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From Desegregation to Desexigration in Richmond, Virginia, 1954-1973

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of History at
Virginia Commonwealth University

By

Leslee Key
Bachelor's of Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2006

Director: John Kneebone
Professor, Department of History

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
December, 2011

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Abstract

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By: Leslee Key

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Major Director: John T. Kneebone, Professor of History, Virginia Commonwealth University

This investigation explores the relationships and experiences in the urban community that connected black and white women to understand the complexities of Jim Crow, its breakdown, and the subsequent expansion of female activism in Richmond, Virginia. By examining the South's famous department stores, Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads, this research attempts to focus on female-created and female-oriented spaces within downtown Richmond, from 1954 until 1973, and draws a line from the Thalhimers boycott staged by African-American women in 1961 to the sit-in performed by white women in the Thalhimers male-only soup bar in 1970. Historical context is developed to show changing patterns surrounding racism and gender roles during the 1950s and 1960s within urban space, particularly department stores. The changes made within white and black women's organizations, such as the YWCA, alongside these downtown stores, supplied important social and employment opportunities for women in the community and throughout the state, and influenced women of different cultures and races. The formation of multi-racial female coalitions within areas of employment set the stage for the formation of the women's Movement in Richmond as women displayed subtle forms of feminist activism within the conservative environment of the Commonwealth.

Introduction

"In considering the social effects of the department store, one is inclined to attach the greatest importance to the contributions which they have made to the transformation in the way of life of the greatest strata of the population, a transformation which will remain the one great social fact of these last 100 years."¹ -- Hrant Pasdermadjian, *The Department Store, Its Origins, Evolution and Economics*, 1954

The last half of the twentieth-century differed greatly from the first half of the century, as dramatic changes in population, demographics, mechanization, industry, economics and politics transformed America's physical and philosophical pastures. This period was also marked by the development and strengthening of a distinct American beauty culture propagated by advertising, a growing service economy, dramatic economic growth, and an incessant consumer drive as many people felt a need to express themselves as individuals. New institutional mechanisms also actively worked to create a national consumer culture. Sociologist William JF Keenan's study on the life of dress describes "dress freedom" as a cultural manifestation of prescribed dress codes as well as individualistic expression that can limit and alter human rights depending on historical and cultural circumstances.² Clothing, accessories, and an abundance of material goods and household items became more easily attainable as dry goods stores expanded into larger, more accommodating shopping centers, which offered clothing, hats, furniture, as well as a variety of services to a growing number of eager patrons. Material culture was, and continues to be, an important element of twentieth century American history. It is significant in the formation of self-identity as people can express individual style while still being part of the collective cultural whole. Keenan states that scholars should examine fashion, but also its

¹ Hrant Pasdermadjian, *The Department Store: Its Origins, Evolution, and Economics* (London: Newman Books, 1954), 124.

² William J.F. Keenan, "Dress Freedom: The Personal and the Political," In: *Dressed to Impress: Looking the Part*, William J.F. Keenan, ed. (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 180.

connection to society, including shopping malls, health and leisure clubs, and other places, as it is “essential that we ‘get inside’ the dress ways and dress worlds that we ourselves inhabit or closely rub shoulders with or distantly look upon from the outside.”³ The rise of department stores in the United States is a relatively recent phenomenon, as the first major stores developed during the mid-nineteenth century. Historians first examined the topic of department stores in the 1950s and 1960s and based their accounts on a variety of materials while focusing their research on the functions and features of large-scale retail business. The topic of retail stores had, until this time, been the focus of economists, government agencies, and business organizations. Business and social historians began the quest to understand the American department store and legitimize its history as a worthwhile topic. The historiography of department stores breaks down into three themes: consumer capitalism, the role of women, and cultural development. In the early literature, the recurring themes of women and culture were anecdotal rather than examined as analytically significant to the understanding of American culture. During the nineteenth and twentieth century, political equality for women was in its infancy, but women were finding social and physical freedoms. The department store, then, is an ambiguous symbol of subjugation and freedom, one that that can be characterized as a binary environment, modifying over time because of actions of people and technological and urban development.

While it can be argued that feminine behavior and dress solidifies gender inequalities, over time women have altered the function of dress ways as a means to transform their subordinate social position. Dress ways, or department stores, house not only fashionable attire and comfortable luxuries but also present the prevailing physical and social customs of the day. As tea rooms and dry goods stores served as salon-like forums for women to meet, they also connected the domestic and public realms of society. These were places where women met and

³ Keenan, 180.

discussed not only the latest fashions, but conversed about local politics, or the business affairs of their husbands. With the rise of modern consumer culture in the twentieth century, larger retail establishments effectively contributed to the heightened appreciation for beauty, fashion, and the home, and perhaps eased transitions for women entering the workforce.⁴ Over time floor plans grew larger, extravagant amenities were included, and new items became available, which transformed economic and social relations while allowing customers to accumulate a lifestyle.

In the 1970s, the scholarly attention to the subject of American department stores steadily increased. Historians such as Ralph Hower, Harry E. Resseguie, and Robert Twyman were some of the early pioneers on the subject; each reconstructed the histories of famous department stores and focused his inspection on the foundation and success of the new “grand emporiums.”⁵ Since the 1980s, scholars have offered new perspectives through the examination of cultural and gender-related experiences within urban institutions. Historians have considered the traditional literature and attempted to explain the role of women and the greater cultural significance of department stores. In the work *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth Century America*, Gunther Barth shows how many different institutions, such as apartment complexes, department stores, ball parks, and theaters, served the people in cities, or newcomers to cities, and assisted in the formation of new identities and traditions. Barth shows that changing attitudes about consumerism and the newly established retail giants complemented one another in a new way of life in American urban communities. More recent narratives by Susan Benson and Sharon Zukin have since given deeper, more meaningful interpretations of department stores and the women who inhabited these gendered spaces. Benson highlights the department store as a social institution in that “department stores

⁴ T.H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 177.

⁵ Robert Hendrickson, *The Grand Emporiums: The Illustrated History of America's Great Department Stores* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), 6.

revolved around drama of persuasion in which social interaction replaced production as the essence of the work process.”⁶ In doing so, her work breaks away from traditional institutionally-focused narratives of department stores.

This thesis aims to provide a deeper cultural interpretation of southern department stores and urban women in the South. From the brief historiographical overview provided above, scholars should note the regional component of this analysis which differs from the prominent literature on department stores located in the North. If we are to look at the dress ways of Virginia, we would find two of the South’s, and arguably the nation’s, most famous department stores of the twentieth century; Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads. This examination of these two stores after World War II focuses on the broader manifestations of the Jim Crow system -as historian J. Douglas Smith called it- to illuminate the important role women played in opposing segregation and sexism within the city of Richmond. Described as “cooperative competitors,” Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads are often portrayed by historians as successful community businesses, as they effectively marketed and sold “the southern lifestyle” to the nation.⁷ Still, the stores’ connection and social influence in regards to race, class, and gender has seldom been explored in a historical context. Instead, historical significance has been lost or misplaced by nostalgic recollections, predominantly accounted by white southerners who remember Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads as synonymous with the South’s “good old days”.⁸ Examining these two southern department stores in the broader framework of twentieth-century Virginia provides a window through which to observe how gender and class were inextricably linked to the continuing separation of blacks and whites.

⁶ Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 2.

⁷ Downtown Richmond Memories, prod. Paul T. Roberts, 75 min. WCVE, 2002, videocassette.

⁸ Downtown Richmond Memories, prod. Paul T. Roberts, 75 min. WCVE, 2002, videocassette.

Furthermore, concepts of race and gender in Richmond after World War II will be explored, as expressed through the women and cultural spaces of Richmond department stores and urban societies in order to elucidate more clearly the intertwined evolution of subtle feminism in the Commonwealth. I hope to highlight that in fact it was black women who were the first to challenge the status quo of gender relations in Richmond. By invoking southern traditions of chivalry and paternalism, African American women protesters in the Thalhimers boycott were the first to employ their gender to challenge segregation and circumvented the masculine discourse used by black and white men in Richmond. While white women during and after the movement were “throwing off their cloaks of privilege in varying degrees of radicalism” the opposite can be said for many black women in Richmond.⁹ Black women in mid-twentieth century Virginia largely removed the cultural cloak of inferiority as they advanced their social status by way of feminine style, influence, and behavior. The actions of urban black women in Richmond can be seen as a switch which, while important to blacks in their fight for equality, also propelled the feminist movement in Richmond. While male leaders fought on for educational and political freedoms, middle-class and working-class black and white women shared a communal language that combined economics and their experiences as working women to express their goal: their rights to both racial and sexual equality. This project intersects conservatism, race, and gender in mid-twentieth century Virginia, to explain the mobilization of black and white female coalitions in the city, and in a region and time that, until very recently, has been unfortunately simplified or absent from the historic literature.

Throughout the twentieth century Miller & Rhoads (“The Southern Department Store”) and Thalhimers (“The Fashion Store of the South”) held more in common than in how they

⁹ Gail Murray, ed. *Throwing off the Cloak of Privilege: White Southern Women Activists in the Civil Rights Era* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2004), 3.

differed.¹⁰ Thalhimers was founded by Issac Thalhimer and began as a dry goods store in 1842 before the onset of the Civil War. The story of Miller & Rhoads begins after the Civil War, when the dry goods store was founded in 1884. In 1906, Miller & Rhoads incorporated, and by 1909, it had acquired nearly half a city block of space fronting Broad Street. While the store grew, Richmond expanded to a city of 127,000 people with the 1910 annexation of Manchester. In 1914, Miller & Rhoads made a significant expansion onto Grace Street, which altered what had been a strictly residential area. By 1900, both stores continued to prosper by selling fine merchandise and providing a multitude of services to a growing population of consumers who recognized them as successful community stores. With the advent of World War I in 1917, Miller & Rhoads joined Richmond in unified support by selling war bonds. Both Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads moved location several times but by the 1920s they had established all-inclusive shopping centers adjacent to one another at 6th and Broad Streets.

Within just a few years, stores, banks, and movie theaters followed the giant department stores and turned Grace Street into Richmond's version of Fifth Avenue in New York City. Thalhimers was more clothing-based, while Miller & Rhoads was known for its sophisticated fashions and home furnishings. Miller & Rhoads attracted an elite crowd of upper class citizens, but both stores served a predominantly well-to-do white clientele within the heart of Richmond's downtown business and entertainment district. Each store was equally dedicated to the physical appearance and aesthetic beauty of both the interior and exterior design elements. By offering a wide variety of goods and unique services to create a splendid shopping experience for customers, these two department stores brought modern urban living to southerners. Each store strove to surpass the other in originality, beauty, and overall positive experience offered to customers by way of quality merchandise, revolutionary advertising, and through their social

¹⁰ Miller & Rhoads was also called "Virginia's Finest Department Store." *Miller & Rhoads: For the Home Comfortable* (Richmond: Garret & Massie, Inc. Printers, 1918), Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

obligation to a community which had “produced such nobility of character and accomplishment.”¹¹

These Richmond stores catered to an all-white customer base, particularly upper and middle class white women. Tea rooms and garden clubs were some of the first recreational amenities offered to white women. The creation of these department stores made “a feminine public possible,” a new social paradox that devoted public space to the private domestication of, and leisure for, elite women.¹² The early basis of these stores in the South, other than to provide goods to customers, was to serve as private, safe environments for white women as white male leaders sought to give ladies public refuges from male sexual advances and violence. White male city leaders and merchants’ devotion to white elite females also provided for the differentiation of race and class as urbanites were “constructed in gendered terms, with white elite female respectability providing the standard by which the deviation of lower class whites and African Americans were judged.”¹³

As women increasingly became the target audience, department stores also gave many women their initial job opportunities. Over time, female participation as consumer and worker made department stores popular and successful. Women were not simply frivolous spenders, as “under the entrepreneurial eyes, it became not only acceptable but fashionable to work in a store,” which often led to female advances in other careers such as marketing and public relations.¹⁴ Women found fewer barriers within the walls of department stores, as many served on “customer advisory boards, opened credit accounts, attended fashion shows” and

¹¹ Kristen Thrower, “The Miller & Rhoads Department Store: A Social History of a Richmond Institution,” (M.A. thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 1999), 72. Elizabeth Thalhimer Smartt, “Thalhimer’s Department Store: Story, History, Theory,” (M.A. thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2005), 25. See both Thrower and Smartt for extensive background on these two Richmond stores.

¹² Gunther Barth, *City People: The Rise of the Modern City Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 140.

¹³ Pippa Holloway, *Sexuality, Politics, and Social Control in Virginia, 1920-1945* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 10.

¹⁴ Nan Tillson Birmingham, *Store* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1978), 39.

“volunteered for store-sponsored charity events.”¹⁵ Starting in the 1920s, these stores began promoting a number of women employees to manager and senior-level positions. However, it is not until mid-century when women were increasingly hired and promoted by store management.

Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads in downtown Richmond grew to be vital economic and social institutions, each a city within a city. Both of these institutions offered specialty services, and were arranged so that each selling floor was “conceived as a specialized unit.”¹⁶ Through progressive leadership, revolutionary advertising, a strong clientele of women and a growing urban population, both stores increased revenue and expanded physically, each building taking up an entire city block and growing to several stories high by the mid-twentieth century. By World War II, Virginians and travelers from afar came to Richmond for all-day urban adventures that often included shopping. If one could not make it to downtown Richmond, both stores provided delivery services to any state. Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads were also the first department stores in the South to introduce specialty restaurants inside the stores. In 1941, Thalhimers heralded the opening of the Delicatessen as the first dining establishment of its kind in the South that offered catering services in addition to standard dining amenities. In addition to shopping, both stores offered dining, fashion shows, entertainment and other modern conveniences such as travel bureaus that prearranged transportation, hotel accommodations and meals. Thalhimers went as far as to install women’s showers on the third floor to accommodate women travelers who would perhaps need to refresh their clothes and makeup before venturing back out for the trip home.¹⁷

Historian George Lewis has highlighted that after the Supreme Court’s 1954 decision to end legal segregation in public (*Brown v. Board of Education*), Virginia and South Carolina

¹⁵ Smartt, 55.

¹⁶ “The History and Growth of Thalhimers, 1842-1951,” box 2, folder 7, William Blum Thalhimer, Jr. Corporate and Family Archives, 1862-1992, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

¹⁷ “The History and Growth of Thalhimers, 1842-1951,” box 2, folder 7, William Blum Thalhimer, Jr. Corporate and Family Archives, 1862-1992, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

“toiled under the added pressure that came from the knowledge that both states had been named in the original *Brown* cases” and “had begun to see the logic in presenting themselves as ‘progressives’ in a bid to attract much-needed northern financial investment to their respective state economies.”¹⁸ The growing financial needs of the state melded with state and national opinion to convince businesses and philanthropists to bypass the erratic, and often violent, social climate in states further south. This period flourished with financial success, as the growth of Virginia’s economy was more sophisticated in many regards than other southern states, having been largely fueled by the replacement of agriculture with industry and more profitable endeavors such as manufacturing, tourism, and coal-mining. Employment in service work was most significant, seeing a 34-percent increase in areas of employment such as “wholesale and retail trade, service, and finance.”¹⁹ In fact, a large portion of state revenues relied on individual and corporate tax dollars, as the state did not implement a sales tax and “Virginia’s tax rate on corporate income was double the forty-eight state average.”²⁰ As state expenditures were rising during Massive Resistance, the campaign led by southern white politicians to avoid segregation of the public school systems, Virginia leaders were concerned over economic uncertainties caused by population increases, capital projects such as the interstate highway system, and ongoing civil rights litigation.

Digging through local archival sources about Richmond, downtown department stores, female-oriented work environments, and the women who comprised them, was essential in recasting a story that is supposedly already known. The reliance on broad secondary source material is also extensive considering the topic, or perhaps topics under investigation, depending upon one’s sense of historical construction. Works by civil rights and feminist

¹⁸ George Lewis, *Massive Resistance: The White Response to the Civil Rights Movement*. Rev. 2nd ed. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 50.

¹⁹ Advisory Council on the Virginia Economy. Fiscal Study Committee. *A Report on Virginia’s Economy: The State’s Fiscal System and the Impact of Its Taxes on Industrial Development* (Richmond: 1957), 9.

²⁰ Advisory Council on the Virginia Economy. Fiscal Study Committee. *A Report on Virginia’s Economy: The State’s Fiscal System and the Impact of Its Taxes on Industrial Development* (Richmond: 1957), 31.

historians were consulted regularly to aid in clarifying a historical record that may otherwise remain disjointed. The line drawn, however, is not as clear-cut as one would expect or prefer, as history itself, is not straightforward and requires historians to deal with complexities to be analyzed, but the analysis should provide consistency and make some sense of the chaos in order to sort out meaningful connections and significance. While mainstream organizations such as the N.A.A.C.P. and the National Organization for Women are at the forefront of many historical narratives, their appearance on the scene often comes without deeper evaluation or explanation. Little work has been done to detail the relationship not only between civil rights and women's rights, but the multi-racial components of activism. Such events in Richmond, Virginia are not readily found in the literature, and thus, required not only a re-evaluation of historiography, but a fair amount of leg work. With this said, it is imperative to understand how black women's approach for social, political, and economic advancement, fostered feminism in the early Richmond movement.

Historian Simon Hall's study of civil rights in Virginia, while focusing on a region often neglected in traditional narratives, follows a timeline starting with the Greensboro sit-ins and broadly paints the subsequent sit-ins and the Freedom Rides, until the fruition of success was reached in 1964 with the passage of the Civil Rights Act.²¹ Much of the literature on the modern civil rights movement fails to recognize Virginia as the next location after Greensboro to witness major protests, and therefore its legacy is not highlighted as a pivotal location in the breakdown of the Jim Crow system, both socially and politically. Likewise, while scholars of twentieth-century America have recently examined the connections between civil rights and the second wave of feminism, activities in Virginia have not been given priority or detailed at length. Traditional narratives depict middle-class white women as the creators and implementers of the second wave of feminism in America, attributing the legacy of the movement solely to white

²¹ Simon Hall, "Civil Rights Activism in 1960s Virginia," *Journal of Black Studies*, 38(2007): 252.

women. Other historians, such as Sara Evans, have noted that the sexism women faced within civil rights organizations propelled women toward forming their own organizations. However, recent examinations, such as the works by Glenda Gilmore, Elna Green, and Anne Valk, have gone beyond this dichotomous structure and have examined black and white women's interactions in the South and the formation of multi-racial female coalitions within civic organizations and in employment. Examinations of women's rights organizations such as the National Organization for Women (N.O.W.) reveal that white women's involvement in civil rights activism helped them to adopt similar strategies in their fight for social equality.²²

While some historians correlate a race and gender paradigm, many place the historical actors within their own subsequent movements.²³ Much of the historiography fails to offer an in-depth analysis of both race and gender and leaves a rigid divide between the two concepts, rather than explaining significant connections between them during and after Jim Crow. It is within this framework that most scholars produce dichotomous narratives that often leave the era of the Feminine Mystique in the wake of Massive Resistance. Historian William Chafe has shown that connecting the topics of race and gender, particularly the hardships of women compared to those of blacks, was, and is still of historical, and often personal, controversy. However, as Chafe also points out, societal conceptions of race and sex need to be talked about, investigated and analyzed, as his examination of women in America focuses on the common experience of black and white women in their subjugation and dependency on socially superior males.²⁴ The purpose here is not simply to lump the two movements together, as they can be separated in their own right, but to elucidate how women came together during a time in which consumer activism played an increasingly significant role in the techniques employed by

²² Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 19.

²³ See Anne Valk, *Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in D.C.* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010) for discussion and research on multi-racial female activists in D.C.

²⁴ William Chafe, *Women and Equality: Changing Patterns in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 48.

equal rights organizers.

The first chapter focuses on women in Richmond during the 1950s to elucidate how after World War II, social expectations of white and black women in the South strengthened, as white elite males sought to maintain good race relations in the state of Virginia. While law and custom formally separated black and white citizens, women had been framing and forming important connections through political organizations and activism in local volunteer groups, in their everyday roles as sisters, daughters, mothers and wives, and through new self and group identity, particularly within spheres of female influence inside and outside of the home. It was at this time when again black males, and often times white men, were portrayed as violent, unpredictable, and unyielding. Historian Elsa Barkley Brown has shown the social paradox of co-existing conceptions of male violence and male chivalry in the early part of the century. Her examination of black clubwomen during the early to mid-1900s shows how women, particularly black women, utilized the church to better not only their race but their sex within urban institutions and communities. Continuing Brown's narrative, this examination highlights how black women developed a separate discourse of dignity as black women utilized places of employment, leisure, and civic engagement in the fight for equality. Glenda Gilmore's *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* also highlights surviving aspects of earlier gender-race interactions in the later advancement of the women's movement in Richmond, Virginia.²⁵ Likewise, historians Kathy Peiss and Sharon Zukin have shown that during the mid-twentieth century America had a distinct beauty culture, solidified by standards of white femininity and replicated through the beautification of black women.²⁶ These sources along with archival documents and store records yield a better understanding of the formation of the feminist movement in Virginia. Black women continued to

²⁵ Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), xix.

²⁶ Kathy Peiss, *Hope in A Jar: The Making of America's Beauty Culture* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998), 213. Sharon Zukin, *Point of Purchase: How Shopping Changed American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 161.

gain social status particularly over the course of the 1950s during Massive Resistance. Some whites in Virginia ultimately fueled the communal uplift of black females who they increasingly viewed as a stabilizing force for black families and the larger community.

Chapter two examines the defining moments of the Richmond sit-ins, particularly the radicalization of black working-class and middle-class women who staged a year-long boycott in Richmond's downtown shopping district. In 1960, black women who had been discriminated against, directly or indirectly, by area businesses, social establishments, and communities, forged together their buying power and a collective sense of strong, dignified, contemporary femininity.²⁷ Black women claimed their acceptance from the white community in Richmond as they elevated their moral behavior and stylish appearance. Cultural values imposed on both white and black women were in turn utilized to secure social respect and political negotiation within segregated public space. The mobilization of black women in Richmond provides a window into the complicated social environment in Virginia, as it displayed the limited opportunities of black citizens while showing gender as a cause of disruption in the Jim Crow system. Their efforts are analyzed within the broader framework to show how concepts of race and gender, particularly those of female consumerism and male chivalry, were applied during the protests. The radicalization of urban black women in Richmond was critical to the desegregation of two of the South's most famous institutions, Miller & Rhoads and Thalhimers department stores.²⁸ Lewis A. Randolph's and Gayle T. Tate's *Rights for a Season: The Politics of Race, Class, and Gender in Richmond, Virginia*, contains in-depth information about the sit-ins and highlights the actions taken by local leaders. However, their assessment of the black female protesters is placed in the context of black male chauvinism and leaves out the concept of white male chivalry, which opens another perspective by which to view the socio-cultural

²⁷ Lewis Randolph and Gayle Tate, *Rights for A Season: The Politics of Race, Class, and Gender in Richmond, VA* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 190.

²⁸ Randolph and Tate, 190.

complications of race and gender in Richmond.

The third chapter focuses on the aftermath of desegregation, after the successful boycott of Miller & Rhoads and Thalhimers and especially after the passage of the Civil Rights Act. Even as legislation abounded in state and federal legislative policy paving the way for that act, women who continued to battle racism, segregation, slander, employment issues, also found sexism an obstacle to full equality, in their lives as workers, consumers, mothers, housewives, professionals, and most importantly, as individuals. Women such as Ora Lomax, who participated in the Thalhimers boycott, also found acceptance and opportunity working in retail, and acquired support through a network of professional black and white women. The lives of city women, department store workers, civic organizers and members, housewives, and executives are explored, along with the role of the department stores' management in the evolution of the new, "new woman". The progressive nature of these department stores connects to the broader urban community and the participation of female volunteers and workers. It is within women's professional and social work that women looked beyond racial, religious, and class differences and came together in labor and in protest.

Chapter four further connects race and gender in the post-Jim Crow era and shows how white women performed actions similar to the actions of black women a decade prior, when in 1971 Zelda Nordlinger along with several other white radical feminists, sat-in at the male-only Soup Bar in Thalhimers.²⁹ As black women in Richmond reinforced progress for the black race, white women piggybacked this approach ten years later as one strategy in the continuing resistance against gender bias. Betsy Brinson, a long-time feminist activist in Richmond, commented on the forces behind the women's rights in Richmond following the fight over racial equality. In her dissertation Brinson admitted that "the student challenge to a system of racial

²⁹ Newspaper clipping, Zelda Nordlinger papers, 1932-2008, folder 2, Special Collections, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

segregation inspired thousands including myself, to follow their example of non-violent protests.”³⁰ As the issue of civil rights loomed large in the early 1960s, white women in Richmond started taking more direct action and looked toward their black contemporaries for strategic maneuvers and responded to the social outlets of discrimination which still existed in the city. The experiences of many married and single white women had changed as more women sought employment, and more women were earning college degrees. Women who had fought for civil rights and those radicalized after, continued to encounter obstacles in the workplace such as low wages, sexual harassment, unequal distribution of work, and gendered career paths.

The growth of Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads reflected “the growth of the Old Dominion Capital.”³¹ Alongside their positions as powerful business men, officials at Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads worked to maintain racial and gender hierarchies and continued to serve a heritage that contradicted “progressive” ideals by fostering traditions of paternalism and white male superiority.³² New historical inquiries detail the breakdown of the old southern order and the formation of a new South during the mid-twentieth century. Southern department stores such as Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads give a unique opportunity to investigate the responses of Richmond women to the patriarchal and conservative style of governing relationships within urban space. Ultimately, white and black women utilized the gendered space of department stores as a playing field for equal rights, and together formed both separate and bi-racial female

³⁰ Betsy Brinson, “Helping Others Help Themselves : Social Advocacy and Wage-Earning Women in Richmond, Va., 1910-1932 (Ph.D. Dissertation, 1984, Union Graduate School, Union for Experimenting Colleges and Universities), Betsy Brinson papers, box 6, folder 165, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

³¹ “The History and Growth of Thalhimers, 1842-1951,” box 1, folder 7, William Blum Thalhimer, Jr. Corporate and Family Archives, 1862-1992, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

³² Thalhimers honored its development as it had grown from a one room building, housing less than 10 employees, to a six floor department store that covered an entire city block with over 3,000 employees. By 1967, the store had 19 branches in Richmond, Danville, Durham, Petersburg, Greensboro, and Winston Salem. “The History and Growth of Thalhimers, 1842-1967,” box 2, folder 7, William Blum Thalhimer, Jr. Corporate and Family Archives, 1862-1992, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

coalitions throughout the Richmond community. In a distinct and important moment of time the lives of white and black women melded in similar fashion within female dress ways and social organizations that engrossed the entire downtown community, and enabled new opportunities for female consumerism, employment, networking, and ultimately further political power.

Chapter 1

Designing Dignity in the Dress ways of Downtown Richmond

A familiar rendering of downtown Richmond in the 1960s would depict a white woman, perhaps visiting from out of town, who finds herself “intimidated” and awestruck by Thalhimers’ imposing exterior, which featured fanciful “glass doors,” “colored displays,” and “animated windows” that captured the attention of “Richmond matrons in hats and gloves,” graciously moving from one store to another.³³ After shopping at Thalhimers, the visitor would head next door to Miller & Rhoads to pick up the new hat for her sister’s wedding, custom made by “the hat lady.” She is excited that she can show her friends and family an emblem of Richmond, the tag inside that reads “*Designed for You By Sara Sue.*” Years later, the woman might return to downtown Richmond with her children, so they too will come to remember fondly the wondrous shopping adventures with all the extras, including the Thalhimers’ Snow Bear, chocolate silk pie, and stories from the story book lady at Miller & Rhoads.³⁴

Richmond’s department stores were major players as they provided a feminine public that also served the state’s larger economic initiatives as Richmond stores maintained credit unions, travel bureaus and other services, and extended their influence abroad and to all levels of society. Thalhimers and Miller & Rhodes began opening stores in other Virginia cities such as Danville and Petersburg. Urban goers and city leaders often associated women with shopping, leisure, and domesticity, as can be seen through other municipal objects of the time, such as a

³³ *Downtown Richmond Memories*, prod. Paul T. Roberts, 75 min. WCVE, 2002, videocassette. Description of women shoppers in Earle Dunford and George Bryson, *Under the Clock: The Story of Miller & Rhoads* (Charleston: The History Press, 2008), 81.

³⁴ *Downtown Richmond Memories*.

“Dears Crossing” road sign, (obviously a play on words), placed between Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads department stores for women shoppers.³⁵ However, in the 1960s, during the civil rights era, both black women and white women were not merely ladies leisurely shopping as is often portrayed in historic representations of downtown Richmond. While department stores and other social institutions had been created for and utilized by white women since the mid to late-1800s, the historical agency and the evolutionary involvement of black women in such institutions over the course of the century is likewise important. As the system of racial segregation still remained formidable in churches, schools, and many political arenas, these institutions often played second fiddle to the modern, cosmopolitan language within and around downtown Richmond. By the mid-twentieth century, shopping had become a way of life in America regardless of creed, sex, or color; a social activity that further combined the personal within economic and political spheres.

Researchers of post-World War II Richmond may feel that the presence of black customers who were welcomed to shop and spend their money on a variety of services and items in Richmond stores, specifically black women, is historically or politically unimportant. However, historians often misrepresent Richmond’s downtown shopping district as a haven for white shoppers who remained socially isolated from black customers until desegregation in the 1960s. Most accounts only recognize the facts that blacks had tremendous buying power in the South as consumers, but deemed as socially inferior, blacks had to shop in the basement, as the stores maintained separate dressing rooms, rest rooms, and restaurants throughout the facilities.³⁶ By maintaining some separation of black and white customers, store owners solidified the public’s perception of segregation although many sections of these stores were integrated, or quasi-integrated. While businesses in downtown Richmond welcomed white

³⁵ *Downtown Richmond Memories*. prod. Paul T. Roberts, 75 min. WCVE, 2002, videocassette.

³⁶ Thrower, 62.

women in the workforce, black women also increasingly ventured downtown and worked and shopped at these stores.

In the early 1900s, the African American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois coined the phrase “behind the veil” to describe the psychological and physical constructs used by blacks to deal with fear and to thwart racial discrimination and violence in the segregated South. Historian Ronald Davis’s article describes this social veil and shows how blacks had to “mask their true feelings and actual personalities whenever they were in the presence of white people...this masking meant shuffling and feigning irresponsibility, and sometimes it meant turning the other cheek and walking away rather than responding to white insults” to “cope with the fact that whites refused to acknowledge the humanity of black Americans” and conformed to a “pattern of racial etiquette in day-to-day affairs.”³⁷ The racial divide in the South was characterized not only by racist violence, but often meant blacks had to veil themselves on a daily basis, whether it was making room on sidewalks or not looking directly into the eyes of whites. Du Bois’s term conveyed a socio-political consciousness, which by the mid-twentieth century, took on greater significance in regard to race and gender relations in the South. Some scholars have suggested that blacks unveiled themselves during the civil rights movement; I agree with those who argue this unveiling occurred much earlier through the actions of African American urban women, which aided in their acceptance into the broader community and within white communities.³⁸ “Unlike race, class had no uniformly observable dimension,” and part of visible style was not always defined by material wealth, but rather was characterized by dignity, refinement of character, physical appearance, and more often than not, gender.³⁹

³⁷ Ronald L. Davis, “Surviving Jim Crow: In-Depth Essay,” www.jimcrowhistory.org/history/surviving2.htm

³⁸ Ronald L. Davis, “Surviving Jim Crow: In-Depth Essay,” www.jimcrowhistory.org/history/surviving2.htm

³⁹ Megan Taylor Shockley, *“We, too, are Americans”: African American Women in Detroit and Richmond, 1940-1954* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2004), 7.

In the early to mid-1900s, southern whites had defined a racial etiquette in their relations with black citizens, as historian J. Douglas Smith highlights in his work *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia*. Smith argues that Virginia's white elites practiced a paternalistic style of managing race relations and believed that providing black men and women mediated access to education and the public sector made for a "better class" of black citizens in Virginia than the rest of the South.⁴⁰ Despite the rhetoric of paternalism, white elites during Massive Resistance amplified a political and social discourse of black inequality, inferiority, sexual deviance, and violence. By the mid-twentieth century, federal policy was backing many black organizations and citizens in their efforts to integrate the public school system and other institutions. Some southern white citizens, newspapers, and leaders spread the fear of a possible violent black uprising, while the majority described the consequences of any assertion from blacks, a perception that only strengthened during Massive Resistance. Blacks publically expressed concern over the ferocity of violence being perpetrated by racist whites whereby political obstacles were constantly put in place by white leaders.⁴¹ White and black men predominantly held the leadership positions in social and political organizations and white state leaders tried to sustain full political and social power by preventing black men from gaining further significant political influence. Despite the debate, some citizens, men and women, believed and feared that school integration would lead society on a path to "mongrelization," widespread sexual relations between whites and blacks.⁴²

Historians, on the other hand, have also noted changing social patterns and changing perceptions of some whites toward their black counterparts. Glenda Gilmore and others suggest that some whites in the South, particularly after World War II, saw racial discrimination as a

⁴⁰ J. Douglas Smith, *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 10.

⁴¹ Smith, 110.

⁴² "Virginian Answers Smear: Counter Attack," *The Virginian* May 1957, Newport News: Virginia League, p.1, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

moral, political, and social fallacy that needed to be changed. Over the century, Virginia's elite grew less afraid of racial integration while continuing segregation to maintain social order, as the behavioral aspects of the populace were framed within hierarchical constructions of both race and gender. Secondly, racial cooperation joined together with ideas about maternalism and black and white women's role as mothers. During the 1950s, the mainstream media, along with white politicians and citizens, sharpened their focus on black women. The key to maintaining the social order of the state was the creation of "stable economic climates and stable families", both white and black.⁴³ The social evolution of black women in the broader community is an important factor, which is connected to racial uplift within the black community, also witnessed and applauded by some whites. While southern department stores and many southern whites remained faithful to segregated life, the relationships and everyday experiences that connected black and white women are crucial to understanding Jim Crow, and its breakdown, in the mid-twentieth century.

The 1926 Massenburg bill, also known as the Public Assemblages Act required by law "the separation of white and colored persons at public halls, theaters, opera houses, motion picture shows, and places of public entertainment and public assemblages, had defined segregation in Virginia for four decades."⁴⁴ State leaders continually pushed for sustained segregation within the school system as they believed this type of integration would lead to the sexual interracial relationships and, thus in the minds of elite white leaders, would ultimately warrant the end of the supreme white race.⁴⁵ After World War II, soldiers returned to their families, their homes, and their segregated communities in Virginia, but they also returned to a dramatic refashioning of civic and urban life. More employment opportunities opened to blacks, and small victories had been gained through both direct action and litigation. A notable success

⁴³ Shockley, 3.

⁴⁴ Smith, 117.

⁴⁵ Smith, 10.

came in 1954, when the Supreme Court, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, struck down legal school segregation. Virginia Senator Harry Byrd, supported by the majority of southern leaders, led the South down the path of Massive Resistance. However, many leaders in Virginia, such as Governor J. Lindsay Almond and the editor of the *Richmond Times Dispatch*, Virginius Dabney, acknowledged and accepted that blacks and whites interacted on a daily basis on many levels of society, and that urban areas and institutions were to a large extent integrated, helping the state not only politically but economically.⁴⁶

While it has been argued that Broad Street “effectively segregated” whites from blacks during the first half of the twentieth century, the fact is that downtown evolved both physically and ideologically, creating a form of quasi-integration in Richmond by mid century.⁴⁷ Considering the arduous fight in Virginia’s public schools over segregated institutions during the 1950s, the image below of a black and white child next to the famous Thalhimers’ Santa Claus, taken and published by Thalhimers in 1951, should be evaluated within the urban environment from which it was taken, giving rise to alternative explorations of race and gender in Richmond’s history. If one is up on their scholarly research on Richmond in the 1950s, one would not expect the image to show a white girl alongside a black boy playfully laughing and enjoying time with Santa Claus. How could this occur just before Massive Resistance, a contentious time in Virginia’s history? What occurred in downtown Richmond to allow for the presence and participation of black women and children in some of the South’s most esteemed and famous metropolitan institutions? How did long standing beliefs integrate into the minds of up-to-date Virginians living in a conservative state and how did the social discourse of race and gender alter during the mid-twentieth century in Jim Crow Virginia?

⁴⁶ Interview with Virginius Dabney, July 31, 1975. Interview A-0311-2. Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/A-0311-2/menu.html>.

⁴⁷ Thrower, 22. Cited from Harry M. Ward, *Richmond, An Illustrated History*, (Northridge, CA, Windsor Publications, 1985), 276-277.

Figure 1: “Santa’s Wonderland”



“Santa’s Wonderland.” William B. Thalhimers Jr. Corporate & Family papers. Back page, *TBI Talks* 1951. Courtesy Virginia Historical Society.

In recent years, Jackson Ward and other sections of downtown Richmond have been regarded as historically significant and have been included in the National Register of Historic Places. This historic district was bound by Broad Street on the north, 7th Street on the east, Franklin Street on the south, and Adams Street on the west.⁴⁸ Both stores, having moved several times, finally settled on Broad and Grace, eventually taking up entire city blocks with Thalhimers situated between 6th and 7th Streets, and Miller & Rhoads located across the street

⁴⁸ United States Department of the Interior, The National Historic Register Registration Form, Jackson Ward Historic District (Additional Information), *National Park Service* (October 1990).

between 5th and 6th Streets. Their presence created the “retail and entertainment center of the region,” and gives a glimpse into the landscape of downtown Richmond in the mid to later twentieth century.⁴⁹ The south side of the street was home to the department stores, fine shops, jewelers and restaurants that drew in middle class and elite white women, who were otherwise not welcome in the hustling male world of business. The city’s largest dry goods merchants, Miller & Rhodes and Thalhimers, were evolving into elegant department stores. The north side of the street, however, was home to saloons and barbershops, which were still places patronized exclusively by men. Shops serving the African American community in Jackson Ward were also on that side. The opening on Broad Street’s north side of increasingly elaborate theaters, which sought to attract the white middle-class family, plus the traditional male amusement seekers and black families, represented a new bridge of Broad Street’s social divide. As the decade progressed, so did the further assimilation of black citizens, largely in urban areas and institutions, where many downtown stores and organizations provided a mixing ground for cosmopolitanism during the mid-twentieth century.

By this time, Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads had become synonymous with the progress of the new South and had become national symbols of capitalist success. As Virginia served locally-stationed troops and other travelers, along with its own growing population, these stores served as community hubs dedicated to the war effort, inciting citizens to bring collected scrap metal to their facilities, selling war bonds, and providing entertainment for service men in the store parking lots. These two leading retailers “dripped patriotism” as they customized events and created window displays to support the war effort, white and black soldiers, and their families.⁵⁰ While the progressive moral “bridges” of downtown Richmond were forming, merchants and city planners physically restructured the landscape in and around the city’s

⁴⁹ United States Department of the Interior, The National Historic Register Registration Form, Jackson Ward Historic District (Additional Information), *National Park Service*, (October 1990).

⁵⁰ “Chronologies,” box 2, folder 6, William Blum Thalhimer, Jr. Corporate and Family Archives, 1862-1992, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

center. During the 1950s, Miller & Rhoads and Thalhimers began regional expansion, opening stores within and outside the state. William Thalhimer Jr. served as the president of the Richmond Retail Merchants Association, and was heavily involved in other community initiatives. His brother Morton Thalhimer owned the Byrd Theatre and controlled a substantial portion of the local televised broadcasting.⁵¹ Officials from both stores relished the extension of the interstate highway system that connected Richmond with surrounding areas, which extended their influence on society and their consumer base. Upon the opening of the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike in 1958, William Thalhimer declared the new route “was the greatest single achievement in Richmond in our generation.”⁵²

While blacks made up large numbers of urban southern communities, especially large cities such as Richmond, their story remains largely “invisible,” as certain aspects of black and white relations during the pre- and post-*Brown* era also need to be uncovered.⁵³ Some of the physical spaces of segregation had changed. It was during the 1930s and 1940s that “photographers took hundreds of pictures of the shopping districts of small towns and small cities across the region” of places like Richmond as images of downtown grocery stores and department stores “depict integrated crowds.”⁵⁴ Despite continuous discriminatory acts against African Americans before the 1950s and beyond, southern whites not only advanced the education of blacks, but moved towards better treatment of African Americans when compared to the early part of the century. Historian Kevin Gaines has observed that by the turn of the twentieth century and through the 1950s black elites spread an “uplift ideology” within the black community, similar to the rhetoric provided by the white elite, which held that blacks could

⁵¹ “Interview with Dr. Laverne Byrd Smith,” Voices of Freedom: the Virginia Civil Rights Movement, VCU Libraries Digital Collections, < <http://dig.library.vcu.edu/u/?/voices,9>>, April 2009.

⁵² “Achievement,” Richmond Times Dispatch July 1 1958, box 6, folder 9, William Blum Thalhimer Jr. Corporate and Family Archives, 1862-1992, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

⁵³ Ronald L. Davis, “Surviving Jim Crow: In-Depth Essay,” www.jimcrowhistory.org/history/surviving2.htm

⁵⁴ Elizabeth Grace Hale, “‘For Colored’ and ‘For White’: Segregating Consumption in the South”, In: *Jumpin’ Jim Crow*, eds. Jane Dailey, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, & Bryant Simon (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 173.

replace “the notion of fixed biological racial differences with an evolutionary view of cultural assimilation, measured primarily by the status of the family and civilization.”⁵⁵

The idea of “racial uplift” within the black communities and the focus on Negro heritage strengthened over the century and flourished after World War II largely due to the actions of black women. Blacks in urban areas benefited from increasing educational and career-based opportunities, and they also increased their presence and participation in social affairs within their own communities in and around neighboring urban centers. The white and black masculine political struggle often takes precedence over the less subtle actions made by white political and business leaders in Virginia as they increasingly included black women in social, economical, and political affairs. Black women in Virginia had also come to embrace the mainstream middle class concept of “true womanhood” as part and parcel of racial “uplift” as it “pertained to matters of gender roles, family responsibility, child rearing, sexuality, employment, frugality, and education.”⁵⁶ By the 1920s, “racial pride often took the guise of a beautiful woman on display.”⁵⁷ Black women, teachers, and social educators in Richmond and surrounding counties often pooled resources to provide decent clothing and social education for youth. Local P.T.A.’s held sessions in training schools and often worked with black universities such as Virginia Union University and Virginia State University to ensure collective commitment from all teachers and parents to “assist in establishing ethical values, attain maximum educational development, development for competence for and accept respect for citizenship and maintain wholesome personal and group adjustment.”⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 5.

⁵⁶ Marisa Chappel, Jenny Hutchinson, and Brian Ward “Dress Modestly, Neatly...As if You Were Going to Church”: Respectability, Class and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement”, In: *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement*, Peter Ling and Sharon Monteith, eds. New York: Garland Pub., 1999, 73.

⁵⁷ Kathy Peiss, 213.

⁵⁸ “6th District P.T.A.”, *Richmond News Leader* December 1951, Congress of Colored Parents and Teachers Scrapbook, 1927-1965, 35, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

Black women played a major role in the social and political advancements of black citizens in the early 1900s through their participation in black homes and churches. It is through the complex entanglement of masculine racial politics and the role of black women in grassroots mobilization in the late nineteenth century that historian Elsa Barkley Brown depicts the emergence of the “endangered black woman.”⁵⁹ In the late 1800s and early 1900s, black women had been vital elements in grassroots movements, organizing voting registration drives for the advancement of blacks in politics, and similarly took part in the larger social welfare reform movement that is typically associated with white women.⁶⁰ While white leaders controlled the social discourse surrounding the violent black rapist, black men felt politically and socially inept to protect their women and daughters from sexual assaults by white males, which regardless of local reports, happened more frequently than the rape of white women by black men. This justified the inclusion of black men into the political realm, as they asserted the right to secure the protection of their homes and families. Black men, in turn, underwent a process of “unmanning white males” as they expressed concern over sexually “deceitful and barbarous” white men preying on black women.⁶¹ Black women had become socially advantageous to a male political discourse of violence and sexual immorality while gaining chivalrous social protections not always guaranteed but certainly more warranted than in previous decades. While much of the literature on the nineteenth century “constructs a masculine liberal bourgeois public with a female counterpublic,” Brown highlights aspects of black feminism and the

⁵⁹ Elsa Barkley Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom,” in *Major Problems in African-American History: Volume II: From Freedom to ‘Freedom Now,’ 1865-1990s*, Thomas Holt and Elsa Barkley Brown eds. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 113.

⁶⁰ Karen Ann Johnson, *Uplifting the Women and the Race: The Educational Philosophies and Social Activism of Anna Julia Cooper and Nannie Helen Burroughs*, (Routledge: Taylor & Francis, 2000), 135.

⁶¹ Brown, 113.

association of black matriarchy with the home and with church that allowed for the advancement of black women into the public sphere by way of church participation and civic work.⁶²

Throughout the century, African American women teachers, mothers, wives, salon and retail workers, church and organization members, continued to work extensively together in Richmond and surrounding counties to seek a better future for themselves and for their families. Historian Glenda Gilmore extends the idea of black female dignity and the influence of black women due to their participation in the broader community by way of benevolent societies, “social service and civic structures that wrested some recognition and meager services from the expanding welfare state.”⁶³ During the early to mid-1900s, black women primarily earned their living as domestic workers, usually inside the homes of white citizens. As the authority and social influence of churches dwindled in the nineteenth century, the “development of social institutions and structures take over, compete for, or share functions traditionally connected to the church as institution and structure.”⁶⁴ By the mid-twentieth century, black men and women in Virginia had come to realize that “proper” behavior and dress could blur not only class distinctions, but racial ones as well, and formed a mutual understanding of style and character that did not always depend on “economic viability.”⁶⁵

In reality, many of the organizations created by black and white women were dedicated to fight poverty and class discrimination. Within organizations such as the Commission on Interracial Cooperation and the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), women “created semi-autonomous arenas in which to learn organization skills, gain in self-confidence,

⁶² Brown, 103.

⁶³ Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, xxi.

⁶⁴ Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2008), 383.

⁶⁵ Randolph and Tate, 201.

and experiment with new patterns of behavior.”⁶⁶ The department stores on Broad Street were situated between important political and business centers of the city. One institution close in proximity to these retailers created by and for the needs of women was the YWCA, first founded in 1887. As Virginia’s economy was switching from primarily agricultural-based to industrial-based, the concept of the YWCA originated in the home of Emily Fairfax Whittle. Whittle, along with eight other white women, was concerned for the more than 700 white women working in factories within the city limits. Richmond’s organization became a chapter of the national YWCA in 1906, and in 1914, YWCA President Katherine Hawes stated that the organization was to “engage in a new era of expansion and program building for women in the community.”⁶⁷ The organization extended its services to black and white women, particularly those from rural areas moving into urban districts, and helped to feed them and educate them on issues of women’s suffrage, school programs, and vocational programs. Together with the Virginia Bureau of Vocations for Women, the YWCA was one of the earliest advocacy agencies in the South for working women.

The Richmond YWCA boasted a commitment to female creativity and participation in the community and in the home. A central building for the organization was erected in 1914 on North 5th Street, which was cited at the time as being a “pivotal center in the life of the community,” located mere blocks from Miller & Rhoads and Thalhimers. Part of the moral ethos held by the members of the YWCA as well as other women’s organizations was the ability to recognize and in many ways refrain from racial constructions. In 1912, the organization established a center for black women, the Phyllis Wheatley Branch of the Richmond YWCA, which was erected on East Leigh Street, and later moved to North 7th Street. The YWCA played a key role in a 1929 study that researched the economic and social needs of the black

⁶⁶ “History, Beginning of YWCA Greater Richmond,” Box 13, Constitution, History, Documents folder, Richmond YWCA Archives, M177, Special Collections and Archives, James Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

⁶⁷ “History, Beginning of YWCA Greater Richmond,” Box 13, Constitution, History, Documents folder, Richmond YWCA Archives, M177, Special Collections and Archives, James Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University

community, from which came the formation of the Richmond Urban League, as both organizations became instrumental in the 1930s. Despite the separate facilities, efforts to promote interracial cooperation began in 1925 when a member of the Wheatley branch was invited to sit on the Central board of directors. In the following decades, black, white, and minority women often interacted on service projects, in meetings, and in their day-to-day lives.

Through their increasing participation in social institutions, as caregivers, workers, and community organizers, black women ultimately secured the race more respect and a higher degree of social standing. Newspapers, books, and other outlets highlighted the cultured and refined appearance and behavior of African Americans within and outside of their home communities. Some white citizens perceived that the black race was advancing culturally, especially in regards to their “dress and home life” as American cities such as Philadelphia, Atlanta, and Richmond “witnessed a display of refinement, beauty, and culture among Negroes such as to evoke extended newspaper coverage.”⁶⁸ One Richmond publication from the 1940s described a meeting of “50,000 delegates of Negroes whose general appearance and conduct,” separating them from the white delegates only to mention that it was the “largest host of visitors assembled in that city for any purpose, and the most orderly.”⁶⁹

Dignity was measured not only by hard work but through the formation and maintenance of a socially visible nuclear family and the well-being of the home largely organized, led and provided by black women. Gilmore has observed that the rising population of working, financially secure black citizens did not use the same language as other women to express their economic situations but rather considered themselves of a “better” class as they adopted Victorian values and “practiced middle class habits- temperance, frugality, and hard work- as

⁶⁸ Robert Russa Moton, *What the Negro Thinks* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Doran & Co., 1941), 35.

⁶⁹ Moton, 36.

useful tools for living.”⁷⁰ Black women and men dressed appropriately to thwart any threat of violence from racist whites, but black women and young girls were taught to use their respectable education and manners in an outward style to protect their own bodies and reputations as sexual beings, and thereby keeping the race respectable. African Americans also believed that the replication of Victorian white womanhood, encompassing unsurpassed moral behavior, often symbolized by beauty and station in life, would ultimately “ensure the survival of the black community as well as gain acceptance in the white community.”⁷¹

While many social institutions were racially segregated before the civil rights movement, black and white women intermingled on a regular basis and gained new perspectives on social problems concerning education, poverty, racial and gender discrimination.⁷² Black women utilized these values in their outward and visible participation in democratic practices, within their churches, at voter registration drives, and in social welfare organizations in an attempt to change the political status-quo of blacks in the South. One such African American woman, Maggie Lena Walker, the first woman in America to become a president of a bank, was born in Richmond, Virginia on July 15, 1867, to former slaves Elizabeth Draper Mitchell and William Mitchell. After living at the mansion of Elizabeth Van Lew, an abolitionist, her father got a job as the head waiter at the Saint Charles Hotel and the family moved to a small house in town where Walker later attended school. After graduation in 1883, she taught at the Lancaster School until her marriage to Armstead Walker, Jr., in 1886. At the age of fourteen, Walker became a member of the Grand United Order of St. Luke, an African-American fraternal and cooperative insurance society founded in Baltimore in 1867 which was later established in Richmond in 1889. The purpose of the order was to assure proper health care and burial arrangements of its members and encouraged self-help and racial solidarity. In 1903, she founded the St. Luke

⁷⁰ Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*, xix.

⁷¹ Johnson, 161.

⁷² Evans, 27.

Penny Savings Bank to facilitate loans to the community and became its president. In 1912, she helped found the Richmond Council of Colored Women and served as its president. Maggie Walker was also a member of the National Urban League and the Virginia Interracial Committee. She also served as vice-president of the Richmond branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and was a member of the national NAACP board. These organizations contained many black female activists such as Walker who throughout the twentieth century worked to better the economic, social, and political growth of African Americans. The Penny Savings Bank became very successful in this mission as it absorbed all black-owned banks in Richmond. In 1929, The Penny Savings Bank became the Consolidated Bank and Trust Company with Walker as the chairwoman.⁷³

Historian Megan Taylor Shockley's work on African American women in Detroit and Richmond highlights that in the 1930s, black middle class women focused on the "politics of respectability" and relied on their social status to participate in "voter registration campaigns and called upon the Federal government to alleviate the plight of African Americans."⁷⁴ Social and political participation on the part of black women were applauded by black men, such that in the early 1900s Du Bois remarked, "even southern gentlemen as used as they are to the mistreatment of colored women, cannot in the blaze of present public opinion physically beat them away from the polls."⁷⁵ The politics of dignity and respectability enveloped all African American women during the 20th century, not only those who came from or rose to a higher economic class, but was also formed by the actions of middle and working class black women.

As black female dignity had contributed significantly to racial uplift during the 1950s, the Massive Resistance campaign fueled racial tensions, creating a complicated cultural dynamic in

⁷³ Distinguished women of past and present- Maggie L Walker (1867-1934), <http://www.distinguishedwomen.com/biographies/walker-ml.html>.

⁷⁴ Shockley, 7.

⁷⁵ Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, 211.

Richmond, Virginia. The overall inclusion and participation of black women within the growing black movement, along with their increasing social and political presence in the urban community, proved influential as white and black leaders led a political discourse which was not only racialized but gendered-specific and lends to how “prescribed gender roles shaped the future of activism” in the growing Commonwealth.⁷⁶ White leaders ramped up the political and social “unmanning” of black men. Newspapers, radio broadcasts, government and public hearings, continued to support conservative values and perpetuated concerns of violence, immorality, and miscegenation as powerful and practical consequences of racial integration. State leaders responded to the federal government’s ruling in *Brown v. the Board of Education* by pointing to long held traditions that upheld socially and politically, concluding that the right and “power to maintain racially separate public schools” had been “exercised daily for more than 80 years” and that “she” the state of Virginia, had “never surrendered such power.”⁷⁷ While Virginia’s leading statesmen used less vulgar rhetoric than the more overtly racist publications, such as *The Virginian*, they also believed that the integration of blacks and whites in public education would “subvert their social mores and increase the likelihood of interracial unions.”⁷⁸

Black male leaders in Virginia reciprocated this gender-centered rhetoric as a means to undermine the racially driven policies of state leaders. In 1958 Roy Wilkins, a civil rights activist and prominent member of the N.A.A.C.P., addressed a black audience in Richmond to discuss Massive Resistance as a source of “humiliation” for the white citizens in Virginia. He described the state’s leaders as having “descended to hysteria” in their attempts to save white schools and

⁷⁶ Johnson, 161.

⁷⁷ William Old, *The Segregation Issue as it Appears Now*, Chesterfield: [s.n.], 1959, p. 77, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

⁷⁸ Mary C. Doyle, “From Desegregation to Resegregation: Public Schools in Norfolk, Virginia 1954-2002,” *Journal of African American History*, 90 (2005):66.

cities from sexual and violent black boys and men.⁷⁹ Wilkins claimed that white leaders controlled the “economic power- finance, business, agriculture, industry” as they resort to “tricks and the meanest of tactics” to keep down the black race.⁸⁰ According to Wilkins, and understood by black men, the unequal treatment of cherished white women by white southern gentlemen was a major weakness that could be used as political leverage. Wilkins chided white elites for their lack of chivalry and civility toward women and questioned the role of white leaders and positioned them as “gentlemen (?)” who had forgotten the tradition of “chivalry toward womanhood which even obtains in the land of the Yankees...gentle and cultured white women who dare to speak their conscience have been reviled.”⁸¹ As whites had long spread the fear of black men preying upon white women, some whites began to vocalize the fact that black women were also “exposed to unwelcome and uninvited attentions from a certain type of white men without any sort of redress or protection in the law.”⁸²

As black and white males continued to unman one another, white and black females had designed an independent discourse of dignity, cooperation, and non-violence within urban centers. Retailers could not ignore the rapid advancement of women in the workforce, as Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads began opening many clubs and programs to support working women in the community. These events extended elite standards of feminine beauty to local schools and businesses to include a larger female network as a means for young white women to attain self-respect, style, class, and dignity throughout the Commonwealth. Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads proudly printed many articles displaying pictures of young white girls in area

⁷⁹ Roy Wilkins, “Speech, 1958 February 27, Richmond, Va., Delivered at a Meeting of the Richmond Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,” Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

⁸⁰ Roy Wilkins, “Speech, 1958 February 27, Richmond, Va., Delivered at a Meeting of the Richmond Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,” Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

⁸¹ Roy Wilkins, “Speech, 1958 February 27, Richmond, Va., Delivered at a Meeting of the Richmond Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,” Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

⁸² Moton, 35.

high schools, whose scholarly activities and plans for college were supported through scholarships from these retail establishments. As women continued to advance in the public sphere, Richmond department stores offered new opportunities in terms of consumption, employment, and civic work, than had previously been experienced. Urban institutions, such as Miller & Rhoads and Thalhimers, participated and supported many of the advances made by their sales women and staff, as they also started to hold major events, such as the Garden Club, the Woman's Club, and other civic organizations for accomplished women in the community.⁸³ Fashion shows were dedicated to career women and school scholarships were awarded to overachievers. White middle-class and working class women enjoyed more political and social presence, and could enjoy showing off their style as fashion became more accessible to a growing number of powerful female consumers. White women were on a path of success and achievement found in everyday expression in social and personal fashion, acceptable grounds for female accomplishment.

Throughout the century working class black and white women, who were often excluded from the realm of male politics, were breaking ground in the male dominated system of politics and business. Black women in Virginia constructed different ways to protect themselves and to ensure better lives for themselves and their families. They often focused on obtaining "equal opportunity to employment, control over their own labor, access to state's entitlements like welfare benefits, and better working conditions."⁸⁴ As consumerism and a distinct beauty culture took hold of white women, black women in Virginia found new opportunities "away from field, factory, and kitchen service" as they entered and excelled in boutiques, beauty salons, schools, and in a variety of trades traditionally held by white women.⁸⁵

⁸³ Thrower, 99.

⁸⁴ Shockley, 7.

⁸⁵ Julia Kirk Blackwelder, *Styling Jim Crow: African American Beauty Training During Segregation* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 145.

Working class black men and women also sought relief from work and found leisure in and around urban centers. Department stores and theater houses throughout the South worked to maintain the color line, by offering segregated facilities, but also defied it as they endorsed Victorian ideals and sought to provide settings where whites and blacks could enjoy “wholesome entertainment in a safe setting.”⁸⁶ Department stores and other boutiques within and around urban areas in places such as Atlanta and Richmond “presented more opportunities for black women as consumers, small entrepreneurs, and entertainers.”⁸⁷ The expansion of federal and state governance saw the extension of government run programs while changes in “polity and ideology” enabled black women to “claim civil rights based on a new definition of citizenship that enabled negotiation with the state.”⁸⁸ Black women were raised and aware that their every day actions, appearance and experiences were part of a larger political schema, thus negotiating with the state as mothers, wives, workers, and powerful consumers, often within the “pink collar” industries deemed acceptable for women like urban department stores.⁸⁹

Richmond’s downtown department stores were among a handful of institutions who hired and maintained a large number of African American employees. In the 1950s, black women still worked as domestics within white households, but many had left these positions and sought out work in the community, particularly within the growing service industry.⁹⁰ This movement out of white homes and into white communities was accepted by urban institutions as a means to not only control segregation, but to increase profit margins as well. Blacks also worked in lower-status, lower paying jobs, such as waitresses, cooks, maids, truck drivers, and elevator

⁸⁶ Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 159.

⁸⁷ Hunter, 154.

⁸⁸ Shockley, 9.

⁸⁹ Shockley, 26.

⁹⁰ Hunter, 145.

operators.⁹¹ By the mid-twentieth century, Richmond department stores had started to hire blacks in the stores and black women were the first to receive jobs where their behavior, style, and dress were displayed, recognized, and often rewarded. Black working women were expected to “be dressed,” usually in hat, gloves, and appropriate footwear as saleswomen within the service industry.⁹² Black women often found more enjoyment working outside in the broader community as it gave them more freedom and personal time to do for their own families. Black women were often more likely to work at this time than white women, many often holding two jobs to maintain their livelihoods.⁹³

Historians researching what life was truly like in the segregated South often point to more obvious social indicators of racial division and inequality within public institutions, such as the discrepancies in the treatment of black and white employees. Historian Elizabeth Jacoway’s description of southern businessmen as “reluctant advocates” of segregation may or may not fully describe these progressive leaders, as many business and political leaders in the South still maintained that their patriarchal style of segregation was a progressive measure that should be adhered to in social and legal customs.⁹⁴ While modern industry and an expanding population nourished a growing economy, Virginia held tightly to political and social conservative values, those which included the reverence of Confederate heritage and white supremacy. Blacks continued to be excluded from good paying, high status jobs in the “public and private sectors.”⁹⁵ As leaders sought to put blacks “in their place” during the 1930s, blacks in the 1940s and 1950s were discriminated against, but often experienced the changing

⁹¹ Hunter, 144-145, Atlanta published newspaper articles trying to dissuade African Americans from leaving the South due to economic toll.

⁹² Ora Lomax, interview by author, 7 February 2009, tape recording, VCU Oral History Archive, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

⁹³ Randolph and Tate, 183.

⁹⁴ Gavin Wright, “Persisting Dixie: The South as an Economic Region,” in *The American South in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Craig S. Pascoe. Atlanta: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), 83.

⁹⁵ Wright, 83.

physical and mental spectrum of segregation differently from previous decades.⁹⁶ The management of Miller & Rhoads and Thalhimers were proud of the supposed progress in handling race relations, as they hired black workers before and during World War II. Blacks were hired on in low paying jobs, often working as delivery drivers, elevator operators, janitors, launderers, waitresses and waiters. In a 1945 issue of Thalhimers' *T.B.I. Talks*, one article refers to blacks working in stock rooms as "store keepers."⁹⁷ In another issue of *T.B.I Talks*, the all-black female elevator crew are praised for their great "loyalty and faithfulness" to their employer.⁹⁸ Miller & Rhoads records reveal a similar management style, particularly in terms of its patriarchal attitude toward black employees as store records reveal that after-hour parties and events were organized and held according to race. One party flier from Miller & Rhoads announced a "dinner and dance for colored employee...Yes Suh! You may bring one guest free of charge", which highlights the continuation of a social vocabulary that associated blacks with servitude and inferior human value based on the color of a person's skin.⁹⁹ Many social functions for blacks had similar party themes and titles, as the separation of whites and blacks came to represent the white and black "families" of these retailers.¹⁰⁰

While these policies and the idea of store families reflect the teachings of the Old South as blacks continued to serve under or apart from whites during Jim Crow, the every day events also reflect the state's evolving legal and social custom of separate but equal. These two department stores, which reflect the state's more progressive management of race relations, did separate but did not exclude blacks entirely and offered similar incentives to black workers as

⁹⁶ Dana F. White, "Cities in Full: The Urban South during the Final Century of the Past Millenium," in *The American South in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Craig S. Pascoe, (Atlanta: The University of Georgia Press, 2005), 134.

⁹⁷ "Recognition Deserved," *T.B.I. Talks* November 1945, box 6, folder 45, William Blum Thalhimer, Jr. Corporate and Family papers, 1862-1992,, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

⁹⁸ "On the Wings of Spring Training," *T.B.I. Talks*, November 1952, box 6, folder 45, William Blum Thalhimer Jr. Corporate and Family papers, 1862-1992, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia

⁹⁹ "Come One, Come All- Dance For Colored Employees," *The Mirror*, April 1952, section 5, folder 13, Miller & Rhoads Papers, 1899-1985 , Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

¹⁰⁰ Elizabeth Thalhimer Smartt, "Thalhimers Department Store: Story, History, Theory," (M.A. thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2005), 72-73.

were given to whites, including but not limited to parties and vacations for employees and their family members and health insurance. Black employees gained a sense of independence and confidence, not only meeting expectations, but often exceeding them in what store managers and shoppers deemed responsible and important duties which contribute positively to the stores and to the community as a whole. In 1945, Thalhimers rewarded the excellence of its all black female elevator crew, claiming they deserved recognition in “their responsibility of transporting many hundreds of customers and co-workers up and down every day to the selling floors, in addition to which they are called upon to give directions and information.”¹⁰¹

The inner-workings of department stores offered safe female space for women but also provided continuing mental and physical constructions of racial hierarchies perpetuated by long-standing customs and perceptions of black women as cradles of the South. While black women were allowed in Richmond stores, they were allotted to certain sections and had separate restroom and eating facilities. In the mid-twentieth century, the exclusion of black women within these facilities vanquished while certain physical stereotypes still persisted and were attributed to blacks inside and outside of these institutions. Black women still experienced a variety of stereotypes, many of which included aspects of their beauty, be it their dark or fair skin or supposed greasy hair, which often limited their physical access while inside of department stores. Black women “could not try on hats,” as black hair was believed to be oily and, thus, in the minds of whites, was inferior to white hair.¹⁰²

It is equally important to examine how concepts surrounding gender and class, not always expressed or immediately apparent, worked in mid-twentieth century Richmond. These two southern department stores displayed, sold and perpetuated the color line by educating and extending societal ideals of womanhood to both black and white women. While black women

¹⁰¹ *T.B.I. Talks*, November 1945.

¹⁰² Ora Lomax, interview by author, 7 February 2009, tape recording, VCU Oral History Archive, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

could not work as sales women in these stores before the civil rights movement, they often found freedom and release from traditional burdens as waitresses, hostesses, maids, and elevator operators. In the 1950s, a loyal white female shopper boasted about a black waitress stating, "When Bea serves me, I always shop liberally at Thalhimers."¹⁰³ Bea is noted for her loyal twenty-three years of service at the lunch counter in Thalhimers, as she was "always pleasant, serves you deftly, remembers faces, and brings you your check promptly."¹⁰⁴ Black women such as Bea were often seen by white citizens and white department store owners as people who "make a difference and that makes friends for an institution or business."¹⁰⁵ African American workers in these stores were openly given the opportunity and important responsibility of serving not only whites, but a vast clientele, while improving their own family's circumstances. In the Jim Crow South, as urban centers upheld racial distinctions they also often defied the color line as "consumers, performers, and small entrepreneurs were multiracial, and engaged in interracial social, cultural, and material transactions."¹⁰⁶

As white elites sought to polish any political and social blemish on the state's record, particularly during Massive Resistance, gender roles tightened in public life and were replicated through mass media, business advertisements and educational campaigns that surrounded the lives and the achievements of educated, beautiful, and well-mannered women and girls. The image below comparing the fashion of four white women photographed together in 1926 (top) came together and were again photographed in front of Thalhimers in 1958 (bottom). With the intent to compare fashion trends over time, the image also displays black women walking by in similar dress just outside the department stores.

¹⁰³ "Colored News," *T.B.I. Talks* November 1952, box 6, folder 45, William Blum Thalhimers Jr. Corporate and Family Archives, 1862-1992, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

¹⁰⁴ "Colored News," *T.B.I. Talks* November 1952, box 6, folder 45, William Blum Thalhimers Jr. Corporate and Family Archives, 1862-1992, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

¹⁰⁵ "Colored News," *T.B.I. Talks* November 1952, box 6, folder 45, William Blum Thalhimers Jr. Corporate and Family Archives, 1862-1992, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

¹⁰⁶ Hunter, 166-167.

Figure 2: “Remember When?”

REMEMBER WHEN?

Four young girls were working for Thalhimers in 1926 when this picture was taken outside the store. Today, they are still valuable coworkers! Wearing fashions in the Twenties are Elizabeth Johnstone, Better Coats and Suits; Frances Zachary Jones, Budget Hats; Gladys George, Third Floor Supervisor; and Shep Ashworth, French Room.



Today's fashions are strikingly reminiscent of the Flapper Era. Recreating the above photograph in 1958 are Evelyn Willis, Advertising; Sue Smith, Major Appliances; Johnnie Coleman, Flying Squad; and Lee Harbutz, Photo Reflex.



William B. Thalhimer Jr. Corporate & Family papers, *TBI Talks* 1958. Courtesy Virginia Historical Society.

Southern urban department stores became “landmarks of power,” racial and gender-associated “democratic space between civil society and the state” that which black women had become essential to the livelihood of the South.¹⁰⁷ Many black women advanced in the local community via their respected and important skills often in the field of domestics and transferred them into the growing service economy. Through their early volunteer efforts, voter registration drives, and in their jobs, many black women either worked inside white homes or outside in the

¹⁰⁷ Sharon Zukin, *Point of Purchase: How Shopping Changed American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 32.

community. As black communities started to look inward toward black women as proponents of progress for African Americans, some urban white communities in the South began to follow suit. While store management continued to uphold and maintain racial propaganda and political pandering aiding to benefit the political and social supremacy of white citizens, they inconsistently upheld and approved the presence and participation of black urban women in institutional activities and ceremonies, jobs, and leisurely public events.

In mid-twentieth century Virginia, social acceptance stemmed largely from white women and white male merchants who encouraged and often helped black women, such as Bea, achieve a positive, self-sustaining social reputation in the eyes of the community. Ora Lomax was born in Wade County, North Carolina, and moved to Richmond before turning twenty years of age. Encouraged by her father to change the tides of racial discrimination, she moved to Richmond only to observe and experience Jim Crow on the city's public transportation, the GRTC, as blacks "had to sit at the back of the bus...but sometimes there were no seats" even though "there were seats in the front."¹⁰⁸ In 1955, Ora Lomax married William Lomax and began working at a black-owned boutique located on 6th street called Jamie's. Jamie's was owned by a black woman from Connecticut who sold "very nice merchandise" and was the place where Ora Lomax "got the feel of clothing" and gained valuable experience in retail.¹⁰⁹ Her experiences in retail meshed with the intensifying racial crisis and increasing activism from civil rights supporters, both black and white. It was during this time that Lomax "wanted to see more African Americans in the stores working" as blacks were usually not allowed to work as salespeople or hold other socially or economically prestigious positions within department stores and white-owned

¹⁰⁸ Ora Lomax interview by author, 7 February 2009, tape recording, VCU Oral History Archive, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹⁰⁹ Ora Lomax interview by author, 7 February 2009, tape recording, VCU Oral History Archive, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

boutiques in Richmond.¹¹⁰ Eventually, as will be detailed in a later chapter, Lomax, with support from the Richmond Urban League, became the first African American woman in Richmond to work in sales in many of the city's white-owned department stores.

From the perspective of black women, frequenting these stores in work and leisure became a personal expression of political equality as they took their rightful place alongside white women within these public institutions. Shopping conveyed personal and racial pride while conforming to conventional standards of gender roles and like grooming, shopping was “socially encouraged for all women during the 1950s and 1960s.”¹¹¹ These standards were also applied within black homes, as black families encouraged their children to behave and to always “be dressed.”¹¹² Racial and gendered constructions of the civil rights movement are also due to our own present-day cultural and historical misconceptions, as black women were able and did utilize their matriarchal roles as family and social caregivers to lead local resistance efforts. As Maxine Leeds Craig highlights in her work *“Ain’t I A Beauty Queen?”: Black Women, Beauty, and The Politics of Race*, the generation of black women before the start of the civil rights movement “did what they could to obtain respect...many laboring at hard and socially undervalued work, presented themselves where they could, with as much propriety as they could afford: Donning fabulous hats on Sunday at church; wearing clean, pretty dresses; and having their hair straightened and styled to motionless perfection were ways of displaying dignity.”¹¹³ Thus, department stores along with the broader community played a crucial role in the daily lives of black women and the maintenance of their families and communities.

With a blossoming population of middle and upper class blacks, the physical proximity

¹¹⁰ Ora Lomax interview by author, 7 February 2009, tape recording, VCU Oral History Archive, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹¹¹ Maxine Leeds Craig, *“Ain’t I A Beauty Queen?”: Black Women, Beauty, and The Politics of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 12.

¹¹² Ora Lomax interview by author, 7 February 2009, tape recording, VCU Oral History Archive, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹¹³ Craig, 34.

and the lure of downtown offered black women the opportunity to venture into Thalhimers, Miller & Rhoads, and other department stores, where they were welcome to purchase most items in the stores. The physical location of segregated neighborhoods such as Jackson Ward located on 2nd Street, a mere four blocks West of Richmond's department stores, as well as the expanding highway system, made shopping convenient for whites and blacks. Black women often took advantage of convenient services such as credit cards and layaway in Richmond stores such as Woolworth's, Lerner's, May Company, along with Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads.¹¹⁴ Middle class and working class black women in Virginia had the financial means to buy nicer merchandise, and often sought out "quality goods in the better class of stores."¹¹⁵ While Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads boasted their progressive treatment of women, white women were pampered on every selling floor while black customers had separate restrooms, dressing rooms and eating facilities for employees and for customers. Blacks could, however, shop fairly comfortably in the basements within Miller & Rhoads and Thalhimers. Sometimes black women could shop on other selling floors, but they were usually not permitted in certain departments such as "the better dresses."¹¹⁶ Most often they were expected to "buy blind," meaning they could often not try on clothes, nor could they exchange or return items to the store.¹¹⁷ As the Richmond community continued to expand, businesses and department stores began to realize the economic benefit in securing a more diverse clientele. Businesses accepted and utilized the private lives of black women who, like white women, served as the lead purchaser for family households. While many southern retailers did not cater to black women or go above and beyond to include them when compared to the amenities available for

¹¹⁴ Ora Lomax, interview by author, 7 February 2009, tape recording, VCU Oral History Archive, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹¹⁵ Sharon Zukin, 161.

¹¹⁶ Ora Lomax, interview by author, 7 February 2009, tape recording, VCU Oral History Archive, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹¹⁷ Raymond Pierre Hylton, "Intersection of Change: Virginia Union University Students Sat Where They Weren't Supposed to Sit, and Helped Spark A Civil Rights Revolution," In *Style Weekly*, Richmond, VA. vol.26, no.45 (Nov. 5, 2008), p. 14, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

white women, Miller & Rhoads and Thalhimers did recognize and accept a sizeable black female clientele within their walls. Ora Lomax solidified that while African Americans were “not welcome” in some departments such as “the better dresses” blacks shopped without little problem in the basement and on the 3rd floor of Thalhimers.¹¹⁸ These stores also began providing services to consumers which made accessibility and purchase of items easier, such as the implementing layaway, promoting sales, and extending credit cards to shoppers.¹¹⁹

Starting in the 1950s, and about a decade before most mainstream department stores marketed to black consumers, these stores implemented promotional campaigns to advertise products and services to include participation and consumption from all women and their children. In the 1950s, Miller & Rhoads began advertising bleaching agents to offer black women some of the latest beauty products. Miller & Rhoads established segregated reading sessions that included groups of black children with the famous story book lady.¹²⁰ Of even greater significance, these stores also began to promote and secure the progress of respectable black women. Thalhimers began providing annual scholarships on a rotating basis to dutiful black girls in Maggie Walker High School and Armstrong High in the mid 1950s. In 1957, Joan Yvonne Scott was selected to receive financial support for her entrance into Virginia Union University because of her “scholastic ability, financial needs, leadership qualities, character and ambition”.¹²¹ Black females had largely been accepted by the urban community, in their roles as dutiful wives, mothers, as well as students and potential employees. The article continues by suggesting that Joan was selected for the award, “as are all winners, on the basis of scholastic

¹¹⁸ Ora Lomax interview by author, 7 February 2009, tape recording, VCU Oral History Archive, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹¹⁹ Ora Lomax, interview by author, 7 February 2009, tape recording, VCU Oral History Archive, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹²⁰ *The Mirror*, December 1950, p. 2, Miller & Rhoads Papers, 1899-1985, section 3, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

¹²¹ “Thalhimer Foundation Awards Scholarships,” *T.B.I. Talks* Fall 1956, William Blum Thalhimer, Jr. Corporate and Family Papers, 1862-1992, box 2, folder 45, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

ability, financial needs, leadership qualities, character and ambition.”¹²²

Black women claimed major victories in Richmond during the 1950s for their attainment of socially prescribed elite standards of feminine behavior, appearance, and livelihood. In 1953, newspapers publicized Mrs. Richard Darden, wife of the prominent Virginian, presenting the for the first time in the state’s history the “Mother of the Year Award” to an African American woman, Mrs. Leah Sykes Young, at a formal ceremony attended by other black women and prominent white women from the community.¹²³ The image was publicized in a local newspaper and showed Mrs. Young as the official award winner sitting beside Mrs. A. O. Calcott and Mrs. Richard L. Darden, both white elite women with ties to local government. White women were physically unable to govern over the actions of black males, so black women then became a viable source in which white women could personally engage and manage the race problem. Southern urban institutions introduced the public to their “formal” education of segregation, that which outright supported the social, mental, and physical advancement of black girls and women, as fear of inter-marriages between whites and blacks undermined the stability of the region in the minds of white citizens.

Black women became an intricate part of a sustainable, unmovable southern culture during the 1950s as they became prominent players in society and friends of white citizens within their role as the moral and biological providers of a pure black race. Both Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads were driven physically and ideologically by the habituation of white feminine standards of beauty and domesticated life, which also assisted in a growing leniency for black

¹²² “Thalhimer Foundation Award Scholarships: Award Program Announced This Year to Include Ten Local High Schools,” *T.B.I. Talks*, Fall 1956, William Blum Thalhimer, Jr. Corporate and Family Papers, 1862-1992, box 2, folder 45, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

¹²³ “1953 Mother Awarded,” April 1953, Colored Congress of Parents and Teachers scrapbook, p. 94, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

women to patronize downtown retailers. Webster Rhoads, Sr. was once characterized as man who “had a master plan for his life, for his philanthropies and for his business and he rarely had trouble in determining promptly how or whether a new detail fitted into the broad plan. His management was discerning and discriminating, but it was progressive.¹²⁴ The growing social sponsorship was carried out by Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads, along with other urban institutions, and was first carried out in employee relations as the stores began to foster and promote black employees. The stores increased the space allotted for “colored news”, articles that primarily covered the marriages and births of black couples.¹²⁵ While businesses in downtown Richmond welcomed the new consumer base of working white women during the 1940s, black women also increasingly ventured downtown and shopped at these stores during the 1950s and beyond. Store managers were not shy to share their respect and hospitality toward the “store families” as can be witnessed through the managerial style of Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads. Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads extended their institutional and community support to black families, and ultimately black women, who worked and shopped in the stores, offering employment, advertising, private ceremonies, and public awards and recognition that had previously applied only to white women.

Black women during the 1950s modeled the idea of white female respectability and built a discourse of dignity through their outward appearance, proper behavior, and conduct not only as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters, but as waitresses, nurses, maids, and store clerks. With an increasing presence in civic engagement, both white and black women formed relationships based on female respectability, and built upon this framework over the years,

¹²⁴ The Mirror, 75th Anniversary Diamond Jubilee, Miller & Rhoads papers, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

¹²⁵ “More News Wanted From Our Colored Co-Workers”, *T.B.I. Talks*, November 1945, William Blum Thalhimier, Jr. Corporate and Family Papers, box 2, folder 45, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

particularly during the civil rights movement. Black women fighting for civil rights more often became advocates for women and children within volunteer organizations such as the YWCA, and within places of employment, particularly the service industry. It was within such retail establishments like Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads where black and white women found increasing acceptance and opportunity for professional advancement. Serving as quasi-feminist organizers, black women paved the way for further inclusion of women and children within the political discourse of human freedom and equal opportunity.

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Chapter 2

Cashing In On Chivalry: Dignity, Desegregation, and the Demarcation of Space in the Thalhimers Boycott

My Money

In many fair cities on downtown streets
There are five and dime stores where we can't eat.
Well be it known, and it's no sin
In those same stores, we will not spend.

My money is good at every spot
Except the one where they have the soup pot.
Well be it known and I confess
I won't be going to Woolworth,
Grant's and Kress.

And McClellan, your name ain't Sue
Cause till you serve me, you go too.¹²⁶

In February 1960, hundreds of students from Virginia Union University walked into Richmond's downtown shopping district and began a series of sit-ins at white-only department

¹²⁶ "My Money," poem written by anonymous author on back of NAACP brochure, The Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia. The poem symbolizes black solidarity as many merchants in downtown Richmond did not exclude black shoppers, but did maintain separate eating facilities for blacks. Note how the poem mentions important department stores such as Woolworth while merely mentioning influential features of the south's two major stores; the "soup pot" or soup bar at Thalhimers and Sara Sue, the famous milliner of Miller & Rhoads.

store restaurants and lunch counters. Upon the arrest of the “Richmond 34” at the Thalhimers department store, African American women, many of whom were middle class, assisted in securing the release of the imprisoned students.¹²⁷ Radicalized by the experience, these women then fully engaged themselves in a boycott of Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads for the remainder of the year.

While historians have recently focused on the Richmond store protests and the significant contributions of black women activists rather than the mass involvement of black students, their analysis finds that the black and white communities “devalued” the middle-class black women “manning the picket lines.”¹²⁸ Observers of the boycott, as well as the larger black community, perceived their actions as “woman’s work.”²⁵ However, as African American women breached the segregated system of these downtown dominions, they altered the paradigm of southern capitalist freedom as white elites had to negotiate with black women and not black males. As the economic system came to increasingly rely on external sources of production and consumption, provided largely by minority groups and women, the collective assertion of African American women countered traditional notions of racial inferiority. In their connection to Richmond’s urban shopping district they were able to demonstrate their right to, and their desire for, a more inclusive relationship with these stores rather than distancing themselves and promoting physical and social disconnect.

With the suburbs burgeoning farther from the downtown commercial core, Miller & Rhoads decided to build small branches in Southside Plaza and Willow Lawn, the first large suburban shopping centers in Richmond. Between 1956 and 1960, branch stores opened in downtown Lynchburg, Charlottesville, and Roanoke. Thalhimers also expanded their store to

¹²⁷ Richmond Times Dispatch, February 23 1960, Civil Rights Sit-Ins, Richmond, Virginia Subject Files Collection, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹²⁸ Randolph and Tate, 190.

²⁵ Randolph and Tate, 190.

areas in Danville and Petersburg during the 1960s. The stores and the women who inhabited them continued to transform the social landscape of Virginia. While Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads accepted black women into their facilities and their money, some services were not offered to blacks. Separate amenities were allotted such as bathrooms, dressing rooms, as well as restaurants for the customers and for the employees.¹²⁹ Thus, while black women were not excluded from these places, and often gained the same pleasure and personal liberties from shopping and owning a variety of goods for daily needs or to better their families, homes, and communities, they often viewed urban department stores as a double-edged sword, as clothing and amenities were a passage to, and an obstruction of, their freedom. Ora Lomax, who worked at the black-owned boutique Jamie's located in downtown Richmond, often shopped at Thalhimers basement. Black women found freedom in expressing individual style and in the act of shopping that starkly contrasted the harsh inequalities of segregation, even as they were sometimes denied access or were treated poorly. As shopping evolved from a pursuit of leisure to a decision-making process for white women, shopping and other forms of leisure became important in the daily lives of black women, who were also seen as the primary nurturers of the home and family. As merchants viewed women as society's leading consumers, black women with tremendous buying power motivated locally white-owned businesses to offer all services to their black customers and to discontinue all selective racial practices by proclaiming female "inconvenience" over racial "injustice."¹³⁰ In doing so, black women utilized their buying power and gender as a tool- one to which merchants were more likely to respond favorably.

In the 1950s, as blacks moved toward integration and were met with resistance from white communities, local churches and organizations held meetings to debate not only the

¹²⁹ Ora Lomax, interview by author, 7 February 2009, tape recording, VCU Oral History Archive, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹³⁰ Marisa Chapel, Jenny Hutchinson, and Brian Ward, "'Dress Modestly...As if You Were Going to Church': Respectability, Class, and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement," in *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement*, Peter Ling and Sharon Monteith eds. (Rutgers University Press, 2004), 87.

failing educational system, but the impoverished neighborhoods, lack of employment, and political inefficacy as direct results of poverty, all of which affected the overall future of black children. Black women were often the leaders in this crusade, speaking locally and afar in order to lend new strategies and new opportunities for black communities. The generalization has been made that black women during the nineteenth and twentieth century often “failed to intersect class oppression with race and gender oppression and link it to the institutional structures of industrial capitalism.”¹³¹ However, black women in Richmond had been forming a social lens that connected the social realities of poor housing, education, and labor to the economic and social poverty put in place by white leaders through racial segregation. Black middle class and working class women asserted that poverty had been brought to the black communities and recognized that they needed to act in the interest of black youth, as they were the “stocks and bonds” in which to invest the future.¹³² Much of the fight for black youth was led by black women as they committed their time and resources to the school issue in Richmond and throughout Virginia, as students, teachers, parents, church members, and others came together to push for racial integration. This fight, political, social, and economic momentum stemmed from the school issue, yet this network of collaboration and support extended deep into the community and facilitated new opportunities toward integration.

Governor Almond and state officials understood that strengthening the economic and political assault to funnel funds away from the black community could ultimately bring their desired result. During Massive Resistance, southern leaders amplified the threat of violent, full-scale revolts sparked by black males and launched a full scale “witch hunt” within the politically charged and active rank-and-file of organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.) and the Student Non-violent Coordinating

¹³¹ Johnson, 137.

¹³² “Mrs. Pegram Founder’s Day Speaker for PTA,” February 7, 1953, Congress of Colored Parents and Teacher Scrapbook, 1927-1965, p. 76, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

Committee (S.N.C.C).¹³³ White elites were not only fearful of social violence, but they also felt threatened politically by male political organizations, such as the N.A.A.C.P. who had contributed to fierce civil rights legislation. Feeling a strong sense of urgency in the late 1950s to combat forced integration, the Virginia General Assembly created two agencies, the Joint Committee on Offenses against the Administration of Justice and the Virginia Commission on Constitutional Government to maintain and control segregation in the public school system. Laws against “running, champerty, maintenance, and barratry” were enacted and enforced by the Committee since 1958.¹³⁴ Other states, including Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, Florida and Tennessee also installed legal precedent hindering the efficacy of the N.A.A.C.P. politically, while Virginia, Tennessee, Texas, and Arkansas “specifically targeted the funding of the N.A.A.C.P.”¹³⁵ Historian George Lewis has elucidated that “rather than waiting passively for the N.A.A.C.P. to bring further law suits against segregation and, thus, to accelerate the erosion of segregation, massive resisters instead formulated a number of aggressive and active strategies that sought to pre-empt the Association’s activities in the hope of rendering them ineffective.”¹³⁶

However, through the century, African American women teachers, mothers, wives, salon and retail workers, church and organization members, had worked extensively together in Richmond and surrounding counties to seek a better future for themselves and for their families. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, black women had been vital elements in this grassroots movement, organizing voting registration drives for the advancement of blacks in politics. They

¹³³ Roy Wilkins, “Speech, 1958 February 27, Richmond, Va., Delivered at a Meeting of the Richmond Chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,” Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

¹³⁴ Virginia General Assembly. Joint Committee on Offenses against the Administration of Justice. *Barratry, Champerty, Running and Capping, Other Related Offenses, and Tax Matters in Connection Therewith. Report of the Committee on Offenses against the Administration of Justice.* (Richmond: Commonwealth of Virginia Department of Purchases and Supply, 1959), 6.

¹³⁵ Lewis, 93.

¹³⁶ Lewis, 91.

similarly took part in the larger social welfare reform movement largely associated with white women.¹³⁷ The transition from an agricultural society to an industrial society offered new opportunities to black workers as they increasingly entered into industry, while others found work in the growing service economy. African American club women were extending their feminine influence into retail service and the beauty industry. Seeking opportunity in secure and satisfying careers in the 1950s and 1960s, women gained street smarts while shopping and while working in the less conservative environments of department stores such as Thalhimers, where women were often trained in their professions through seminars provided by employers and through various social organizations. Women working in these stores were trained not only in sales, elevator operation, or domestic service, but were also taught how to express courtesy and maintain a beautiful appearance. Such training of course often began in the home and then through social connections, and became reinforced through women's work in the public sphere. Black and white women of this time understood that hats and gloves "had an important role to play" and were considered part of their "total look." It has been said that the woman of the post-World War II era preferred a "cropped coiffure a deep-crowned, more or less narrow brimmed cloche as she dashed off to her office or numerous club and civic meetings."¹³⁸ This expansion into public service strengthened the will and efforts of black women as they served many races in a variety of fashions, whether at voting stations, in black schools, or as nurses and waitresses tending to the needs and wants of others.

During the late 1950s, black parents, teachers, workers, and lawyers witnessed the expansion of private white-only schools, founded by Governor Almond and the Virginia General Assembly. As blacks felt that political awareness and participation would ensure their full citizenship, educated black men and women from the N.A.A.C.P. formed the "Miracle of

¹³⁷ Johnson, 135.

¹³⁸ Elizabeth Dabney Coleman, "Hats Our Mothers Wore: Centers of Fashion in Virginia Cities Advertised These Gems of Early Twentieth Century Millinery" In: *Virginia Cavalcade*. Richmond, VA. v.2, no.4 1953, 19, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

Richmond” crusade in 1957, which resembled the antebellum tradition where one black taught another to read in order to ensure increased voter registration among black citizens in Virginia. The lines had been drawn and were crossed when six black students were denied placement in an all white school. Richmond’s black churches were critical to the voter registration movement in the city as well as other civil rights campaigns. There were fifteen black churches in Jackson Ward alone, such as Third Street Baptist and African Methodist Episcopal. The Richmond branch as well as the Virginia Chapter of the N.A.A.C.P. maintained offices in Jackson Ward, mere blocks from the metropolitan center. However, a meeting at Fifth Street Baptist Church among black teachers, N.A.A.C.P. members, parents, university professors, students and powerful lawyers such as Oliver Hill, inspired a new direction in Jim Crow Richmond. As the Virginia General Assembly continued to put off integration in the state by establishing private institutions for only white students, African Americans in Richmond began to increase community meetings within black churches and organizations within and around this vital black community.

Black women often expressed their concern and heartache over racial segregation in Virginia with a language and tone in accordance with their prevailing situations. In 1951, a black woman named Grayce Hundley wrote a letter to the *Richmond Times Dispatch*. She declared segregation an “outmoded southern pattern” and stated that her “spirit is pained and scarred because as a loyal American citizen I’m not free to enjoy all the privileges of my white friends...we do not want to marry your sons or your daughters. The few who do will do it in spite of segregation.”¹³⁹ Ms. Hundley ends by characterizing segregation as “unChristian,” and declared the tradition a “southern pattern,” and insisted that she “as a dressmaker” would

¹³⁹ “Outmoded Southern Pattern,” *Richmond Times Dispatch*, August 14 1951, Colored Congress of Parents and Teachers scrapbook, p. 93, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

“discard extremely old patterns.”¹⁴⁰ Black middle class and working women used such mainstream outlets such as newspapers, in addition to their community networks of black parents, workers, and teachers in area church organizations, businesses, parent teacher associations, and schools to challenge the outright exclusion of blacks. The Colored Congress for Parents and Teachers was one such organization that inspired many women and men in the community to join together in the fight for equal rights for themselves and for their children. Black women reacted to Massive Resistance in both private and public forums, spreading the word of radical change. Such organizations held meetings throughout Virginia to discuss the importance of education, often defining social problems in racial and feminine terms. As men and women shared the leadership in these lectures, women speakers often declared their racial suffering in terms of their experiences as women, whose houses, communities, and children were being forgotten or ignored.

In the fall of 1959, Prince Edward County public schools remained closed. Between 1958 and 1962, under the leadership of J. Lindsay Almond, state authority saw to the erection of thirteen private schools for white children around the state to “circumvent integration.”¹⁴¹ Some of these schools were in urban areas, such as Douglas MacArthur Academy in Norfolk and Jamestown Academy, which served James City County and the city of Williamsburg. Some were located on the outskirts of big cities, such as the Chester Education Academy in the city of Hopewell, while others were situated in rural areas like Powhatan, Sussex, and Prince Edward Counties. Like many white leaders, the governor believed that *Brown* would ultimately ruin Virginia’s public school system. He turned to an economic solution to solve the problem of integration. Almond proposed to keep his commitment to the white citizens to fight coerced racial integration. He thus proposed “the next step in the continuation of our struggle within the

¹⁴⁰ “Outmoded Southern Pattern”, *Richmond Times Dispatch*, August 14 1951, Colored Congress of Parents and Teachers scrapbook, p. 93, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

¹⁴¹ Peeples, 12.

framework of law,” and to “restore tax revenue to the control of the people” as, in his words, “They and they alone will decide these issues.”¹⁴² Almond’s prediction that the people would decide the fate of integration in Virginia was partially correct, as it was in fact black students and women that actually put forth a deciding blow to Jim Crow in Virginia. No major changes occurred until February 1, 1960.

On that date, four male African American students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University sat-in at the white-only Woolworth’s lunch counter in Greensboro and refused to leave until they were served. The four protesters stayed until store management decided to close the store. However, the next day more students showed up to support the cause and sat-in at the white-only lunch counter. The events in Greensboro set off a domino-like effect. Soon after the Greensboro incident, large protests occurred throughout Virginia, surprising state leaders, as resistance spread rapidly to cities and counties in the region including Hopewell, Petersburg, Danville, and Richmond. Shortly after the events in North Carolina, several graduate students from Virginia Union University began planning a similar course of action in Richmond’s downtown shopping district, focusing on white-only department store restaurants as in the Greensboro sit-ins. The actions were planned out over the course of a couple of weeks, whereby Virginia Union students, professors, and church members staged mock demonstrations to prepare for the sit-in movement. Concurrently, the students reached out for community support and collaborated with N.A.A.C.P members, lawyers, and workers in order to gain moral and physical help, including lodging and transportation to and from the sites of protest.¹⁴³

The next major location of protest after the Greensboro incident was the Woolworth’s department store and several downtown store white-only restaurants in Richmond, Virginia, on

¹⁴² J. Lindsay Almond Speech, 6 April 1959 (WRVA - 390). WRVA Radio Collection, Accession 38210, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

¹⁴³ Peter Wallenstein, *Blue Laws and Black Codes: Conflict, Courts and Change in Twentieth Century Virginia* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 116.

February 19, 1960. Students including student-body leaders from Virginia Union staged sit-ins for several days in a variety of restaurants and establishments throughout the downtown area, including Thalhimers department store. In the early morning hours on February 20, 1960, the *Richmond African-American* published the latest updates on the rise of sit-ins throughout the South, and reported that the “sit-in demonstrations against discrimination in public eating facilities thus far have occurred in fifteen communities in North Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee, South Carolina and Florida (Hampton, VA Hampton Institute, Norfolk, Norfolk Unit, Virginia State).”¹⁴⁴ The same morning, two hundred students from Virginia Union University “marched from the campus across Lombardy Street, down to Chamberlayne Avenue and then down Broad Street to the downtown shopping district, which ran from between First and 10th streets, and Broad Street, and pretty well along the same axis of Grace Street.”¹⁴⁵ The students from Virginia Union split into groups to cover more ground, as one group went to Woolworth’s at 5th and Broad, which at the time occupied the same building as Miller & Rhoads, and another group went to G. C. Murphys located at 4th and Broad streets.

The Virginia Union students sat at the white-only department store lunch counters with text books, Bibles, pens and pencils, and requested service. One local newspaper described the event as “a negro assault on white lunch counters.”¹⁴⁶ The media went to great lengths to illustrate the students’ appearance and behavior. The *Richmond Times Dispatch* described the young students as “well-dressed, with most of the men wearing ties and sport coats” who “concentrated on reading, talking quietly, looking about- and sitting.”¹⁴⁷ Some accounts simply stated that the students carried books, while other reports note what the students were reading;

¹⁴⁴ *Richmond Afro-American*, February 21 1960, Civil Rights Sit-Ins, Richmond, Virginia Subject Files Collection, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹⁴⁵ Raymond Pierre Hylton, “Intersection of Change: Virginia Union University Students Sat Where They Weren’t Supposed to Sit, and Helped Spark A Civil Rights Revolution,” In *Style Weekly*, Richmond, VA. vol.26, no.45 (Nov. 5, 2008), p. 14, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

¹⁴⁶ Virginia 1960 News Highlights, 31 December 1960 (WRVA - 377). WRVA Radio Collection, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

¹⁴⁷ *Richmond Times Dispatch*, February 21 1960, Civil Rights Sit-Ins, Richmond, Virginia Subject Files Collection, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

one read “Faust” while another studied “Man and His Biological World.”¹⁴⁸ The students were denied service at all locations, yet they remained seated at the counters until management turned off the lights over the lunch counter. When local police and management decided to close the counters at around 1 o’clock that afternoon to prevent any trouble, the students entered all four restaurants in Thalhimers: the Fountain lunch bar located on the first floor, the basement Fountain Counter, the Mezzanine Soup Bar and the Richmond Room, located on the fourth floor. Students also staged demonstrations at Murphy’s, W.T Grant, Sears and Roebuck, and People’s Drug store the same afternoon. Even as police and store managers threatened the students with trespassing charges and imprisonment, no one was arrested as the owners preferred to close rather than to “risk escalating a public confrontation.”¹⁴⁹

Two days later, on February 22, hundreds of black university students again made their way to the infamous Richmond Room located on the fourth floor of Thalhimers department store, while others went to the white-only lunch counter on the first floor. “Some minor pushing and shoving followed” as students were denied entrance into the Richmond Room and management asked them to leave the premises.¹⁵⁰ When the thirty-four refused to move from their seats, they were arrested and charged with trespassing as some white patrons “verbally

¹⁴⁸ As Massive Resistance was met by local resistance, local newspapers covering the sit-ins often described the refined dress and behavior of the Virginia Union students. What the protesters were reading may be another way to view the social dynamics in mid-twentieth century Virginia. The continuation of paternalism during Massive Resistance had solidified the realization among the black community that whites would never follow through on their promises to support black citizenship, and could be described as a Faustian pact. *Faust*, first written in the 16th century, was read by a black male student during the Richmond sit-ins. This classic literary work involves the legend of a man named Faust who makes a pact with the devil in exchange for earthly knowledge and happiness. In Part I, Faust falls in love with the noble and beautiful Gretchen but Faust’s advances shames the woman. This leads to the final tragedy as the devil saves Gretchen but does not save Faust. In Part II, Faust reaches the zenith of human happiness. When the devil comes to take Faust’s soul, the devil is interrupted by the Lord who intervenes and saves Faust from eternal hell. Considering the role of black women activists, the literature can be viewed as a symbolic display in favor of female morality and natural beauty as stronger forces over the masculine world of science and politics. Johanne Wolfgang Von Goethe, *Faust* (Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1881).

¹⁴⁹ *Richmond Times Dispatch*, February 21 1960, Civil Rights Sit-Ins, Richmond, Virginia Subject Files Collection, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹⁵⁰ *Richmond News Leader*, February 22, 1960, Civil Rights Sit-Ins, Richmond, Virginia Subject Files Collection, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

abused them and scalded them with hot coffee.”¹⁵¹ Faculty and other students from Virginia Union converged on the scene and asked the student protesters remaining to leave the stores. The faculty leaders stressed that the university was not behind the movement, but that the students would not face academic penalties as they were acting on their own volition and behaving appropriately.¹⁵² The thirty-four students were taken to police headquarters, charged with trespassing, and released on bond with hearings pending for March 4. A crowd of “about 150 persons, mostly Negroes, stood around the Sixth and Marshall streets lockup” and, upon the release of the thirty-four students, “the crowds applauded.”¹⁵³ Local newspapers reassured city residents that the efforts of store owners and police ensured order at the end of the day as the targeted businesses “closed as usual.”¹⁵⁴

Thalhimers’ officials soon offered a statement regarding the events of February 22. They expressed alarm that these large crowds not only impeded the normal flow of customers throughout the store, but also, created a dangerous situation.¹⁵⁵ Noting that they had warned the students and gave them a chance to leave the premises, they insisted they had “no other alternative” as the students refused to vacate; therefore, they were found to be “trespassing on private property and endangering the safety and welfare of themselves as well as others.”¹⁵⁶ Joe Simmons, one of the participants, recalls the women behind the counters when the sit-ins occurred; “the ladies who would normally be serving people, many of them African American

¹⁵¹ *Richmond News Leader*, Civil Rights Sit-Ins, Richmond, Virginia Subject Files Collection, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹⁵² *Richmond News Leader*, February 22 1960, Civil Rights Sit-Ins, Richmond, Virginia Subject Files Collection, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹⁵³ *Richmond News Leader*, February 22 1960, Civil Rights Sit-Ins, Richmond, Virginia Subject Files Collection, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹⁵⁴ *Richmond News Leader*, February 22 1960, Civil Rights Sit-Ins, Richmond, Virginia Subject Files Collection, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹⁵⁵ *Richmond Times Dispatch*, February 23 1960, Civil Rights Sit-Ins, Richmond, Virginia Subject Files Collection, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹⁵⁶ *Richmond Times Dispatch*, February 23 1960, Civil Rights Sit-Ins, Richmond, Virginia Subject Files Collection, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

women, and you could look in their face and see how proud they were.”¹⁵⁷ Of the thirty-four students arrested, eleven were women; a reporter from the *Times Dispatch* described the students as “clutch[ing] their textbooks and notebooks” and others “held American flags over their heads” as they were led to the police wagons.¹⁵⁸ As state officials and business owners first looked toward the black leaders of Virginia Union as the instigators, students supported the faculty and insisted that the “total protest” against segregation was an “individual action”, not supported by any larger group, and would continue in “one form of protest or another perpetually until racism is gone.”¹⁵⁹

On the night of February 22, 1960 at 8 o'clock, a meeting was held at 5th Street Baptist Church in Jackson Ward to discuss the recent events and to broaden the support for the students who had been arrested. The following morning, thousands of blacks gathered again at the church to show support for the students and the new demonstrations taking place on the streets of downtown Richmond. During the meeting, Oliver Hill articulated the “critical need for direct action” as he told the crowd that “it was back in 1954 that the Supreme Court said that segregated schools are unconstitutional. Yet, today in 1960, the School Board is still trying to establish in Jim-crow schools.”¹⁶⁰ By the end of this meeting, the crowd “approved a proposal to boycott stores in Richmond whose eating facilities discriminated against blacks” as hundreds signed up to join the picket lines. Among the attendees were the student leaders, Frank Pinkston and Charles Sherod, Oliver Hill and Clarence Newsome, Dr. J. Rupert Picott, executive secretary of the all-black Virginia Teachers Association, Reverend Wyatt T. Walker, and Dr. Felix Brown, the executive secretary of the N.A.A.C.P.’s Virginia State Conference.

¹⁵⁷ Raymond Pierre Hylton, “Intersection of Change: Virginia Union University Students Sat Where They Weren't Supposed to Sit, and Helped Spark A Civil Rights Revolution,” In *Style Weekly*, Richmond, VA. vol.26, no.45 (Nov. 5, 2008), p. 14, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

¹⁵⁸ *Richmond Times Dispatch*, February 23 1960, Civil Rights Sit-Ins, Richmond, Virginia Subject Files Collection, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹⁵⁹ *Richmond Times Dispatch*, February 20 1960, Civil Rights Sit-Ins, Richmond, Virginia Subject Files Collection, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹⁶⁰ Wallenstein, 120.

The very next day, February 23, African American housewives, mothers, and workers began picketing both department stores as they initiated the Campaign for Human Dignity. They held up signs that read “If you shop in Jim Crow stores, you are inferior” and “Turn in your charge-a-plate.”¹⁶¹ When many protestors were arrested, black women and students began what turned into a year-long boycott of Richmond’s downtown shopping district. Radicalized by the arrest of the “Richmond 34,” black women also responded and took to the streets.¹⁶² Black women such as Ora Lomax, Ruby Clayton Walker, and Willie Dell participated in protesting the South’s most famous department stores. Laverne Byrd Smith, a local school teacher who also participated in the Richmond store boycott, pushed aside all other concerns as she and other members of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority called off a formal dance to make funds available to bail out the Richmond 34. Byrd Smith later commented on the mobilization of black women protesters, “We had to change our priorities, and see about our children, our students,” she observed.¹⁶³

Throughout the boycott, policemen rode on horseback through the crowds, while others walked up and down the streets, many with trained attack dogs. Many middle and working-class women supported the cause and the students who had put themselves at risk, as they made signs and claimed their place on the sidewalks. LaVerne Byrd Smith discussed her involvement and the involvement of many other African American women in the aftermath of the arrests. She noted, “Our group made signs and set up picket lines and we did take the leadership in that. Once we had gotten them out [of jail], we made up signs and set up the lines

¹⁶¹ Photographic print, Can't Eat...Don't Buy, Plate 13, John Mays (photographer), Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

¹⁶² Randolph and Tate, 190.

¹⁶³ Raymond Pierre Hylton, “Intersection of Change: Virginia Union University Students Sat Where They Weren't Supposed to Sit, and Helped Spark A Civil Rights Revolution,” In *Style Weekly*, Richmond, VA. vol.26, no.45 (Nov. 5, 2008), p. 14, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

of picketing. It went on for a pretty good while.”¹⁶⁴ Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads immediately felt the effects of the boycott, as many white patrons stayed clear of the location out of fear rather than respect. Black citizens who observed the boycott would not purchase from these stores, and hundreds more joined the protesters.

Figure 3: African-American woman with picket sign during the Thalhimers boycott



Courtesy *Richmond Times Dispatch*

Local reports on the subsequent boycott simplified the critical role African American women played in the picketing of these two department stores, focusing rather on the mass student movement. The *Richmond Times Dispatch* covered the launch of the department store boycott and reported large groups of young male and female college students, along with

¹⁶⁴ Raymond Pierre Hylton, “Intersection of Change: Virginia Union University Students Sat Where They Weren’t Supposed to Sit, and Helped Spark A Civil Rights Revolution,” In *Style Weekly*, Richmond, VA. vol.26, no.45 (Nov. 5, 2008), p. 14, Manuscripts and Archives, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, Virginia.

“activist housewives.”¹⁶⁵ Other reports conclude that the picketers were college and high school students, supported by large groups of African American women. In general, the media largely undervalued the participation of women, or disregarded them as mere housewives with little effect. As the Virginia Union students created a wedge into these downtown dominions by way of the lunch counters, African American were able to push store management toward full integration, not on threatening terms, but rather on terms as shoppers and workers who welcomed further inclusion in an environment that had already welcomed them to a large extent. Black women initiated a long-lasting boycott of Richmond’s two leading department stores in a symbolic gesture of feminine negotiation within racialized space. Rather than highlighting broader social obstacles for black citizens, black women mobilized a buying boycott in support of the larger movement against segregation by staying within the physical boundaries deemed socially acceptable for women by black and white communities.

By invoking southern traditions of chivalry and paternalism, African American women protesters employed their gender and class to challenge segregation and circumvented the masculine discourse of race and race relations used by black and white men in Richmond. The presence of these black women at the front of the picket lines therefore accentuated hetero-social civility within segregated space, as perceptions of gender and class shielded the black women and students from racial prejudices, being unlikely that police officers would impose violence on women publically in the streets. The rise of the department store in the late nineteenth century created a female public, through which black women increasingly gained acceptance from the mainstream community. As the white community recognized the credibility and influence of black women caregivers and consumers, many of whom were working in white homes and advancing in the service industry, black women assumed the role as moral and

¹⁶⁵ *Richmond Times Dispatch*, February 24 1960, Civil Rights Sit-Ins, Richmond, Virginia Subject Files Collection, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

metropolitan channels for the black race within Richmond. As some whites feared that school integration would lead to an increase in black male violence, sexuality, and interracial offspring, popular urban institutions such as Miller & Rhoads and Thalhimers sought to maintain segregation by encouraging the moral and social uplift of black women in hopes that their conformity to white womanhood would help synchronize segregation in the broader political, social, and familial landscape of “separate but equal.” While some historians grant that it was “no surprise that sit-ins took place in towns across Virginia,” what is surprising is that large groups of black women, who were disadvantaged by their race and gender within the Jim Crow system, could still employ their social status as reputable middle and working-class women to mobilize for racial equality, targeting these two powerful and influential southern stores.¹⁶⁶

Black women entwined consumerism with a sense of moral right against a larger social ill and understood their strength not only as women, but as shoppers, utilizing “individual responsibility” and “collective buying power.”¹⁶⁷ The protests continued until August of 1961, when downtown stores, six in all, reached an agreement with the Retail Merchants Association and the Richmond Citizens Advisory Council to desegregate. Thalhimer “deliberated how to respond to the boycott in the most compassionate and just manner, balancing his considerations with their impact on the business. Should he fully integrate the store and risk losing the majority of his white clientele or continue enforcing the segregation policies that the rest of the region’s retailers observed?”¹⁶⁸ Similar to the Montgomery bus boycott, the Thalhimers boycott’s central aim was to “force the merchants and other elite to support equality and racial justice.”¹⁶⁹ Formal negotiations were made without the actions or participation of women, as some reports claim that Thalhimers, Miller & Rhoads and other stores had quietly

¹⁶⁶ Simon Hall, “Civil Rights Activism in 1960s Virginia,” *Journal of Black Studies*, 38(2007): 252.

¹⁶⁷ Lawrence B. Glickman, *Buying Power: A History of Consumer Activism in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 263.

¹⁶⁸ Elizabeth Thalhimer Smartt, 28.

¹⁶⁹ Glickman, 300.

integrated all of their eating facilities within six months of the start of the boycott; however, other reports claim that Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads did not desegregate their facilities until 1961.¹⁷⁰

One description of the sit-ins, prior to the boycott, clearly depicts the masculine power-struggle that black and white men had defined within the community. Edward Peeples, who at the time served the Richmond community as welfare worker, heard rumors during the morning hours of February 20 that something was going to happen in the capital city that day. Upon entering Thalhimers, Peeples observed about fifty students standing outside the restaurant which had been roped off by management, as he took a place on the side with the black students in a show of his support. Peeples remembers being spit in the face by an elderly white woman who took notice of his position standing, waiting, like the other students to enter the Richmond Room. Peeples recalls a “small pretty girl” standing close to the aisle as a white manager unhooked the rope and marched down the aisle through the group. As he did, he bumped into the girl and feeling the impact turned and “glared angrily into her beautiful golden brown face.” With “clitched fists” and “taut lips” he leaned forward, closer to her with a threatening scowl. According to Peeples, the girl was about to react to the man’s threat when the position of the white manager was trounced by a young black male student leader who, upon seeing the exchange, took the girl’s hand. The girl’s tense expression “surrendered into a smile” as the two protesters, hand in hand, “stepped amicably together back into the group of students.”¹⁷¹

During and after the protests, state leaders scrambled to find the source of the movement but could not find only one organization responsible for the events, or the off switch

¹⁷⁰ Richmond Times Dispatch, February 24 1960 Civil Rights Sit-Ins, Richmond, Virginia Subject Files Collection, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹⁷¹ Edward H. Peeples, Jr, “Such a Simple Act,” in *Style Weekly*, February 20, 1990, Civil Rights Sit-Ins, Richmond. Virginia Subject Files Collection, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

to stop the spread of black resistance. The direct action taken by the university students and black women was not publically backed by the N.A.A.C.P. until March of 1960, approximately one month after the picketing began. Around this same time, the arrest of Ruth Tinsley became public when *Life Magazine* published the picture of the elderly black woman being dragged by two white police officers, one of which still handled his German shepherd only inches from Mrs. Tinsley's body. The picture and subsequent reports showed that on February 23, the first day of the boycott, she was arrested for loitering when she refused to move from the sidewalk as she waited for a friend to pick her up. Mrs. Tinsley, who was the wife of James Tinsley, a well-respected dentist and the president of the Richmond branch of the N.A.A.C.P., was dragged by two police officers across the street and was arrested. This image was observed throughout the world and helped to bring sympathy to the women's cause. As young and elderly black women paced with signs and traded places with other women, southern chivalry came into question on day one of the boycott when the police forcibly intervened. However, local newspapers reports did not dwell on the Tinsley incident, while the picketing continued with vigor and with little interruption from police or store managers. After her arrest, Mrs. Tinsley explained that the women were responding to the fact "blacks' money was good enough to spend in the store" but that they "could not sit down to eat."¹⁷² Ora Lomax, one of the Thalhimier picketers, commented that after seeing Mrs. Tinsley dragged, she, along with many women, felt more had to be done to break down the system of segregation. As sit-ins and boycotts across the South turned violent, the boycott on Richmond stores continued to gain momentum through an increase of women and student protesters. Only three arrests occurred between the start of the boycott until its conclusion the following year.¹⁷³

¹⁷² *Richmond Times Dispatch*, February 23, 1960, Civil Rights Sit-Ins, Richmond, Virginia Subject Files Collection, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹⁷³ Virginia Department of Historic Resources, United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (Richmond: Virginia, 2002), p. 8.

Recently, historians have recognized the actions of African American women such as Ora Lomax, Willie Dell, and Janet Ballard, citing that their involvement was “essential to the civil rights movement in Richmond” as they “occupied free space connecting the goals of the community with those articulated by black leadership.”¹⁷⁴ This point validates that the fight for equal rights and equal employment practices developed earlier in Richmond, as sit-ins and buying boycotts that targeted restaurants, train and bus stations, and department stores did not occur in many parts of the South until later. The explanation, however, examines black male chauvinism and not the role of white southern chivalry in the actions of these, and hundreds of black women who claimed their right to the city’s downtown shopping district as female family and community caregivers who fought for the equal right to shop and the equal right to work, in areas previously off limits to black women. Ora Lomax worked her way into sales and management positions in downtown stores, as she first desegregated Raylass department store in 1961, and other Richmond stores such as Lerner’s, Newman’s, Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads as she continued to build on her previous experience in retail.¹⁷⁵ Black women protesters in Richmond, such as Lomax and Walker, supported the university students who had bravely provided a wedge into these stores, claimed their right to segregated space, on account of their gender.

The challenge brought forth by the black women protesters brings present day challenges, as historians have aligned the actions of Richmond African American women with a presumed ignorance of their husbands who “allowed” their wives to participate due to the lack of violence. Lewis Randolph and Gayle Tate explain that the loss of income from either the husband or wife would equally endanger the black household, and therefore the “men’s absence from the picket lines appears to be an admission that manning the picket line was

¹⁷⁴ Randolph and Tate, 133.

¹⁷⁵ Ora Lomax, interview by author, 7 February 2009, tape recording, VCU Oral History Archive, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

somehow devalued.”¹⁷⁶ This is explained as an act of male chauvinism on the part of black men; however, observing the actions of black women as the ultimate test of white male chivalry allows another perspective in which to view the socio-cultural penumbræ of race, gender, and class in Richmond as experienced by African American women. There is notable evidence showing that black men encouraged the public participation of black women because “they understood that black female activism contributed to the betterment of the overall black community.”¹⁷⁷ Also, white codes of patriarchy made white leaders more cautious about beating black women, but they would not have hesitated to beat black men. While Tate and Randolph have argued that black men held no lead role in the actual boycott of both Thalhimers & Miller & Rhoads, which has perceivably undervalued the overall participation of black women, the actions of black men can be viewed as the “new strategy” taken into account by blacks in Richmond and throughout the South as they supported the actions taken by black women.¹⁷⁸ Black men in Richmond had come to realize that the accentuation of female dignity was a “stronger” force against the fight for integration than the air of masculine violence.¹⁷⁹

Black male family members, who rarely participated in the boycott, did help to perpetuate the demarcation of urban space by publically advocating the actions of their wives. The sit-in and boycott movement that first spread through the South, and then the North, influenced the creation of a freedom song, in which the chorus, “heed the call to Americans all, side by equal side. Sisters sit in dignity, brothers sit in pride” and heralds the strength of women with the underlying support and gratification of black men.¹⁸⁰ Black women and men took

¹⁷⁶ Randolph and Tate, 183

¹⁷⁷ Johnson, 162.

¹⁷⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, <<http://historicaltextarchive.com/sections.php?op=viewarticle&artid=40>>, April 2009.

¹⁷⁹ Ora Lomax, interview by author, 7 February 2009, tape recording, VCU Oral History Archive, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹⁸⁰ Julian Bond, “What We Did: Young Leadership in the 1960s,” from *The Explorations in Black Leadership Series*, April 2, 2002, Albert & Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, <<http://www.virginia.edu/uvanewsmakers/newsmakers/bond.html>>, April 2009.

advantage of their understanding that women would “suffer” more being denied beautification, status, and respect as moral rights and innate functions of their gender.¹⁸¹ While it cannot be denied that sexism was a major problem for black women in the overall liberation movement, black women who participated in the boycott in front of Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads were able to advance socially in the workforce and in identity politics by “confusing” social customs that involved varying ideas and ideals about racial, gender, and class identities in segregated department stores.¹⁸² The once “immovable white power” was overturned as black women “upset the traditional conduct of race relations” as they promoted a new form of visual merchandising that allowed a shift in conceptual realities and racial negotiation as blacks explored new and unique “consultations between powerful whites and frequently handpicked blacks.”¹⁸³

While the examination of black male chauvanism offers a portion of the civil rights movement in Richmond, a subject sadly understudied, this analytical lens fails to acknowledge what other noted historians have, which is that such grassroots movements in Virginia were “boosted by civil rights campaigns outside the state”, and were often influenced by the actions of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, as well as the members of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee.¹⁸⁴ The Thalhimer boycott was arguably modeled after the non-violent protests observed in the Montgomery bus boycott. Black women in Richmond took notice of the effective participation of black female picketers during the Montgomery bus boycott whose assistance led to the desegregation of the public

¹⁸¹ Martin Luther King, Jr, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, <<http://historicaltextarchive.com/sections.php?op=viewarticle&artid=40>>, April 2009.

¹⁸² Martin Luther King, Jr, “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, <<http://historicaltextarchive.com/sections.php?op=viewarticle&artid=40>>, April 2009.

¹⁸³ Julian Bond, “What We Did: Young Leadership in the 1960s,” from *The Explorations in Black Leadership Series*, April 2, 2002, Albert & Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, <<http://www.virginia.edu/uvanewsmakers/newsmakers/bond.html>>, April 2009.

¹⁸⁴ Hall, 252.

transportation system, which is most often characterized by the heroine figure of Rosa Parks.¹⁸⁵ The “Campaign for Human Dignity” in Richmond is comparable to the Montgomery bus boycott in that large groups of women understood their gender would summon the spirit of chivalry and bring “sympathy” to their cause, as men would easily give way to a “lady” rather than to another male.¹⁸⁶ These external influences combined with local ideals when black students led a rash of sit-ins by immaculately dressed, dignified, non-violent protesters contrasted the public’s fear of a violent uprising. Richmond women similarly aroused a strong constituency of black women from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, as most women on the front lines would exchange places with other women who had to leave for work. When black citizens in Richmond fought against the integration of white-only restaurants and were arrested, black women used the sensibilities about proper behavior and proscribed gender roles that forged a new “clash between accepted notions of decency and respectability and those of vulgarity and barbarism.”¹⁸⁷ Black women managed to utilize their gender as leverage for civil rights, not within a public space perceivably shared by both sexes, but within the socially identifiable and legitimized female sphere of department stores.

This communal strategy, however, was met with resistance and stoic bravery from black citizens who disturbed racialized space by blurring conceptions of race, gender, and class motivations. In 1956, management believed that consumer confidence was high, and Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads continued to support their beliefs through the management of their retail businesses, and through institutional involvement in community affairs which sought to control racial integration on the terms of whites which opted to support the activities of black

¹⁸⁵ Ora Lomax stated that the actions of Richmond women were modeled after Rosa Parks. Ora Lomax, interview by author, 7 February 2009, tape recording, VCU Oral History Archive, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹⁸⁶ Chapel, 88.

¹⁸⁷ Chapel, 69.

women rather than black men, or no blacks at all. However, black women had gained “cultural capital” by situating themselves as respectable, dignified, and moral women in their everyday experiences as mothers, wives, and workers in Richmond, Virginia, ultimately positioning themselves as a stronger force against white resistance.¹⁸⁸ After over six months of picketing, the city mayor’s “biracial study committee recommended that all lunch counters be desegregated and that picketing be ended.” Coinciding with these measures, while some whites were still against desegregation, black groups such as the Richmond Citizens Advisory Committee demanded that the picketing continue until downtown facilities stopped racial segregation. The boycott staged by black women, backed by black students and some whites, thus propelled store managers and city leaders to desegregate the Miller & Rhoads Tea Room, the Thalhimers Soup Bar, and the mezzanine at People’s to admit anyone who wanted to pay for his meal. After the boycott ceased, these downtown retailers began integrating their beauty salons as well as their sales staff.¹⁸⁹

In 1960, black women who had been discriminated against, directly or indirectly, by area businesses, social establishments, and communities, forged together their buying power and a collective sense of strong, dignified, contemporary women. Black women claimed their acceptance from the white community in Richmond as they elevated their moral behavior and stylish appearance, then utilized these inherent and social rights as women, wives, and mothers. The growing social influence and acceptance of the rise of fashionably modern and domesticated black women and girls also served as a model to others and provided a safeguard for all women as men acted chivalrous in their dealings with black women. The mobilization of black women in Richmond provides a window into the complicated social environment in

¹⁸⁸ Sharon Zukin, 41. Ora Lomax, interview by author, 7 February 2009, tape recording, VCU Oral History Archive, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

¹⁸⁹ Bryson, 97.

Virginia. With limited opportunities available to the majority of black citizens, some black women and their families managed to refashion themselves by way of dignity, beauty, and hard work, within downtown retailers and within areas of employment. Ora Lomax recalls being able to sit and eat for the first time in the famous Miller & Rhoads Tea Room. Business people on lunch breaks, families shopping, young couples, and numerous others convened in a room that was far more than just an eating establishment. In essence, the Tea Room functioned as a board room, a family room, a rendezvous point, and a restaurant. For several decades, Miller & Rhoads models paraded down the runways, talking with lunch-goers about the latest fashions offered in the store. In 1961, Miller & Rhoads integrated the seats in the Tea Room, opening the door for further development and diversity of the community. Black women, when provided full entrance into these halls of beauty, took full advantage of the opportunities they had worked long and hard to accomplish. Lomax herself commented on eating in the elaborate Tea Room and remembering getting dressed for the occasion and looking every bit of “important” as the white guests.¹⁹⁰ However, as Ora Lomax found that barriers remained, many women like her often united and continued to aid the fight over racial and gender inequality in Richmond.

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¹⁹⁰ Ora Lomax, interview by author, 7 February 2009, tape recording, VCU Oral History Archive, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

Chapter 3

Revolutionizing Retail & the Region: The Formation of Multiracial Female Coalitions in Downtown Richmond

Women of all colors were finding common ground and common problems facing the glass ceiling within employment and within the larger realm of business and politics in the state. Becky Thompson argues against the conventional wisdom that “women of color feminists emerged in reaction to (and therefore later than) white feminism,” calling instead for history that “includes their actions from the beginning of the movement.”¹⁹¹ While women at this time may or may not have used the term feminism, nor believed themselves to be feminists, black and white women had steadily engaged themselves in conscious-raising for women’s rights within employment and social forums during the 1960s. In Richmond, consciousness-raising took on three forms, in private meetings and correspondence, public speeches and writing, and public protest. As shown by the dressmaker’s letter to the *Richmond Times Dispatch* in Chapter 1, black women utilized their race and gender in writing to new outlets to voice their plight as black women. During the 1960s, more white women who had built relationships with black women within employment or otherwise, built close ties through participation in the community and in forming conscious-raising initiatives within female dominated organizations. This chapter elucidates further the role of women within urban institutions, particularly in employment and volunteer efforts, in the creation of multiracial female coalitions within and outside of these stores, which needs to be for one, conveyed, and two, better understood.

¹⁹¹ Becky Thompson, “Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism,” In *Feminist Studies*, 28, no. 2 (Summer 2002), 338.

Historians like Becky Thompson have recently critiqued traditional historical narratives of the Second Wave Women's Movement during the late 1960s and 1970s by claiming that they are "not sufficient in telling the story of multiracial feminism."¹⁹² Most accounts describe Betty Friedan's publication *The Feminist Mystique*, and the actions of white middle-class women "unwilling to be treated like second-class citizens in the boardroom, in education, or in the bed."¹⁹³ However, overarching generalizations blur the realities of what was happening locally on the ground and simplify, or leave out, critical information regarding the lives and legacies of all women. This research responds to this unmet need by examining and analyzing the local practices and experiences of women in Richmond, outside of the larger mainstream movement, as in fact, "women of color were involved on three fronts-working with white-dominated feminist groups; forming women's caucuses in existing mixed-gender organizations; and developing autonomous Black, Latina, Native American, and Asian feminist organizations."¹⁹⁴ This examination highlights the fluidity of feminism within the Commonwealth, in particular the multiracial components within urban centers, social organizations and political caucuses in Richmond, propelled by the outcome of the Thalheimer boycott and extending years beyond.

African Americans continued to fight for their right to full participation in public facilities and political institutions by way of sit-ins and boycotts that continued in libraries, schools, stores, and restaurants around the Commonwealth and elsewhere in the South where success had not come as quickly. Black women in Richmond during the boycott created an all female-force that advanced the American dream that had emerged from black neighborhoods, churches, schools, businesses, and homes, circumventing white male statesmen in front of the South's renowned department stores in 1960 and 1961. In 1961, sixty department stores in Richmond, Virginia, fully integrated their facilities. This was three years before federal law required all white-owned

¹⁹² Thompson, 338.

¹⁹³ Thompson, 338.

¹⁹⁴ Thompson, 338.

establishments to do so. In December of 1961, President John F. Kennedy established the President's Commission on the Status of Women, which denoted a shift in federal policy as it expressed the "enactment of equal pay legislation and the enactment of prohibition against women in the federal service."¹⁹⁵ Many of the boycotters were among the four hundred black Richmonders who boarded the four-bus caravan at the Leigh Street Young Men's Christian Association to travel to join the March on Washington in August 1963, as an enormous crowd of people came to the nation's capitol, determined to swell the rapid wave of progress that eventually came to legal shore with the passing of the Civil Rights Act in 1964. Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads, as noted previously for their acceptance of working women, also fostered a form of interracial cooperation within employment practices early in the twentieth century. Records show these stores' ceremonies for long-time employees often included, and awarded, black employees for their commitment and positive contributions. After the civil rights movement, new support systems emerged within urban centers and institutions commonly associated with women and where they often frequented.

Women's heightened presence within the service industry became a defining characteristic of the modern day family, where women worked and shopped, as the central focus of the unit. Black and white women of the 1950s and 60s subscribed to and utilized the concept of female respectability, and were often rewarded for their recognition and expression of a clean, beautiful outward appearance. These standards were to not only be learned by women, but to be taught by women to the community as a whole. Elna Green has elucidated the lives of female "professionals and activists" earlier in the century in her study of nursing settlements in the Commonwealth.¹⁹⁶ The ideology of maternalism and femaleness, or what it was like to be female, was constantly learned and taught through sources of entertainment,

¹⁹⁵ Cynthia Harrison, "A New Frontier for Women: The Public Policy of the Kennedy Administration." In, *The Journal of American History* (Vol 67, No. 3, 1980), 630.

¹⁹⁶ Elna C. Green, "Gendering the City, Gendering the Welfare State: The Nurses' Settlement of Richmond, 1900-1930," In: *The Virginia Magazine of History & Biography*, Vol. 113, 3, 2005, 277.

education, department stores, health care organizations, and by women themselves. Elna Green's work on the interracial cooperation within nurses' settlements also highlights early connections between women as they were seen as integral to larger social units. This turn-of-the-century notion of maternalism held that "women, as mothers and potential mothers, had a special and innate sensitivity to and understanding of the needs of women and children."¹⁹⁷ This ideology extended into mid-century branching out into urban centers, college campuses, and through women's organizations, which began to transform and take on a new spirit of individuality and humanitarianism. It is during the 1950s and 1960s when urban centers saw the rise of the new, "new woman" as women increasingly advanced into the public sphere of community politics while also remaining the dominant force behind the responsibilities in the private spaces of the home. The retail and recreational core created by theaters and department stores continued to expand and transform marketing towards and for women.

Though women's involvement in social welfare in the nineteenth century has been thoroughly detailed in the historical record, female endeavors during the twentieth century are not as well documented, particularly after women gained the right to vote in the 1920s. While the N.A.A.C.P. and the Urban League in Richmond, Virginia were helping African Americans enter a segregated workforce, middle-class white and black women engaged themselves in individual advancement, at home, in education, in the community but also in the workforce as they "took the lead during World War II in trying to promote job opportunities for working class women."¹⁹⁸ Megan Shockley has elucidated some of the events that took place after World War II as urbanization and population grew noting how "structured segregation of neighborhoods placed middle class professionals in close proximity to poor blacks" which undoubtedly played a role in the lives of clubwomen who witnessed the suffering of the poor and "maintained

¹⁹⁷ Green, 282.

¹⁹⁸ Shockley, 19.

programs to step in and help when possible.”¹⁹⁹

In the 1960s, women in Richmond increasingly associated themselves with local churches, schools, and civic organizations that reached out to the less fortunate, elderly, children, and women. While black women continued to pursue the racial struggle, they were forming new patterns of politicization and feminism within and outside of their communities. Black women, with more fervent reason, continued to serve as the active motivators of others to join the struggle, and better understand, the new routes opening to blacks. For example, not only were black women crucial in the Richmond Crusade for Voters, but in Richmond and surrounding areas like Petersburg and Hopewell, about thirty miles south of Richmond, women were organizing “block parties” where all residents living in a certain city block were “invited to discuss ‘matters of importance’ over coffee and doughnuts.”²⁰⁰ Civil rights activists in Richmond and throughout the state also utilized community organizations, including the YWCA, the Parent-Teacher Association, and the Beauticians Association to promote voter registration.

Women within local volunteer organizations, such as the YWCA, and within places of employment, paved the way for women’s empowerment in places of work and in the larger political sphere. By the 1930s, social organizations such as the YWCA, churches, parent teacher associations, were engaging in group programs for girls and young women, such as day camps and Y-teens. During the 1950s, clubs originated within the YWCA itself, such as the city-wide club, and affiliations between sororities, community councils, and government sponsors, began informally and formally supporting the efforts of young women. By the mid-1960s, the YWCA integrated all of its programs and facilities and promoted the elimination of racism in other areas of Richmond life. This institution provided safety, shelter, day care, physical fitness programs, counseling, and social, health, educational, and job-related services to all young girls

¹⁹⁹ Shockley, 19.

²⁰⁰ Newspaper clipping, Binder 1, Box 1, Richmond Crusade for Voters Archives, M 306, Special Collections and Archives, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

and women.

It has been well documented that white and black women who joined the ranks of civil rights organizations often found more blatant forms of discrimination, as has been retold by female workers of S.N.C.C. which was formed out of the sit-in movement of 1960. The leaders of these organizations were men; women were funneled into jobs deemed fit for women such as cooking or secretarial duties.²⁰¹ While focusing heavily on voter registration rather than access to public facilities, S.N.C.C. became a powerhouse and played a critical role during the civil rights movement. The work *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in S.N.C.C.* is one example that highlights how women, both black and white, who were engaged in the day-to-day activities of the activist organization, were discriminated against due to their gender. As the years passed, the discriminatory actions only worsened as women then began to take steps to confront the obstacles of not only white power, but of male domination: What is less documented is how women transformed personal politics into a social politic, whereby creating, reinforcing, and participating in social networks within their local environments and within areas of employment that saw to the active engagement and growth of women as a means to defeat discrimination. Dorothy Sue Cobble has recently highlighted, most often the members of feminist groups were diverse, both economically and ethnically.²⁰² Historians have pointed out a divide between feminists, based on race, socio-economic status, and areas of strategic focus, while others have elucidated the similar commitment to equal rights at work, equal pay, as well as access to education, day care, abortion and health care rights.

While some historians of the second wave feminist movement tend to play games with numbers in recasting feminist narratives that engage white female majorities within women's organizations, records from organizations on the ground in Richmond elucidate the more

²⁰¹ Evans, 10.

²⁰² Dorothy Sue Cobble, "Labor Feminists and President Kennedy's Commission on Women," In: *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism*, ed. Nancy Hewitt (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 148.

complex nature of women and the social organizations they created and occupied. Female-created or centered spaces provided forums of fluidity, as women who were not members to actively engage in social issues with one another, perhaps volunteering or attending without paying membership fees to various associations, thus aiding in their own independent empowerment. Without question, women organized activities, and armed themselves toward political gains, in education, voting, healthcare, and jobs. Given the Phyllis Wheatley membership was counted separately, membership lists from the Central Richmond YWCA highlights a number of issues. First, members are classified by not only by employment status, but also by ethnicity. From the 1950 membership list, 20 active members were social workers, 57 were teachers, 57 were saleswomen, and 1,229 were clerical workers. The list also classified members by church affiliation as well as by nationality and race. Among the total 3,556 members, 3,430 are listed as white, while 83 are listed as not white or of mixed race, leaving 15 foreign born whites and 28 listed as “unknown.”²⁰³ Similar lists can be found for some of the YWCA’s educational programs that extended to members and to potential members. The Education Department announced events often, both internally within the organization and eventually externally, through ads in the *Richmond Times Dispatch*. Thus, while the YWCA maintained a segregated branch for blacks until the 1960s, records show that the Central YWCA was comprised of women from diverse ethnic groups. Earlier records also show how it can difficult to conclude the number of female participants as women often went to such classes but were not paying membership dues. While 410 women in the Richmond YWCA enrolled in “Home science, Barber science, Art, Family clothing, Music, Dressmaking, and Commercial” classes, the total attendance came to 4,304.²⁰⁴

Department stores connected with the YWCA and other women’s organizations by way

²⁰³“Program Participants,” Box 31, 1950 folder, Richmond YWCA Archives, M177, Special Collections and Archives, James Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

²⁰⁴“Educational Classes Held,” Box 31, Phyllis Wheatley 1941 folder, Richmond YWCA Archives, M177, Special Collections and Archives, James Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

of spreading feminine style and domestic goods not only to consumers, but to women consumers to guide young girls and women into their roles as mothers, wives, and caretakers of the community. As noted by women in the Richmond YWCA, services were particularly needed from similar civil organizations, churches, schools, as well as regional and national department stores and retailers. Receipts, brochures, and records kept by the branch document the need not only to purchase administrative items such as copiers and typewriters, but also the need to buy goods in bulk for cheap. Kadet Stationary samples, along with Sear's hairdryer receipts, and a willing company ready to ship quantities of toys were kept and considered "program equipment" as organizers arranged for the necessary items to run programs such as food and toy drives, home economics, and community-based projects within local schools, churches, and other organizations.²⁰⁵ In 1969, the Food Service Department at the Richmond YWCA concerned with budgetary matters recommended that "3% of the total income should be used to replace large equipment" such as "deep freezers, stoves, and refrigerators" while "2% should be used to replace small equipment...cups, saucers, forks, spoons, etc."²⁰⁶ Retailers, locally and nationally, informally supported women in their fight for equal employment opportunities and equal treatment under the law, by selling, donating to, or buying items from, female-created and dominated civic and volunteer organizations. Department stores themselves were a major contributor in this area, as they often provided the necessary supplies for women to implement programs and or welfare work.

During the 1960s, women within the local YWCA and other organizations were coming together more fervently to fight discrimination and in particular the glass ceiling. In one meeting, members from the local branch discussed work hours and recreational leisure, in terms of vacation time for volunteers and members. The main purpose behind the assemblage was to

²⁰⁵ "Program Equipment," Box 31, Program Equipment folder, Richmond YWCA Archives, M177, Special Collections and Archives, James Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

²⁰⁶ "Food Service Department," Box 31, 1969 Newspaper Ads folder, Richmond YWCA Archives, M177, Special Collections and Archives, James Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

discuss the equalization of vacation time for all members, from clerical staff to board members. Women in the 1960s promoted more services for women, children, the elderly, and the poor within and around downtown Richmond. Women were starting to view themselves more as individuals with contributions greater than what they were credited. Women from around the community, in a wide variety of organizations, pushed for similar measures to ensure fairness of treatment for not only workers, but for the poor. Another example of this can be found in a local mission headed by women from the Jewish Community Center, as they created a meals-on-wheels program in downtown Richmond to feed the city's homeless men, women, and children.²⁰⁷

Working women in Richmond who joined the ranks of volunteer groups or became members of welfare organizations had a tremendous impact not only on the community but on their own forward advancement. Virginian's like Janet Ballard, also known as the "First Lady of the Mid-Atlantic Region," who essentially was to the Urban League what Ella Barker was to S.N.C.C.²⁰⁸ Also stemming from a feminine world of social welfare, Janet Ballard was an African American woman, described as a "young leader" who as a girl joined the Girl Scouts of America, then from her years in Booker T. Washington High School served as president of the Junior Red Cross, who was invited to the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama.²⁰⁹ Ballard devoted her life to public speaking and organizing, becoming a Girl Scout Leader, and serving as a caseworker for the Social Security Administration in Richmond. From 1961-1965, Ballard served as the first and only female Urban League Executive Director, was a Board member of the Richmond YWCA

²⁰⁷Richmond Area Community Council Newsletter, Vol XV, No.1 November 1967, Executive Round Table 193-1962, Box 1, Executive Director Association Agencies folder, Richmond YWCA Archives, M177, Special Collections and Archives, James Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

²⁰⁸"Sounds...About Janet Ballard", Upsilon Omega Chapter Alpha Kappa Alpha Society, Vol 1, No 1, Richmond April 1978, Box 1, Richmond YWCA Archives, M177, Special Collections and Archives, James Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

²⁰⁹"Sounds...About Janet Ballard", Upsilon Omega Chapter Alpha Kappa Alpha Society, Vol 1, No 1, Richmond April 1978, Box 1, Richmond YWCA Archives, M177, Special Collections and Archives, James Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

and sat on the National Board of the YWCA (she later became Vice-President of the National Board in 1978). Like most young, educated women, Ballard was associated with many national, state, and local organizations. This was not rare, as women who entered higher education still often maintained membership or active roles within a number of organizations, as they did when formal education was more limited. This means not only were there many organizations to which women joined, but women often times were part of several organizations at one time.

Willie Dell, an African American woman who participated in the Thalheimer boycott as a student at Richmond Professional Institute's School of Social Work. A long-time advocate for women, children, and the elderly, Dell was an organizer of the Richmond Crusade for Voters, who became an Assistant Professor of Social Work at Virginia Commonwealth University. Dell later worked her way into a seat on Richmond's city council in 1973, and was the first African American woman to hold this position. Speaking on grassroots strategy used during the Crusade, Dell notes the success that came from doing legwork in the communities as she personally sponsored voter registration "at supermarkets, gospel concerts, parking lots, public streets, YMCAs, senior centers and churches" making sure "to go where the people are and to events that would attract individuals with different interests."²¹⁰ This inevitably helped her later when she rallied and gained support as a government official on city council.

While some may argue and say that the stories of Dell and Ballard are exceptions to the rule, and while it may be impossible to pin-point each and every case, these women were not only extraordinary due to their positions as women within male spheres, but their outreach and impact to other young women. Black women particularly had a stake in this development, not only due to their active involvement in dismantling store segregation, but that these efforts also afforded them more mobility in employment opportunities within progressive, social institutions,

²¹⁰ "To the editor" letter (unnamed source), nd, Willie Dell papers, Box 2, Letters from Dell folder, The Cabell Library, Special Collections, Virginia Commonwealth University.

as were many of Richmond's downtown stores. After the boycott, Ora Lomax decided she "wanted to see more African Americans in the stores working" and met a local civil rights activist and member of the Richmond Urban League, Janet Ballard.²¹¹ Having been denied the right to work as a salesperson in white-owned department stores and boutiques, Ora Lomax who had been building work experience in retail, and had been a participant in the Thalhimer boycott, found a broader network outside of civil rights organizations such as the Richmond Urban League. The Richmond Urban League likewise focused on the equal rights of black citizens, and helped them to gain entrance into occupations that were completely blocked or seemingly impenetrable by the low numbers of blacks working in certain jobs. Ballard assisted Lomax into being hired as a salesclerk within some of Richmond's white owned department stores early in the 1960s. Having worked at a black-owned boutique gaining critical experience in the field of retail, Lomax was hired on at Rayless in 1961, a white-owned department store. After a year, she started working in Lerner's located on 3rd and Broad. At Lerner's, Lomax was the first African American woman to work in the store as a saleswoman, as she was hired by the white manager from New York, Donald Philips. At Rayless and at Lerner's shop, Lomax drew on her family upbringing, the fight for equal rights, and her work experience, proving to her supervisors and colleagues that she was a "good person" who was "never late, always on time" and who kept a positive attitude. At Lerner's, Lomax worked on the second floor on the sales floor in the coats and dresses department, and at first worked minimal hours (4 hours per day) as she was being observed by the management. She was given more hours as her performance exceeded expectations, and even her own, as Lomax recalls having nineteen sales in one afternoon, which she stated was "remarkable because no one up there was selling that much."²¹²

Black and white women continued to heavily engage themselves with civil rights even

²¹¹ Ora Lomax, interview by author, 7 February 2009, tape recording, VCU Oral History Archive, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

²¹² Ora Lomax, interview by author, 7 February 2009, tape recording, VCU Oral History Archive, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

after the passage of the Civil Rights Act, which set an example to other humanitarian efforts which are visible around the city of Richmond in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in and around Richmond's shopping district, also including both campuses of Virginia Commonwealth University situated in the downtown business district, and extending beyond Jackson Ward into the Fan District. In August of 1963, black Richmonders marched with pickets from Ebenezer Baptist Church on West Leigh Street down Broad Street to demand increased job opportunities within city government. While blacks fought for equal rights to advancement during the 1960s, these sympathies and similar experiences were shared by many white women who were struggling in their own jobs or could find no opportunity to advance in their careers as men primarily filled the executive positions within the realm of business.

Women such as Ora Lomax advanced their careers in political and social forums among white women within urban centers due to the help and support of other women like Janet Ballard. While Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads strove for modern living and financial profit, racial and gendered barriers continued to persist within and outside these stores even as they embraced career women, young female job seekers, and students. Before and after the boycott, these stores' paternalistic managerial style sometimes blatantly maintained racial and gendered divisions. However, Black and white women found both opportunity and discrimination in these urban spaces within downtown Richmond. Ora Lomax described Thalhimers management as "liberal", thus highlighting a seemingly broad public perception of the store. Part of the reason why the boycott itself worked so well can be attributed to the contributions of progressive businessmen such as Thalhimer. Richmond's downtown provided not only an environment that fostered women's development in beauty, education, and work, but provided a liberal space in the otherwise conservative environment of the Commonwealth.

With advancing community participation, access to higher education, and more job opportunities available to women, particularly in the service industry and social work such as the

YWCA ramped up their efforts toward women's employment and job advocacy programs and initiatives in the 1960s, as did other institutions, such as the Richmond Urban League. In 1968, the Richmond YWCAs Welfare Department began applying for grants to aid in their community work for "clubs and church groups" as the female organization had no current grant funding at the time of the application, and were working with "very little funds."²¹³ The women organizers sought funding in order to implement five goals: 1) "get out of homes, into community", 2) "provide experience and teach skills not previously had" [by women], 3) "give them self confidence and make more employable", 4) "improve family life", 5) "motivate to seek job training/employment."²¹⁴ It is within the walls of department stores that black and white women often found respectable jobs and shared personal experiences, advancing women's place within employment and in the broader community. It was also within places such as the YWCA that women became educated and embraced broadened social views in their community work, many of whom were attending college or college graduates in fields such as social work, education, and business.

William B. Thalhimier, Jr. was a native of Richmond and head of the prestigious family-owned Thalhimiers Department Store during the twentieth century. While noted as a great businessman by many, he was also involved in many religious, educational and charitable causes. Thalhimier, who himself was Jewish and probably more understanding of cultural biases, had quite a positive reputation. Thalhimier served on many boards, including the Crippled Children's Hospital and St. Mary's Hospital. He was also the president of the Richmond Community Chest, Temple Beth Ahabah, the Jewish Community Center and the Richmond

²¹³ Agency Supplemental Funding Questionnaire, January 31, 1968, Box 1, Richmond Area Community Council folder, Richmond YWCA Archives, M177, Special Collections and Archives, James Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

²¹⁴ Agency Supplemental Funding Questionnaire, January 31, 1968, Box 1, Richmond Area Community Council folder, Richmond YWCA Archives, M177, Special Collections and Archives, James Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

Retail Merchants Association. Thalhimer was co-chairman of the Richmond Chapter for the National Conference of Christians and Jews, and chairman of the United Negro College Fund. These varying associations, to name a few, greatly impacted the social and cultural climate of the stores and the region. While Thalhimer himself could not be called a feminist, and he did not formally support a feminist agenda, he was a progressive thinker and businessman who, like many others, supported the idea of maternalism as it related to the family unit. Women were often viewed not as individuals, but as the essential part of the whole unit, as mothers, wives, and caregivers. Acts of corporate welfare that supported women informally through various charitable contributions fueled organizing efforts among minorities and women throughout the state.

Throughout the 1960s, the number of females in the workforce, particularly the field of retail, was steadily increasing. Statewide, department store employment rose from 21,300 in 1960 to 30,800 in 1967. In the city of Richmond, the number of female employees in retail grew from 5,600 in 1963 to 6,900 in 1969.²¹⁵ While proving herself as a reputable employee and profitable salesperson to Lerner's for a few years, Lomax decided to try another store. Lomax met and befriended Mrs. Boxley, the white female manager of Lepelles, a department store located on 5th Street across from the John Marshall Hotel. Mrs. Boxley hired Lomax to sell clothing but after some time she started working as a bridal consultant, broadening her invaluable skills in customer service and retail. It was also during this time Lomax had gained a good reputation and had her own base of customers such that she kept the names and addresses of her clientele in a notebook, and made good money in commission from her sales as whites and blacks consistently purchased clothing through her. Lomax went on to work at May Company and then for Miller & Rhoads. She was the first black woman hired on at Miller & Rhoads on the 7th floor to sell clothing and was later moved to children's shoes. Lomax adapted

²¹⁵ Thrower, 96.

and learned to sell shoes as she did women's clothing and bridal fashions.

Women as early as the 1940s were paving a way in retail, as after fifteen years of service at Thalhimers, Carrie McLaughlin was promoted to supervisor in Checking and Mailing in one of the stores' warehouses. By that time, she had served on several store committees, collected information for the African American newsletter, while pursuing professional development. In 1963, Bunell Harris, also an African American woman, was "promoted to McLaughlin's old job," and two years later was again promoted to manage Ready-to-Wear."²¹⁶ Based on the photographs from company newsletters and from the experience of Ms. Harris, it appears black sales people were readily hired by 1965. Store managers promised customers superior service from skilled and sophisticated sales workers. Female sales workers participated in a positive workplace culture, despite low wages, largely because they perceived sales work to be a respectable and relatively high-status occupation.²¹⁷ Urban department stores sought out employees of every color and offered wages additional incentives to working and shopping within these stores, such as paid vacations and benefit packages. White store managers in Richmond began to broaden the use of blacks within department stores, recruiting and promoting them in higher ranking positions, such as Carrie McLaughlin and Ora Lomax.

White and black women, through a new urban ethos to care for the unfortunate and gaining empowerment through employment, came together in various conscious-raising endeavors and taught their children a broader perspective on self-identity and social-identity. The climate among younger people on the campus of the Richmond Professional Institute also reflected a more inclusive and less discriminatory approach to relationships, both private and academic. Protests during the 1960s ramped up, as many college students joined the Thalhimers boycott and other demonstrations. Ellen Jordon, an African American student at Richmond

²¹⁶ Beth Kreydatus, "You are a part of all of us": Black Department Store Employees in Jim Crow Richmond," *In Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*, 2010, Vol 2, 1, 121.

²¹⁷ Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 3.

Professional Institute's School of Social Work stated that while everyone was "caught up in the racism of the 60s" believed "the issues were with society, not with classmates."²¹⁸ Jordon even recalled her mother's surprise when she would call saying someone would be coming home with her from school and when they arrived the person was white.²¹⁹ Willie Dell and Rubie Clayton Walker who participated in the boycott, were students at Richmond Professional Institute at the time, also had many white friends. One evening students from Richmond Professional Institute ran into the United Daughters of the Confederacy as both groups held a conference at the Jefferson Hotel in Richmond. Jordon recalled this was the evening that Walker became the "grand dame of the South" as "the integrated group of college students" who attracted stares from the United Daughters of the Confederacy decided to drape a black shawl around her "like a royal robe". Walker "marched slowly and regally down the mythic Gone with the Wind staircase while her white friends bowed repeatedly in humble deference."²²⁰

An inspiring advocate for women, not frequently discussed in traditional historic narratives, was the native Richmonder, Ms. Dorothy Height, whose mission was equal rights for both African Americans and women. Dorothy Height was born in Richmond, Virginia March 24, 1912, and educated in public schools in Pennsylvania, where her family moved when she was four. Even though Height left Virginia and moved to the North to attend college, Richmond women clearly followed in her footsteps toward the improving both racial and sexual relations. Height served among many black male leaders such as Roy Wilkins of the N.A.A.C.P., Whitney Young of the Nation Urban League, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. of S.C.L.C., and John Lewis of S.N.C.C. At a time when women were not readily accepted in such a distinguished leadership role, Height was not intimidated by the powerful male leadership. After college and at the age of

²¹⁸ Gloria Thomas and Mary Ellen Mercer. "This was my time' Integrating R.P.I. and V.C.U." *Shafer Court Connections*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Summer 1995, <http://www.library.vcu.edu/jbc/speccoll/vbha/vbhavcu.html>.

²¹⁹ Gloria Thomas and Mary Ellen Mercer. "This was my time" Integrating R.P.I. and V.C.U. *Shafer Court Connections*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Summer 1995, <http://www.library.vcu.edu/jbc/speccoll/vbha/vbhavcu.html>.

²²⁰ Gloria Thomas and Mary Ellen Mercer. "This was my time" Integrating R.P.I. and V.C.U. *Shafer Court Connections*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Summer 1995, <http://www.library.vcu.edu/jbc/speccoll/vbha/vbhavcu.html>.

twenty-five, Height went to work helping others, starting in the New York City Department of Welfare. From there she volunteered with the National Council of Negro Women, an organization she would run as president from 1957 until 1998. Height joined the organization, which sought to give women full and equal employment, pay and education.²²¹ She also served as National President of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority from 1946 to 1957 and served on the staff of the National Board of the YWCA from 1944 until 1977. During the height of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Height organized "Wednesdays in Mississippi" which brought together black and white women from the North and South to create a dialogue of understanding. Height was only feet away from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as he gave his famous "I Have A Dream" speech in front of the Washington Memorial in 1963.

Dorothy Height's own message was heard far and wide, and shared among many other women, both white and black. As Betty Freidan is heralded as the Mother of the Women's movement, Height has been honored as the "Godmother of the movement."²²² The National Board of the YWCA disseminated Height's 1968 article entitled "Eliminating Racism By Any Means Necessary." In this article Height writes, "As a women's movement, the YWCA has set as one of its targets to stimulate affirmative action to eradicate sexism within the elimination of racism. Ours is not only a male dominated society but it is a white dominated society. As a women's movement, the YWCA recognizes sexism as any act, institution, or structure that subordinates persons on the basis of sex. The program we develop dare not pit sexism and racism against each other."²²³ This goal was adopted by the YWCA in 1970 as the concept "One Imperative: to thrust our collective power towards the elimination of racism wherever it

²²¹ Michael Paul Williams, "Dorothy Height, 'the grand lady of the civil rights movement dies,'" *The Richmond Times Dispatch*, April 21, 2010, online source <http://www2.timesdispatch.com/news/2010/apr/21/dhob21_20100420-221407-ar-156049/>.

²²² Michael Paul Williams, "Dorothy Height, 'the grand lady of the civil rights movement dies,'" *The Richmond Times Dispatch*, April 21, 2010, online source <http://www2.timesdispatch.com/news/2010/apr/21/dhob21_20100420-221407-ar-156049/>.

²²³ "Eliminating Racism by Any Means Necessary," Box 1, Eliminating Racism 1970-1972 folder, Richmond YWCA Archives, M177, Special Collections and Archives, James Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

exists by any means necessary.”²²⁴ Women who organized, met, and presided over such organizations, like Height, understood the important social network that included women, families, and many times, political and charitable funding, from government agencies, individuals, corporations, and boards, many of which included Thalhimer himself.

During Height’s tenure, the YWCA and YMCA partnered with other organizations such as the Richmond Welfare Department, Planned Parenthood, Salvation Army, the Girl and Boy Scouts of America, the Richmond Housing Authority, Jewish Family Services, and the Department of Parks and Recreation, to become recognized as “Women in Community Service” or “W.I.C.S.”²²⁵ The evolvement of W.I.C.S grew out of the need for individual social organizations to form relationships and work on mutual endeavors such as welfare, recreation, education, employment, and youth, was sponsored by the United Council of Negro Women, Church Women United, the International Council of Jewish Women, and the National Council of Catholic Women. In 1968, the Richmond Area Community Council announced W.I.C.S. be elected to organize membership in council, as an important goal was to “screen poverty area girls for job corps and provide orientation projects and other supportive and referral services.”²²⁶ Another goal was to implement welfare programs, as some institutions such as Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads provided, such as day care facilities and materials for working mothers. In 1968, the Richmond YWCA also began applying for grants to initiate programs for welfare recipients so that working mothers could “get out of the homes and into the community” in order

²²⁴“Eliminating Racism by Any Means Necessary,” Box 1, Eliminating Racism 1970-1972 folder, Richmond YWCA Archives, M177, Special Collections and Archives, James Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

²²⁵Richmond Area Community Council Newsletter, Vol. XV No.1 February 1968, Executive Director Association Agency folder, Box 1, Richmond YWCA Archives, M177, Special Collections and Archives, James Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

²²⁶Richmond Area Community Council Newsletter, Vol. XV No.1 February 1968, Executive Director Association Agency folder, Box 1, Richmond YWCA Archives, M177, Special Collections and Archives, James Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

to “provide experience and teach skills not previously had” and to “improve family life” as well as make women “more employable.”²²⁷ The organization planned to use the money for “babysitting services, supplying lunches, and to provide the needed supplies such as material for sewing, arts, etc.”²²⁸

Black and white women often looked up to those who had accomplished what few women had in mid-twentieth century Richmond, such as the prominent figure Maggie Walker. Black women such as Carrie McLaughlin paved the way for other women, particularly black, to advance from blue collar workers to white collar employees. Many educated, urban white women that had been engaged in community activities, whether civil rights related or otherwise, engaged with black women in employment situations as co-workers or managers of newly hired black sales women, but also befriended and gained mutual respect for black women as equals based on common experiences of gender and everyday lives as mothers, sisters, and wives. As these relationships were more widely accepted and continued to foster, everyday encounters between black and white women within urban centers such as Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads became an important trend, not only in the stores, but for the community.

Black women in Richmond reinforced expectations for them to forge social progress for their race, but black women also, in fact, led on the path towards feminism in Richmond. The Thalhimers boycott in Richmond in 1961, led by black women, allowed for further inclusion of women as department stores proved a liberal force in a conservative political backdrop. But the actions of black urban women did a lot more, as it set forth a wild fire of activism through the Commonwealth. White and black women, many of whom were involved in the civil rights

²²⁷ Richmond Area Community Council. Agency Supplemental Funding Questionnaire, January 31, 1968, Box 1, Richmond YWCA Archives, M177, Special Collections and Archives, James Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

²²⁸ Richmond Area Community Council. Agency Supplemental Funding Questionnaire, January 31, 1968, Box 1, Richmond YWCA Archives, M177, Special Collections and Archives, James Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

movement itself, constituted the start of the second wave, as women from varying ethnic backgrounds held meetings, hosted awareness activities, and organized institutions, and engaged establishing institutions, surrounding the legal and social rights of women. Their efforts alone secured deeper affiliations between other women, promoted sound moral and work ethics, and gave further weight to the fight for equal employment and equal rights in Virginia. Ora Lomax found that employment training fostered these relationships, as her white managers and co-workers took a liking to her, she found herself being treated not only to lunch, but as more of an equal member of society.²²⁹

²²⁹ Ora Lomax, interview by author, 7 February 2009, tape recording, VCU Oral History Archive, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

Chapter 4

Feminism in Fashion: Personal Politics in Richmond, Virginia

The contribution of black women and white women in the advancement of the women's movement should not be ignored or skewed, as is often the case. It has been portrayed too often that white women's activism was solely a fight for women's rights, and black women's activism was a fight for racial equality. Within organizations such as the YWCA and within local workplaces, women's liberation in Richmond became influential in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Black and white women connected even more closely within these female spheres, and continued to learn from one another. While the interconnections of civil rights and gender were largely ignored by civil rights leaders and political officials, attention to the plight of poor urban black women grew stronger. Leon Dash's prize winning book *Rosa Lee* "provides a graphic illustration of how one poor black woman struggled to get out of poverty in the District of Columbia when blacks had already received the 'benefits' of the movement."²³⁰ As a result, the feminization of desegregation of these department stores led to gender "desexigration" there, too.²³¹

At the time, Height, Friedan, and others provided the framework to challenge legal and social segregation, and women in Richmond participated in a variety of tactics, from leading non-violent protests on the ground, holding feminist meetings, publishing public and private manuscripts on the issue, to forming political caucuses in the fight for women's liberation. Anne Valk's work discusses three relevant points regarding the women's movement that are comparable to what was happening on the ground in Richmond. First, city activism reveals the

²³⁰ Randolph and Tate, 203.

²³¹ Zelda Nordlinger letter to Sylvia Roberts, October 19, 1971, Zelda Nordlinger papers, 1970-2007, Series 1, Subseries A, Box 1, folder 2, Special Collections, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

“complexity and fluidity of political campaigns and the extent to which such campaigns, and the activists involved in them, resist easy categorization.”²³² Second, identity politics are addressed as “alliances depended on activists’ willingness to form partnerships with individuals and groups outside their own circles.” This often provided a network of cooperation with others who did not hold the same ideologies, and thus, the “duality” of this separatism and connectedness “accomplished results at the ground level at the same time that it created tensions that activists struggled to resolve.”²³³ Lastly, recent case studies as the one presented here demonstrate the fluidity of feminism on the ground and show how as “political campaigns and groups converged, they changed course.”²³⁴

Betsy Brinson researched the lives of women in Richmond society and found that some had employed strategies and tactics similar to those that were used during the civil rights movement which included writing letters, joining service organizations, to performing sit-ins. Women’s roles in civil rights welfare work and their participation in volunteerism contributed heavily toward women’s liberation. As social creatures they “were to give to other social causes than to women,” but over time this approach evolved into group education and training to improve themselves as individuals and give back to one another.²³⁵ After the Thalhimers boycott, and after the passing of the Civil Rights Act, Richmond women often trained and supported one another in the pursuit of equal rights. In personal accounts, Janet Ballard claims that she encountered sexism “more frequently when she became the first woman to serve as executive director of the Richmond Urban League in 1964” than she had as a staff member when she started working with the organization.²³⁶ Upon her arrival at the Richmond Urban

²³² Valk, 185

²³³ Valk, 185

²³⁴ Valk, 185

²³⁵ Betsy Brinson, “Helping Others Help Themselves: Social Advocacy and Wage-Earning Women in Richmond, Va., 1910-1932 (Ph.D. Dissertation, 1984, Union Graduate School), Betsy Brinson papers, 1894-1999, Series 14, Box 6, folder 165, 1, Manuscripts and Archives, The Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA.

²³⁶ Randolph and Tate, 191.

League, Ballard said “sexism hit her like a ton of bricks.”²³⁷ Expectations of ladylike behavior made it difficult for women to maneuver in the realm of male politics. Ballard’s experiences heavily contributed to her efforts to empower other young women, such as Ora Lomax, to begin taking action themselves. Ballard aided other women in their placement for job opportunities in a variety of fields. The number of working women in retail steadily increased, particularly after s. With this said, a glass ceiling still remained as women did not hold positions as owners or board members. Ora Lomax went on to work for Miller & Rhoads and Thalhimers. Since 1971, Lomax has also been a youth and college advisor for the N.A.A.C.P.²³⁸

The fight for civil rights continued as the fight for women’s rights in the city ramped up, offering multiple paths towards equal rights. Black women had been engaging women’s affairs in black women’s organizations, and within organizations such as the YWCA and local parent teacher associations. Many white women in Richmond followed similar paths by helping children and the poor and increasingly engaged in women’s organizations and activism. Female activists in Richmond during the later 1960s and early 1970s were not only black, but white, Latina, and Asian, and came from a variety of upbringings. Zelda Nordlinger, one of the founders of the Richmond branch of N.O.W., had both Russian and Jewish ancestors in New York and Virginia. Nordlinger was born in Greenville, South Carolina, in 1932, and moved to Richmond shortly after her first year of high school. Her parents divorced and her mother chose to move to Richmond because it was in close proximity to family members living in Danville, Virginia. Nordlinger’s mother was able to find work at Thalhimers department store as a saleswoman “because she knew about the merchandising business from her own family.”²³⁹ Nordlinger, who herself became a middle-class, stay-at-home-wife and mother, became heavily involved in

²³⁷ Randolph and Tate, 191.

²³⁸ Ora Lomax, interview by author, 7 February 2009, tape recording, VCU Oral History Archive, James Branch Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

²³⁹ Oral history interview with Zelda K. Nordlinger conducted by Betsy Brinson, July 7, 2007, M 15, Richmond Oral History Collection, Special Collections and Archives, James Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

women's activism in the late 1960s. Influenced first by the need for social change, the lessons of the civil rights movement, and the growing national women's movement headed by Betty Friedan, Nordlinger wanted to create a Richmond branch of N.O.W. and understood the need to seek out potential members. In 1968, Nordlinger posted a message at the Richmond YWCA asking for the attention and participation of women to discuss the issue of women's rights. A handful of women responded to her flier and, about a week after, five women gathered at the local YWCA to form Women's Rights of Richmond, which later became the Richmond chapter of the National Organization for Women.

In 1970, Friedan and central N.O.W. called for women around the nation to protest on 26 August, the anniversary of the 19th Amendment, when women got their vote. Historian Anne Valk describes the mass of people protesting on August 26, 1970, when "thousands of men and women" including "black women, suburban housewives, professionals, office workers, women of the peace movement, Black panthers, and religious orders" assembled in the nation's capitol for Women's Strike for Equality Day.²⁴⁰ Nordlinger shared her group's deliberations about this event in an interview with Betsy Brinson, stating, "So, here in Richmond, we had to plan something to do, we all wanted to do something. And we got together and we decided one likely place to try to integrate would be the all-male soup bar at Thalhimers, and they all looked to me to be the leader of it, and I didn't know how to do any of that kind of thing, but I was taking my cues from what I had been reading that was going on all over the country."²⁴¹ With support from the American Civil Liberties Union, Nordlinger and five other women planned the event. They made the public and press aware that something would take place near Franklin Street in downtown Richmond. Nordlinger stated later that "the plans, made secretly with great excitement called for the group to march together across the street and enter Thalhimers

²⁴⁰ Valk, 1.

²⁴¹ Oral history interview with Zelda K. Nordlinger conducted by Betsy Brinson, July 7, 2007, M 15, Richmond Oral History Collection, Special Collections and Archives, James Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

Department store and proceed, with dignity, to the upstairs men's soup bar."²⁴² Nordlinger had arranged to meet Shirley King and two other local women, and another woman, Peggy Dorn, from the Atlanta chapter of N. O. W., on Franklin Street around noon on August 26."²⁴³ The group of five, "dressed in skirts and hats and gloves, walked into Thalhimers and up the stairs to the soup bar. As they ascended the stairs they noticed the sign that read, "Soup Bar, Men Only," which solidified them in their mission, Shirley King thought to herself "It's too late to back out now."²⁴⁴ On reaching the dining area, they noticed they could not all sit together as seats were "sparse and separated."²⁴⁵

As they entered the soup bar, they noticed men sitting and eating, carrying on with "small-talk", as two of the women sat beside one another, and the others "scattered," finding seats where they could. Reporters, who had followed the women inside, began taking pictures and jotting down notes, while the unsuspecting male customers did not know how to react. A female waitress informed the women that they could not be served. Peggy Dorn, a lawyer, began reciting the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and "the flash bulbs stopped" "the pencils ceased scratching" and "all eyes turned toward Peggy and the waitress."²⁴⁶ A male manager suddenly arrived and told the waitress behind the counter to give the ladies a menu. At that moment of triumph for the group, the reporters sprang from table to table asking the male restaurant-goers, "How do you feel with ladies eating here?" One man was heard saying, "I hope you don't print my picture- I don't want my wife to see it." Another male customer "pot-bellied with a napkin still

²⁴² Zelda Nordlinger, Untitled document signed by Nordlinger describing the soup bar sit-in, 3, Zelda Nordlinger papers, 1970-2007, Series 1, Subseries A, Box 1, folder 12, Special Collections, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA.

²⁴³ Zelda Nordlinger, Untitled document signed by Nordlinger describing the soup bar sit-in, 3, Zelda Nordlinger papers, 1970-2007, Series 1, Subseries A, Box 1, folder 12, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA.

²⁴⁴ Zelda Nordlinger, Untitled document signed by Nordlinger describing the soup bar sit-in, 3, Zelda Nordlinger papers, 1970, 2007, Series 1, Subseries A, Box 1, folder 12, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA.

²⁴⁵ Nordlinger interview, Part I, 9.

²⁴⁶ Zelda Nordlinger, Untitled document signed by Nordlinger describing the soup bar sit-in, 4, Zelda Nordlinger papers, 1970, 2007, Series 1, Subseries A, Box 1, folder 12, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA.

hanging from his belt lumbered past the counter mumbling invectives under his breath.”²⁴⁷ The next day a local newspaper report, headlined, “Women Take Last Fort,” confirmed the male reaction to the event, showing one man hurriedly leaving and another trying to shield his face with his napkin.²⁴⁸

As the women sat, eating lunch and savoring victory (one was so distracted she forgot to remove her gloves before biting into her cheeseburger), Nordlinger noticed a gentleman with a briefcase and wondered if it was the man from the American Civil Liberties Union (A.C.L.U.) who said he would be nearby during the event. Indeed, the man closed his briefcase, approached the women and said, “You all don’t need me after all. In my opinion, this was a successful sit-in.”²⁴⁹ The following day on August 27, 1970, Nordlinger wrote to the A.C.L.U. thanking for their support in the Thalhimer sit-in. After expressing her gratitude, Nordlinger declared her intentions of asking Thalhimer’s management “to remove the ‘Men-Only’ sign” as she planned to “have lunch again there in the near future.”²⁵⁰

After the sit-in at the soup bar, the response from media outlets varied as some heralded the victory while others tried to explain the events seemingly unsure of the women and of their actions. *The Richmond News Leader* announced the actions as a reflection of the “larger nationwide strike for equality” as women took action against the “psychological stigma, as young girls can’t be admitted because of their sex.”²⁵¹ Other sources announced the efforts of young women behind the movement but reassured that there would be no immediate revolution. While the women’s movement had been making an impact in other cities, Richmond was late in the

²⁴⁷ Zelda Nordlinger, Untitled document signed by Nordlinger describing the soup bar sit-in, 4, Zelda Nordlinger papers, 1970-2007, Series 1, Subseries A, Box 1, folder 12, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA.

²⁴⁸ “Women Take Last Fort” newspaper clipping, unknown source, Zelda Nordlinger papers, 1970-2007, Series IV, Box 3, folder 2, Special Collections, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

²⁴⁹ Zelda Nordlinger, Untitled document signed by Nordlinger describing the soup bar sit-in, 6, Zelda Nordlinger papers, 1970, 2007, Series 1, Subseries A, Box 1, folder 12, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA.

²⁵⁰ Zelda Nordlinger, Letter to Lauren Sheldon, A.C.L.U., August 27, 1970, Zelda Nordlinger papers, 1970-2007, Series, 1, Box 1, folder 1, Special Collections, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

²⁵¹ “‘For-Men-Only’ Soup Mixed,” *The Richmond News Leader*, August 26, 1970, Zelda Nordlinger papers, 1970-2007, Series V, Box 3, folder 2, Special Collections, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

game as feminists on the ground displayed subtle activism rather than utilizing large protests in the streets. News sources responded to the sit-in largely based on the location of the event, as the Thalhimers name initially made the story newsworthy. One newspaper discussed how the women expressed their desire “to bring to the public eye the male bending influences in our society” but they planned to “do it in a very woman-like and dignified way.”²⁵² The *Richmond Mercury* headlined that Thalhimers soup-bar had in fact been “liberated.”²⁵³

Correspondence between Nordlinger and supporters detail the local activities in Richmond, but also the wider ideological basis for the actions. On November 11, 1970, writing to co-activist and Regional Director of N.O.W., Sylvia Roberts, Nordlinger herself addresses the influence of blacks and the civil rights movement in her networking with women’s associations, stating that “Peggy Dorn in the Atlanta Chapter” of N.O.W., was “familiar with the sit-ins.”²⁵⁴ Apparently, Dorn had participated in a similar sit-in of an “all-male bar” in Georgia.²⁵⁵ In another letter to Reverend John Spong dated November 23, Nordlinger addresses classroom training for mostly upper-class white women interested in the fight for liberation, but noted that they were “trying to reach out to our less fortunate sisters.”²⁵⁶ While the Richmond branch did not right away become part of the central organization, Nordlinger and others looked toward the national efforts and pushed for similar political and social changes in Richmond. In a letter to Sergeant D.R. Duling, dated December 8, 1970, Nordlinger states that a demonstration had been planned by local women for women’s liberation in “conjunction with national demonstrations led by Betty

²⁵² “No ‘Instant Revolution is Planned for Richmond,” Newspaper clipping, August 20, 1970, Zelda Nordlinger papers, 1970-2007, Series V, Box 3, folder 2, Special Collections, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

²⁵³ “Thalhimers Soup Bar ‘Liberated’”, *The Richmond Mercury*, Nordlinger papers, 1970-2007, Series V, Box 3, folder 2, Special Collections, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

²⁵⁴ Zelda Nordlinger, Letter to Sylvia Roberts, November, 11, 1970, Zelda Nordlinger papers, 1970-2007, Box 1, folder 1, Special Collections, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

²⁵⁵ Nordlinger, on sit-in, 3.

²⁵⁶ Zelda Nordlinger, Letter to John Spong, November 23, 1970, Zelda Nordlinger papers, 1970-2007, Series 1, Subseries A, Box 1, folder 1, Special Collections, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

Friedan.”²⁵⁷

As women’s organizations spread the word of action against sexism, the audience who most needed to hear and learn this message was by-and-large white women. A speech to the Officers Wives Club at Fort Pickett, south of Richmond, is one of many examples of Zelda Nordlinger spreading this message on the part of women’s political and social rights. Nordlinger told the audience that “women have been the Sleeping Beauty’s long enough. We cannot afford to wait for the kiss of death. It’s time to pick up our brief cases, set aside our dust pans and we must encourage our daughters to study science and politics instead of dancing and sewing. There is a big bad world out there and the hand that once rocked the cradle must now steer the ship of state!”²⁵⁸ Nordlinger reminded the officers’ wives that the “corollary between the civil rights movement and the women’s movement cannot be ignored.”²⁵⁹

The local branch of N.O.W. paid tribute to the legacy of civil rights as white women fought political battles within and outside of organizational affiliations on issues that also mattered to black women, such as abortion and reproductive rights and equal opportunity in employment. Nordlinger herself wrote on the subject and endorsed many political members who fought for changes on these issues. In October 1970, Nordlinger wrote about the Women’s Liberation of Richmond’s endorsement of candidates George Rawlings and J. Harvie Wilkinson because they were “both for E.R.A., abortion, and childcare” and they also questioned divorce law.²⁶⁰ Nordlinger and her colleagues successfully lobbied the General Assembly to make rape trials less intimidating for victims, to establish a task force to sit with victims through rape trials, and to establish a hotline for rape victims. Nordlinger fought for abortion rights, which she

²⁵⁷ Zelda Nordlinger, Letter to Sergeant D.R. Duling, December 8, 1970, Zelda Nordlinger papers, 1970-2007, Series 1, Subseries A, Box 1, folder 1, Special Collections, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

²⁵⁸ Speech to the Officer’s Wives Club, Fort Pickett, n.d., Zelda Nordlinger papers, 1970-2007, Series 1, Subseries C, Box 1, folder 12, Special Collections, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

²⁵⁹ Speech to the Officer’s Wives Club, Fort Pickett, n.d., Zelda Nordlinger papers, 1970-2007, Series 1, Subseries C, folder 12, Special Collections, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

²⁶⁰ Zelda Nordlinger, October 20, 1970 letter on elections, Zelda Nordlinger papers, 1970-2007, Series 1, Subseries A, Box 1, folder 1, Special Collections, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

believed were closely tied to women's rights in general. She was very active in what some called "the Underground," which was "a loose-knit group determined to help women get abortions by finding a way for them to travel to Washington, where the procedure was legal."²⁶¹

The group, still in many stages of ideological infancy, promoted women's liberation in newsletters and other writings. One such newsletter focused on the existence of the movement itself headlined "Is there a women's liberation group in Richmond?" Within it, the Richmond group discussed how "not all agree on the direction the movement should take" highlighting that some women "favor public demonstrations, in the manner of the civil rights movement against institutions and businesses that discriminate against women."²⁶² Less than two months after the successful soup bar sit-in, Nordlinger wrote a letter to William Byrd on October 8, 1970, stating that it "is urgent that the E.R.A. be passed without any further changes or delays." She noted at the end of the letter that "most women who are in an occupation are eager to have the E.R.A. passed, and they will be outraged if it is not."²⁶³ Rather than distinguishing between radical and liberal issues, female activists in Richmond pushed for the E.R.A. while continuing to pursue other means as possible paths to equality.

Women continued to push particularly within the realm of business, economics, and employment. Department stores, such as Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads, ultimately became targets for some women's rights activists in Richmond because of continuing policies that excluded or limited the access of women. Shortly after forming the Women's Rights of Richmond, and "desexigrating" the Thalhimers all male soup counter, Nordlinger and others fought for the "desexigration" and desegregation of the local want-ads, as the *Richmond Times Dispatch* maintained separate ads for prospective male and female, and black and white

²⁶¹Ellen Robertson and Bill Mckelway, "Zelda K. Nordlinger Feminist Activist Dies", *Richmond Times Dispatch*, March 20, 2008.

²⁶² Newsletter #1, "Is there a women's liberation group in Richmond?" Zelda Nordlinger papers, 1970-2007, folder 9, Special Collections, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

²⁶³ Zelda Nordlinger, letter to William Byrd, October 8, 1970, Zelda Nordlinger papers, 1970-2007, series 1, box 1, folder 2, Special Collections, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

employees.²⁶⁴ Eventually the *Richmond Times Dispatch* did stop the publication of segregated want-ads thanks to the efforts of Nordlinger and the women of Richmond N.O.W. In another attempt to rearrange perceptions on gendered space, Nordlinger planned to desegregate the male soup bar in Miller & Rhoads department store. However, the other women in on the plan did not show up on the day the sit-in was to take place, leaving Nordlinger alone in front of the store.

The collaborations between women from the local Richmond branch of N.O.W. and women from other branches within the region are also vital to understanding the broad network of N.O.W. Flora Crater, who was part Latin American, was also head of the Northern Virginia N.O.W. visited Richmond on many occasions as women pushed for E.R.A. legislation in the General Assembly. Crater along with Nordlinger and other members of N.O.W. would meet in the city of Richmond, often visiting Virginia Commonwealth University to hold assemblies on the issue in the early 1970s. One article from the *Commonwealth Times* announced Crater's arrival and the lobbying effort by women. The members of the Virginia Women's Political Caucus met in the Business building at V.C.U. to discuss the legislation and to coordinate a "multi-party organization" that would encourage women to "run for public office, with the eventual goal of having women in half the public jobs, both elective and appointed, in the state."²⁶⁵ Crater, coordinator of the event, addressed the "list of actions taken" by the Caucus in its first year, which ranged from "evaluating candidates in the lieutenant governor's race to challenging the makeup of Virginia delegation to the Democratic Convention and setting up a women's lobby."²⁶⁶

Other women who did not associate themselves with the formation of N.O.W. in Richmond had pursued different organizations and paths toward equality in Richmond, while

²⁶⁴ Zelda Nordlinger letter to Sylvia Roberts, October 19, 1971, Zelda Nordlinger papers, 1970-2007, series 1, box 1, folder 2, Special Collections, The Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

²⁶⁵ "Feminists Focus on ERA Legislation," *Commonwealth Times*, September 21, 1972, VCU Libraries Digital Collection, <http://dig.library.vcu.edu/u/?/com,8501>.

²⁶⁶ "Feminists Focus on ERA Legislation," *Commonwealth Times*, September 21, 1972, VCU Libraries Digital Collection, <http://dig.library.vcu.edu/u/?/com,8501>.

ultimately connecting on many of the same issues. The Richmond YWCA advanced its feminist agenda and conscious-raising endeavors, often times within a multi-racial framework. One educational program on political activism was hosted at the local branch on 1972, when women met in a series of group discussions to focus on women's rights agenda and strategy. On January 23, Maya Hasegawa and Carole Stewart spoke on the issue of "how to use parliamentary procedure to your advantage."²⁶⁷ Willie Dell, an African American woman and picketer in the Thalhimer boycott, was a seminar speaker for a program entitled, "How to Mobilize Around an Issue."²⁶⁸ Willie Dell continued to organize others while striving for political and employment opportunity. Dell succeeded the following year in breaking the gendered barriers within political labor by becoming the city's first African American city council woman in 1973. Also, the broad network of women workers and organizers within the city entrenched urban life as well as urban politics. As the ratification of the E.R.A. remained a focus of many women's organizations, it was in 1973 that feminists and their organizations began to publicize their intentions to other young women. Women, such as Crater, within the Virginia Political Caucus for Women had rallied together with dozens of other women's organizations in order to push revisions into the law that would allow women to serve in the military to empower single mothers and their children, and to advance "women in businesses" and enforce "equal pay for equal work."²⁶⁹

The civil rights movement was in essence a launching pad for feminism in Richmond and elsewhere. Many women participated directly in civil rights, while others formed working relationships, and sometimes friendships with a network of urban women. Many women, whether they participated directly in the civil rights movement or not, still heavily participated in

²⁶⁷ Box 31, Practical Politics Folder, Richmond YWCA Archives, M177, Special Collections and Archives, James Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

²⁶⁸ Box 31, Practical Politics Folder, Richmond YWCA Archives, M177, Special Collections and Archives, James Cabell Library, Virginia Commonwealth University.

²⁶⁹ Meg Williams, "Proponent of Women's Rights Amendment Beseches Support," January 25, 1973, *Commonwealth Times*, VCU Libraries Digital Collections, <http://dig.library.vcu.edu/u?/com,8616>.

social welfare organizations also increased their participation in the labor force, often times within the expanding service industry. While NOW was an important element within the second wave, it is important to note the other fundamentally important women's organizations, a total of forty-nine in the state during the early 1970s.²⁷⁰ Women from a variety of racial, religious, and economic backgrounds found that despite the complexity, women's liberation in that context was fundamentally the same. Even the Richmond branch of N.O.W. was a multi-racial organization that was more complex and involved a variety of participants. Importantly, these feminist organizations, and the women who comprised them, had matured from a new "urban ethos" of humanity and equality that developed out of the civil rights movement and that women together fostered.²⁷¹

²⁷⁰ Meg Williams, "Proponent of Women's Rights Amendment Beseches Support," January 25, 1973, *Commonwealth Times*, VCU Libraries Digital Collections, <http://dig.library.vcu.edu/u?/com,8616>.

²⁷¹ Betsy Brinson, "Helping Others Help Themselves: Social Advocacy and Wage-Earning Women in Richmond, Va., 1910-1932 (Ph.D. Dissertation, 1984, Union Graduate School), Betsy Brinson papers, 1894-1999, Series 14, Box 6, folder 165, 16, Manuscripts and Archives, The Virginia Historical Society, Richmond, VA.

Conclusion

Historic research is emerging that importantly connects the civil rights movement with the women's movement in the United States. More often, narratives separate civil rights from the second wave and the same is done for studies on feminism which distinguish different branches within the movement. While this may be valid later in the movement, the early phases of the second wave cannot be so easily packaged. Not only did the second wave of feminism rest in part on the actions of black Americans for their rights in the 1960s, but also the civil rights movement contributed to the expanding networks among black and white women. The intent here is to elucidate the collective participation of women in civic engagement, including shopping, volunteerism, and in places of employment, who formed and participated in women's rights organizations within the downtown district of Richmond, Virginia. Black women, upon the arrest of young black students, mobilized into the streets and picketed the South's most prestigious retailers, ultimately delivering an economic blow to business and city leaders. As the months and years went by, female political awareness and participation escalated among both white and black women, in the areas of civic work and employment. A decade later, women in Richmond came together and also utilized their power as consumers in the name of women's rights.

By examining department stores and both civil rights and feminism, the events in Richmond prove to be an illuminating example on three levels. First, historians often do not consider, or steer away from, looking into certain social spaces as they appear frivolous on the surface and not worthy of investigation. Ideas about department stores in general may fit this description two-fold as they are female-centered and recognized for purposes of recreation and

consumption. Continuing to be ostracized from institutions they frequented and often enjoyed as consumers, women understood that shopping was a political act as they decided where to buy and what items would be purchased. Thus, political action as consumers had great political impetus, as boycotts wielded both moral and economic significance. Second, traditional narratives on department stores typically focus on the North, and rarely examine the impact of southern retail environments during this period of revolution. Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads, two major landmarks and retail giants of the century, ultimately closed their doors to the public in the 1990s. The rise of suburbia, along with shopping malls, discount chains, and super stores took hold as many moved out of Richmond and into the suburbs.²⁷² The stores peaked in popularity in the late 1950's and sales steadily decreased in the 1970's and 1980's. The actual department store buildings themselves have undergone many transformations in the last few decades. With modern additions to the Miller & Rhoads building, the structure has been renovated into a mixed-use structure comprised of hotel and residential units. The Thalhimers' city block has been renovated along with Richmond's Carpenter Center, creating Richmond's CenterStage which houses theaters, the Richmond Symphony, and the Richmond Ballet.

Lastly, located between where the two stores once stood, a low-lying plaque is now situated. In 2010, a ceremony was held and the plaque dedicated to the Richmond 34, honoring their actions which led to the desegregation of these stores. While this event is an important remembrance of the fight for equal rights in downtown Richmond, it is not the full history. This research is an attempt to expand on this dedication. While black students and teachers sat, it was black women picketers who stood on the sidewalks while the 34 remained on trial for years after their arrest. It was the actions of black urban women who supported the students within the broader community that pushed policy makers to swing in their favor in 1961. The Thalhimers boycott marks a time women were coming together, forging through physical and psychological

²⁷² Smartt, 113.

ceilings, and paving the way toward equal opportunity to access and work in areas from which they were allowed limited access or outright excluded. During the 1950s and 1960s, historical narratives show Jim Crow as segregation was law of the land, and school segregation was a major issue in Virginia politics, schools, and homes. However, it was the acceptance and participation of all women in a rich urban environment, as employees and consumers that encouraged further change in Richmond, Virginia. The efforts of black women influenced the growth of a formidable feminism that gained further momentum after the boycott. As the history shows, much of this change occurred within and around Richmond department stores thanks to the inter-racial relationships women built, expanding their own opportunities as individuals while helping other women with similar struggles. Through research on the dress ways and urban space of downtown Richmond, the focus on Thalhimers and Miller & Rhoads tells the story of how working women and the lessons of civil rights extended beyond a racial front to advance the cause of women's rights.

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