil Rights years Johnson did not take part in the sit-ins or marches, but did make it known that she did not agree with the philosophy of segregation.⁹⁴ When asked why she did not participate in the demonstrations Johnson replied "I felt that although protest had to be made, I had written and published at least two essays expressing this idea and did not need to show my support by being in the streets."⁹⁵ The idea Johnson chose to express in her writings was that forbidding African

⁹⁰ Johnson, "Southern Paternalism."

⁹¹ Johnson, "Southern Paternalism."

⁹² Johnson, "Southern Paternalism."

⁹³ Johnson, "Southern Paternalism."

⁹⁴ Thusen, "Taking the Vows of Southern History", 320.

⁹⁵ Frederickson, Interview, July 1974.

Americans the full benefits of American citizenship was immoral.⁹⁶ Her works dealt with the roots of difficult issues like race, racism, and segregation. Dr. Johnson's scholarship in the intellectual sphere of activism throughout the three stages of her life centered around her beliefs in anti-racism.

The last work Dr. Johnson wrote and published was an autobiographical essay "My Exploration of the Southern Experience". This article published in 1980, seven years before her death, was a frank, straightforward, and humorous account of her life. Johnson told the story of her intellectual career beginning with the fact that her mother was the only woman in Greenville, Texas who had a Bachelor's Degree and ending with her happy retirement with her husband who had always shared her convictions about southern racism. Johnson gives her readers candid access to the journey of her life. She used wit to convey the twists and turns her life took as she tells that "sometimes she just held on for the ride and other times she was firmly in charge of her life's course."⁹⁷ She claims that she stumbled into the field of history by accident and that her journey was filled with pitfalls that she had to overcome along the way.⁹⁸ Johnson concludes her essay with "I was excited about research and writing in social history and while I was at it I discovered a new world of truth" and a new way of writing American History.⁹⁹ She found out that there are all sorts of flaws, omissions, and failures present in people but that in "fifty-five years of groping and wandering in the field of history with the vain hope of portraying the factors that shaped the lives of Southern people she had only

⁹⁶ Frederickson, Interview, July 1974.

⁹⁷ Johnson, "My Exploration of the Southern Experience"

⁹⁸ Johnson, "My Exploration of the Southern Experience."

⁹⁹ Johnson, "My Exploration of the Southern Experience".

skimmed the surface”.¹⁰⁰ Although Johnson spent her life writing within the confines of Social History, her last essay shows her true character; she jokes about the complaints she had with Howard Odum, she tells entertaining stories of her research at UNC, and is incredulous at the journey her life took to bring her from Northeast Texas to the middle of North Carolina.

Johnson believed that the “problem was with whites” because whites had the power to restrict racism and most southerners were not doing anything to prevent it.¹⁰¹ Dr. Johnson was a southern liberal. As an intellectual woman and a politically active educator she “openly criticized the system of racial inequality and segregation, and wanted to break down all the barriers to fairness”.¹⁰² While her husband believed in the philosophy of gradualism; change cannot be forced upon people, that it must happen gradually, Dr. Johnson did not “always agree with him”. She felt that “there comes a time when some dramatic changes must be made” and she advocated for the immediate integration of blacks into American society.¹⁰³

Early in her writing career Dr. Johnson developed a “strong mistrust for any information or person that purported innate racial differences and for anyone who used the logic of racial disparity to further his argument for racial separation.”¹⁰⁴ She spent her life writing, teaching, and speaking about racial equality and inclusion for blacks and in 1974 she told her interviewer that she “had a strong commitment toward desegregation and toward improving the lot of the Negro.”¹⁰⁵ Through intellectual activism and

¹⁰⁰ Johnson, “My Exploration of the Southern Experience”.

¹⁰¹ Frederickson, Interview, July 1974.

¹⁰² Frederickson, Interview, July 1974.

¹⁰³ Frederickson, Interview, July 1974.

¹⁰⁴ Thusen, “Taking the Vows of Southern Liberalism.”

¹⁰⁵ Frederickson, Interview, July 1974.

“laborious efforts [she] unfolded the Southern experience and showed it to Southern people in such a way that they might understand their past and find hope in their future.”

The hope she expressed in her politically engaged writings fell in line with her anti-racist ideals; a hope for black American equality. Johnson’s hope was realized during her retirement years; black Americans would win the full rights of citizenship and their equality.

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* Frederickson questions Johnson about the beginnings of her anti-racist writing career and Johnson gives candid and non-critical answers about the early years of her life in Texas and Chapel Hill.

Frederickson, Mary. Interview May 28, 1974, Dr. Guion Johnson. Interview G-oo29-1. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007).

* Johnson tells of her invitation to join the Myrdal study, her family life at the time and of the reactions she received from her activism.

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* Fredrickson questioned Johnson about her writings, her convictions on racism, and the philosophies she lived by. Johnson explained the rationale behind her writings and what she hoped to accomplish by writing them. This interview is useful in that it allows Dr. Johnson to tell her own story and to explain [W/C] her stance on integration.

Hall, Jacquelyn. Interview August 19, 1974, Dr. Guion Johnson. Interview G-oo29-1. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007).

*Johnson tells that southern history was a concern of hers since childhood and how growing up in Texas taught her the southern racial mores concerning the inclusion of blacks. She gives the story of her life prior to coming to Chapel Hill, the directions she took in college, how her master's degree came about, her marriage to Guy, and the long dusty road the two of them took to work for Howard Odum.

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* Johnson wrote that it was only logical that immediately after the fall of slavery with the end of the American Civil War the southern states implemented Jim Crow so that they could continue the status quo. This is another example of Johnson's educational scholarship; she meant to tell southerners of their history so that they could change their future.

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