

Why The Y?: The Origin of San Diego YWCA's Clay Avenue Branch for African Americans

By Charla Wilson

Since the late nineteenth century, many African Americans have migrated to San Diego from the North, South, and Midwest with the hope of finding better living conditions and employment prospects. Although there was an absence of *de jure* segregation in San Diego, or segregation upheld by local laws, African Americans still encountered institutional racism and restricted opportunities. Examples include prohibiting African Americans admission to public places such as restaurants and theatres, as well as refusing to employ them on the basis of race. Records show that since the late nineteenth century, African Americans in San Diego, including Rebecca Craft and Exie Lee Hampton, fought against these discriminatory practices.

African Americans have advocated for civil rights through local churches and organizations, including the San Diego



Clay Avenue Branch Girl Reserves on the property of Mrs. Pryor and Nellie Coons, Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, Library and Information Access, San Diego State University.

Charla Wilson received her Master of Arts in history from California State University San Marcos. This essay was inspired by her graduate thesis, *For Refuge and Strength: The San Diego Young Women's Christian Association Branch for African Americans from 1925 to 1951*. Charla Wilson would like to thank her thesis advisors, Dr. Jill Watts, Dr. Jeffrey Charles, Dr. Katherine Hajar, and Dr. Alyssa Sepinwall for their guidance.

Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). Between the 1920s and 1950s, black women took it upon themselves to establish the only community center that provided housing, employment opportunities, and recreational resources for African American women in San Diego in the early twentieth century. They ran the day-to-day activities at the YWCA's Clay Avenue Branch for African American girls in the neighborhood of Logan Heights. The Clay Avenue Branch sustained an essential social services program for a small and underserved population, and a platform from which black female activists organized and challenged racism in a broader San Diego.¹

Collective Activism to Combat Racial Discrimination

By 1920, a growing black middle class had settled in San Diego--the result of the Great Migration and World War I. This led to the introduction of restrictive housing covenants. While African Americans had been living throughout San Diego County, the imposition of restrictive housing covenants impacted settlement patterns, and ultimately limited where blacks could live. African Americans noticeably settled in two concentrated areas: a one-block area of La Jolla, mainly "the quarters" for African American domestic employees; and Logan Heights, east of downtown. African Americans combated racial restrictions such as this by forging social networks and turning to collective organizing. The central organization from which African Americans operated was the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The San Diego NAACP made successful attempts at disrupting the existence of local discriminatory policies; it convinced stores, theaters, and restaurant owners to remove signs that barred African American access, permitted African Americans to be admitted into the San Diego County Hospital nurses' training program, and compelled the Children's Welfare Home to accept black homeless and abandoned youth.²

In addition to dismantling discriminatory policies, black and white women of the San Diego NAACP took special interest in advocating for the creation of youth recreational outlets. The idea of recreation was a product of the Progressive Era after the turn of the twentieth century. Settlement activist Jane Addams claimed that recreation was essential for protecting youth from the dangers of unsupervised play and the illicit lures of city streets. The women were concerned that San Diego did not have a recreational facility for African American youth, as existing youth centers served whites only. Charlotte Stearns, a white woman, was a self-appointed Publicist and Social Coordinator for San Diego's NAACP. She was also elected to serve as Chair of the Juvenile Court and Probation Committee of the Federated Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and as a Playgrounds Commissioner.

In 1920, Stearns approached both the national and local San Diego Chapters of the YWCA and YMCA about the possibility of extending programming to African American youth. The “Ys,” also products of the Progressive Movement, served as important safety nets for African Americans throughout the United States. They were one of the few organizations to encourage interdenominational membership and to extend services to African Americans.³

It is uncertain what transpired among Stearns, the NAACP Youth Auxiliary, and the YMCA; Stearns and the NAACP turned to the YWCA to provide African American girls with recreational activities in San Diego. In 1920, Cordella Winn, the African American Secretary of Colored Work for the National Board of the YWCA, responded to Stearns’ request by surveying the San Diego area for potential YWCA programming for African American women and girls. Winn decided, however, that San Diego was not an appropriate location for an African American branch because of leadership and population concerns. In particular, she asserted that potential black leaders of a YWCA branch in San Diego had “no conception of all that is involved in such a step.” Furthermore, she determined that San Diego’s black population of 1,200 did not meet the YWCA’s minimum population requirement of 15,000. Winn suggested that African American

leaders start a Girl Reserves group, a popular YWCA club for ten to eighteen-year-old girls. This option did not offer African Americans the same benefits as an official branch, including an exclusive meeting facility. To remedy the lack of a place to meet, the wife of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) pastor B.R. Guy organized the Girl Reserves group in the early 1920s with meetings held in the church’s social hall. The Girl Reserves group lasted only a year, disbanding when the Guys moved to Los Angeles. Additionally, some of the other leaders of the Girl Reserves left the San Diego area as well, leaving no one to continue the program.⁴



“In the Midst of Things: Rebecca Craft and the Woman’s Civic League” ©SDHC #91:18476-1724, nd.

After the Girl Reserves dissolved, women in the San Diego NAACP continued to seek avenues to secure a recreational space for African American boys and girls. A few resources became available to African Americans by 1923. The Neighborhood House, a settlement house, was established in Logan Heights by the College Woman's Club with about twenty percent African American patrons. While the Neighborhood House set aside a few days per week for African Americans to use the club rooms, black women were displeased that their meeting schedule was dictated by the staff. Another drawback of the Neighborhood House was that the African American population was not a target group. One of the main goals of the Woman's Club was to understand its Mexican neighbors following increased immigration resulting from the Mexican Revolution.

Additionally, Logan Heights gained a few recreational outlets as a result of San Diego City Commissioner Charlotte Stearns' push for after school activities for African American youth. Memorial Junior High School, located in Logan Heights, was the site for community theatre, dance, and athletics during the summer months. The City of San Diego also converted vacant Logan Heights lots into playgrounds and developed "community leisure time centers" for adults and youth in partnership with the local schools to "continue the work of education." In addition to these community resources, some members of the San Diego NAACP, including Martha Dodge and Rebecca Craft, organized the Young People's Community Center for black youth. The facility located on 2936 Imperial Avenue was intended to serve as a social and civic center for art expos, entertainment, and guest speakers.⁵

Although African Americans were successful in acquiring recreational outlets for black youth, the community leaders' goals broadened to build a community center that served multiple purposes. These women recognized that African Americans in San Diego lacked basic community resources, including social services, reliable meeting places, temporary housing, employment, and networking opportunities. More importantly, a community center served as more than a building; it was a space to gain autonomy within a city that ignored and overlooked its black population. Securing a community space empowered black women to determine the use and purpose of that space within the boundaries of a residentially segregated community--in this case, to mobilize and battle local discrimination, educate black youth in race pride, and establish community roots in San Diego.

In 1923, Martha Dodge, a representative of the San Diego NAACP Youth Auxiliary and wife of Charles H. Dodge, the president of the San Diego NAACP from 1922 to 1923, declared that a goal of the auxiliary was to develop plans to

purchase land and build a community center exclusively for African American youth. In January 1924, the National NAACP Board of Directors reprimanded the San Diego NAACP for what they argued was a move toward segregation and a departure from the core integrationist values of the national organization. Since the San Diego Youth Auxiliary's plan was unsuccessful, it is possible that some members of the San Diego NAACP turned again to the YWCA as an alternative solution for establishing a community center for African American girls in San Diego.⁶

Even though nationwide the YWCA practiced racial separatism and had a history of limiting black participation, the African American women of San Diego recognized that affiliating with the organization had benefits. Some of the immediate resources that the YWCA offered African American women included a physical space to promote educational, recreational, and social programs, a paid Executive Secretary, and opportunities to attend YWCA conferences for leadership training. The San Diego YWCA also received funding, primarily from the Community Chest, an agency that raised money from businesses and philanthropists for local organizations. African Americans would not have access to this funding without its partnership with the YWCA. Also, the woman's organization gave black women opportunities to step into leadership roles, offering them autonomy within a female space. This was beneficial because they were often excluded from these roles in black organizations dominated by male leaders. This allowed women to expand their social and professional networks. The YWCA also offered African Americans a different venue and context from church and school to educate black youth, especially girls. African American women pursued a partnership with the San Diego YWCA because it was a method to achieve full civil rights. If African American women decided to reject the YWCA because of its separatist policies, they would lose access to valuable community resources.⁷

In July 1925, women from the San Diego NAACP returned to the YWCA inquiring about the process of developing a branch for African Americans in San Diego. Margaret O'Connell, Executive Director of the San Diego Chapter of the YWCA, corresponded with Eva Del Vakea Bowles, Executive for Colored Work on the National Board of the YWCA, regarding African American women's request to establish a branch in San Diego. Although the San Diego YWCA leadership mediated on behalf of the African American women's requests, overall they were hesitant about getting involved in and supporting an African American branch. O'Connell noted the impracticality and costly endeavor of establishing a branch to serve African Americans in two distant neighborhoods, La Jolla and Logan Heights.

Moreover, O'Connell added that the San Diego Chapter of the YWCA had

other pending affairs. The association's priority was to complete the \$325,000 "Casa Amiga," a new, five-story YWCA structure on a 100 by 150 square-foot lot in downtown San Diego. Likewise, Eva Bowles faced internal pressures from the National YWCA to approve of African American branches that had the "strongest chance" of becoming "model associations." Since the Girl Reserves had been short-lived and the black population was small, San Diego was considered an "unwise expansion." With affairs seemingly at a standstill, in September 1925, Ornie O. Branford, chairperson of an organization based in Logan Heights, possibly the NAACP, pressured O'Connell for a definitive response to the request for a YWCA for blacks in San Diego. O'Connell deferred to Bowles. Although Bowles did not approve of an African American branch in San Diego, she did assure Branford that the San Diego YWCA would work with the black women to establish another Girl Reserves. She also noted that there was a possibility of developing a branch in the future. The African American women decided to organize the Girl Reserves under the control of the San Diego Chapter of the YWCA. The leaders of the San Diego NAACP viewed the Girl Reserves as a stepping-stone to achieving YWCA branch status. African Americans could use the Girl Reserves program to gain greater access to a physical space and to create a platform for black female activism in San Diego.

African American Leaders of Clay Avenue YWCA



Clay Avenue Board, 1932.

The Clay Avenue Board, 1932, Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, Library and Information Access, San Diego State University.



Clay Avenue Branch facility, 2905 Clay Avenue, San Diego, CA, Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, Library and Information Access, San Diego State University.

The majority of the black leaders of the San Diego YWCA were middle class, educated, and trained professionals, notably educators. They shared in the middle-class goal of expanding women's roles beyond the domestic sphere to provide black communities with self-help resources directed toward "racial progress." Most of the leaders were also members of the San Diego NAACP and Bethel Baptist Church. Some of the principal organizers of the African American Girl Reserves included: Exie Lee Hampton, Rebecca Craft, Elethia Kinzy, Cordelia Tate, Alvessie Hackshaw, Alice Childress, Marcia Smith, and Octavia Payne with support from white leaders from the San Diego Chapter of the YWCA including branch advisor Lottie Porterfield and San Diego YWCA President Josephine Seaman.

In 1929, Rebecca Craft, former teacher and the first female president of the San Diego NAACP, set the tone for the women's mission within the YWCA Girl Reserves. In her NAACP inaugural address Craft insisted that women focus on mentoring and educating black youth in San Diego and recommended that they "study Negro history, Negro music, the great men and women of our race, etc." African American women's commitment to the Girl Reserves and other youth programming was an extension of the broader work of combating racial discrimination in San Diego and igniting black female activism.⁸

While the YWCA approved of an African American Girl Reserves, they did not initially offer African Americans a place to meet, not even at the Central YWCA located in downtown San Diego. At first, Girl Reserves meetings were held in non-YWCA facilities, including Bethel Baptist Church and the Young People's Community Center both located in Logan Heights. In September 1932,

the white YWCA leadership leased property on 2905 Clay Avenue in Logan Heights and designated it a YWCA facility for the African American Girl Reserves. The facility was on a 75 by 140 foot corner lot, with a cottage toward the back of the main building. The facility was located across the street from Bethel Baptist Church. Due to its location, the program was renamed the Clay Street Girl Reserves. Logan Heights was the ideal location for the community center because the neighborhood had one of the largest concentrations of African Americans in San Diego. In fact, many of the members and leaders of the Clay Street Girl Reserves lived in Logan Heights.⁹



Central YWCA "Casa Amiga," 1012 C Street, San Diego, CA. Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, Library and Information Access, San Diego State University.

Although the placement of the facility was conveniently located, it allowed the white leaders of the YWCA to keep African Americans within the limits of Logan Heights. Thus, it reduced the prospect of blacks accessing the Central YWCA located downtown, which was located approximately two miles from the Clay Street facility. African Americans were confined to their neighborhoods, near their churches, schools, and homes, which maintained the YWCA's racial segregation. There were inequitable differences between the Clay Street Girl Reserves facility and the Central San Diego YWCA "Casa Amiga" building amenities. For example, "Casa Amiga" had five stories, of which the top three were residence quarters. There were approximately seventy-five bedrooms, each equipped with running water, a telephone, bedding, curtains, heating and a few with patio terraces. The first floor had a lobby, information desk, shared library and living room, employment bureau, an auditorium that seated 250 people, a conference room, four offices, and a swimming pool. The second floor was devoted to five clubrooms. While the San Diego YWCA stated that any girl or woman could become a member of the association, giving them access to all YWCA activities, African Americans were not permitted to use the downtown gym, swimming pool, or residence. Although the Central YWCA served a larger membership body, African Americans at Clay Street Girl Reserves did not have the same accommodations in Logan Heights.¹⁰

The black women did not contest the physically separate facilities and instead attempted to make it an advantage. By having a black and female community center in Logan Heights, they gained autonomy over the space. On the one hand, the type of work they did in the YWCA community center was inwardly focused; the community work and activism that the black women envisioned took place within Logan Heights. On the other hand, their work in the NAACP was outwardly focused, as they actively pushed against the constraints of discrimination to achieve citizenship rights. The black women used the YWCA to concentrate on addressing immediate issues plaguing African Americans within the boundaries of Logan Heights.¹¹

The Clay Street Girl Reserves quickly achieved a growing membership. In November 1932 the Clay Street Girl Reserves was acknowledged for the first time at a YWCA Board meeting by San Diego YWCA President Virginia Esterly. She reported that the Clay Street Girl Reserves, which she described as “developed from practically nothing,” had about seventy members. By January 1933, the Clay Street Girl Reserves had the third largest membership in the city, rivaled only by the Girl Reserves at San Diego High School and Hoover High School. Accordingly, the Clay Street leadership soon expanded YWCA programming, prompting them to change the Clay Street Girl Reserves to Clay Street Clubs. The women offered an array of activities including sewing, dancing, and gym classes, and sponsored



Clay Avenue Branch Girl Reserves on the property of Mrs. Pryor and Nellie Coons. Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives, Library and Information Access, San Diego State University.



Thelma Gorham Thompson.

theatre and singing clubs. The Great Depression possibly drove membership higher, indicating that these activities were valuable to black girls in the community.¹²

In October 1933, Exie Lee Hampton, former teacher and the Executive Secretary, organized two Girl Reserve Groups at Memorial Junior High School, attracting forty-two members, led by college student Thelma Gorham Thompson. They also started a college and business group called "The Excelsior Club" which drew nineteen members. The Excelsior Club studied "the Negro's accomplishments" in art, literature, and music, a focus that aligned with Rebecca

Craft's NAACP mission for women in San Diego. Additionally, Rebecca Craft extended similar programming to adults. In 1931, Craft supported the coordination of a "Negro in History" night course at San Diego High School out of her concern that African Americans in San Diego did not have racial pride. Clay Street Clubs offered a glee club and choir directed by Octavia Payne Coleman. The leaders of Clay Street Clubs also taught nine health classes and an evening literacy course for adults. They usually ended the month with a special program for the public. For example, in June 1933 they had a piano recital by Los Angeles pianist Lorenza Cole held in the YWCA auditorium. Clay Street Clubs' member Delphia McPherson recalled the impact that the organization had on her as a girl. She participated in the choir, performed ballet and tap, and joined the Girl Reserves. The leaders were also an important part of her experience. In particular, she recollected that Hampton was personable and had the leadership qualities of a teacher. Despite earlier opposition to African Americans affiliating with the YWCA, African American women at Clay Street Clubs successfully used YWCA resources to establish their desired community center.¹³

The black women had limited privileges within the San Diego YWCA. Exie Lee Hampton, for example, was invited to attend monthly Board meetings. Outside of being physically present and reporting on the activities at the Clay Street Clubs facility, she had no other voice. Hampton did not participate or offer commentary on the activities and decisions made by the San Diego Chapter as a whole, nor did she have voting power. She was not even an official member of the Board. Not only were African Americans physically detached from the daily events at the Central YWCA, but they were also excluded from fully participating within the local association. Black and white members were offered only a few opportunities

to hold joint events. In 1933, YWCA President Esterly mentioned that Clay Street Clubs “continue[d] to have their own activities and set on an invitation basis so far as mingling of the groups is concerned.” One of these invitation-based activities included black and white girls attending the Asilomar Girl Reserves camp. Although this camp offered both black and white girls some interaction, the YWCA remained an association that did not embrace racial equality. They refused to develop relationships with the black leaders because they did not consider them as equals.¹⁴

In 1934, Rebecca Craft, along with five other women from the Clay Street Clubs, formed the Women’s Civic League, which functioned initially as a fundraising committee to subsidize the Clay Street Clubs. The League, also located on Clay Avenue, sponsored community talks and requested “a silver offering” to benefit the Girl Reserves. The Women’s Civic League later expanded to a membership of 200 people. The mission of the organization was, “to work out internal problems through constructive programs, and to act concertedly and intelligently upon facts.” The women pursued critical community issues and laws “to study science of government in an effort to overcome some of the cloudy viewpoints as they affect us [African Americans] in civic affairs.” This included pressuring city



Clay Avenue neighborhood Bethel Baptist Church interior. ©SDHC #91:18476.429.

officials to install traffic signals and streetlights in Logan Heights, organizing community cleanup campaigns, providing college scholarships, and supporting the campaign to hire Jasper Davis to the San Diego police force, to become the first African American police officer in San Diego.¹⁵

The African American women of the YWCA continued to seek additional resources beyond acquiring the Clay Street Clubs facility for black girls. They built upon this goal by identifying housing and employment solutions for African Americans in Logan Heights. As early as April 1935, the Clay Street leaders moved forward with plans to expand beyond the Girl Reserves and their additional YWCA programming, to pursue their original goal of being recognized as “a regular YWCA branch.” Not only would the African American group be fully incorporated into the Y Movement, they would gain the added benefit of having a salaried Executive Director, the opportunity to attend conferences, and the chance to advance their networks. In 1936, Clay Street Clubs’ leadership and the San Diego Board invited Cordella Winn, the National Secretary for Colored Work of the YWCA National Board, to visit San Diego to help start the process of transforming Clay into an official branch.¹⁶

Pursuing YWCA Branch Status

From February 25 to 28, 1936, the leaders of Clay Street Clubs met with Cordella Winn to review the requirements for converting Clay Street Clubs into a branch. Even though Winn opposed branch status in 1920, she was now willing to review San Diego’s progress. Since 1920, Clay Street Clubs’ membership had grown to at least one hundred, and the leadership had stabilized. If granted branch status, San Diego would join Los Angeles, Oakland, and Portland as the only African American YWCA branches on the West Coast.¹⁷

After Winn’s visit, the women of Clay Street Clubs began the process of working with the leaders of the San Diego YWCA to complete the necessary paperwork to transition to branch status. Although they had not yet established an official branch, the women voted on representatives for the Clay Street Clubs Committee of Management. Exie Lee Hampton was elected as Executive Secretary, Alice Childress as Chair of Committee Management, E.W. Anderson as Chair of Finance, Lottie Porterfield as liaison to the Board of Directors, and two additional white women from the San Diego YWCA Board. The women also began the process of writing a constitution. The Committee of Management developed a fully structured program of activities, with the addition of an office and housing facilities. The activities included a department for young girls to participate in the Girl Reserves, conferences, summer camp, glee club, choir, and dance. They



YWCA girls club: the Pirateers. ©SDHC #NB 000370. Photo by Norman Baynard.

also had a Girls and Women at Work Department, which included the Industrial Club and which supported employed women and college students with housing, job placement, and recreation. While Clay Street leaders were eager to make the transition to branch status within a year or two following Winn's visit, it took four years to become an official branch. The process was likely prolonged due to decreased leadership support and finances because of the Great Depression.¹⁸

The black and white leaders collaborated more on Clay Street Clubs activities following Winn's visit. Two months after Winn's visit, the committee met to discuss potential employment opportunities for African Americans in response to the Great Depression. According to a YWCA assessment, it was "practically impossible to get domestic employment" in San Diego, a common job for African American women. This was a serious issue because black women were excluded from other work. The Committee of Management considered accepting the National Youth Administration's (NYA) Library Project at Clay Street Clubs. The NYA was a New Deal agency of the Works Projects Administration (WPA), a government-funded program implemented nationwide to aid local governments facing decreasing revenues as a result of the Great Depression. It also was designed to train and put unemployed Americans back to work. The YWCA committee agreed to participate in the program. Edith D. Sawyer, a member of the National Board who was in San Diego conducting an evaluation of Clay Street on behalf of the San Diego YWCA,

noted the respectful and productive exchange of conversation during the meeting:

I have rarely seen such a good illustration of actual group work process as occurred in this meeting. There was literally no pressure but the group moved through discussion from almost united opposition to the project to actual discussion to cooperate with it. Real thinking went on throughout the discussion. The white members participated but not more than anyone else.

The black and white women demonstrated potential to work interracial and collaboratively. Still, the conversation was in the context of developing separate solutions for African Americans; this was not a collaborative effort to support all women in the local association. Four months later, fifty women at Clay Street Clubs were employed through the WPA. Although the WPA project reinforced segregation in the San Diego YWCA, it served as another way for African American women to expand upon the resources that the YWCA offered. At the time, the only employed person at Clay Street Clubs was Executive Director Exie Lee Hampton. Committee leaders were volunteers. The library project was a significant means for extending YWCA services beyond youth to aid African American women seeking employment during the worst economic crisis in United States history.¹⁹

In 1938, San Diego YWCA Board members and Clay Avenue leaders faced a challenge when President Brockett announced that the owners who had leased the Clay Street Clubs property were demanding a 100 percent increase in rent. Representatives of the Finance Committee advised the general board to purchase the property. The board took out a loan for \$2,000 from the San Diego Trust and Savings Bank. Former President Josephine Seaman supplemented the bank loan with a personal \$1200 loan. Likewise, the Secretary Carrie F. Ink loaned \$3,500 to help meet the remaining balance, and Porterfield donated \$100 for the mortgage. By May 2, 1938, the San Diego YWCA became the owners of Clay Street Clubs property, ensuring the continued presence of an African American community center in Logan Heights.²⁰

With a permanent community center confirmed, Clay Street leaders turned their attention again to applying for YWCA branch status. Although Clay Street leadership introduced the Committee of Management and gained a facility, they had not yet formally applied to become a branch of the YWCA. On March 21, 1940, Porterfield gave a presentation before the board about "race relationships as these affect the San Diego YWCA and the Clay Street Center." In this presentation, Porterfield asserted that the Central YWCA should emulate the New York City YWCA's example of interracial cooperation. In February 1940, Porterfield visited

the 139th Street Branch for African American women in New York to observe black and white leadership following their adoption of YWCA's experimental "center" model. The National Board was in the process of restructuring the definition of a YWCA branch as they moved toward the goal of integrating local associations. The concept of a center was to decentralize a city's main YWCA by dispersing smaller YWCA facilities, or centers, throughout the city. Members would have privileges at all YWCA facilities within the city. While the New York association was not integrated, it had black representation on its board, encouraged the membership of immigrants, and had expanded their services, including a larger facility for clubrooms, a residence, and trade school. The center for African Americans was located adjacent to the main New York YWCA building, which placed black and white leaders and members in closer proximity. Porterfield's impression was that the association had "the complete cooperation of the Central YWCA of New York with the Negro leaders."²¹

After Porterfield's presentation on New York City's new YWCA model, the board responded with a lengthy discussion of which Katherine Halsey described: "the matter of branch and race relations rather came to a head." As a supporter of racial equality and integration, Porterfield likely pressured the board to consider a greater commitment to interracial cooperation, including integrating the San Diego association. Some white leaders were likely offended by Porterfield's critique of "race relations" at the San Diego YWCA because they believed they had cooperatively supported Clay Street Clubs financially and administratively. White leaders welcomed black participation in the San Diego YWCA by means of the racially separate facilities. They were not willing to grant black women leadership authority in all aspects of the local association.

Another concern board members had was the restructuring of the organization meant that African Americans would lose autonomy within the organization and direct funding. Halsey recognized the value of having a community center distinctly for African Americans in San Diego:

There seems distinct value in having the only social work agency working with Negroes maintain as much identity as possible with direct representation on welfare councils and Chest groups. I should say that the branch membership idea is needed also and that there would be some loss in trying to carry the relationship through a center with the membership and leadership functioning only in the entire association. However, we will consider all these things when the committee gets down to work and the results may not be what I expect.



*The studio of Norman Baynard, well known African American photographer, at 2695 Clay Avenue.
©SDHC #91:18476.1651.*

African American autonomy of the Clay Street Clubs provided them with the financial backing of the YWCA and Community Chest, a distinct meeting place, housing, leadership platform, and paid staff. In turn, African Americans created a space that empowered black girls through recreational activities, assisted black women in discovering their political voices, and searched for temporary employment for black women. Although African Americans were determined to be fully realized as equals, working within a racially separate organization secured their independence in the only community center of its kind for blacks in San Diego.

The white leaders ensured that they did not sacrifice any of their power. In fact, the transition to branch status increased their influence over Clay Street Clubs. While the San Diego Board was not directly involved in the daily activities at Clay Street Clubs, they owned the facility, had representatives on the Clay Street Clubs Committee of Management, and controlled the majority of their financial support. White leaders accepted black participation in the San Diego YWCA as long as white leaders assumed control of black participation within the organization. By continuing to support racially segregated facilities, unequal leadership, and members' limited access to the full benefits of YWCA membership, African Americans did not gain influence, and the central association did not lose power to the local association. The Board rejected the center model, but stated they were "ready to confer with the Clay Street group whenever they are ready

to present the necessary qualifications for branch status.”²²

In April 1941, the San Diego Board welcomed “a closer relationship between the two associations” when Clay Street Clubs was officially accepted as a branch of the San Diego YWCA. Consequently, Clay Street Clubs was renamed the Clay Avenue Branch of the YWCA. This partnership with the San Diego YWCA, although troubled, led to recreational, housing, and employment resources for African American women and girls. To maintain an African American community center in Logan Heights, the black women’s strategy was to work within a racially separate and unequal environment. This did not mean that black women accepted racial inequality. They were determined to use the YWCA’s resources to their advantage to secure a space to politically mobilize, to create a platform for African Americans and women to express themselves, and to support an ignored and overlooked population.²³

The story continues with African Americans’ struggle to maintain YWCA services at the Clay Avenue Branch in the neighborhood of Logan Heights before it closed in 1951. The closure was in accordance with the National YWCA’s Interracial Charter, which ended segregation within the YWCA. The significance of the origin story of the Clay Avenue Branch is that it identifies black female activism in the early twentieth century and their practical and immediate solutions to racial oppression in San Diego. They established the first and only social services community center for African American women in San Diego at the time.



Grace Covenant Christian Church of the Harvest at 29th and Clay Avenue near the location of the former YWCA. Editors’ collection.

NOTES

1. Robert Fikes, San Diego Branch NAACP, "SDNAACP Chronology," <http://www.sandiegonaacp.org/> (accessed June 28, 2014); Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 57; Gail Madyun, Larry Malone, and Robert Fikes, "Black Pioneers in San Diego, 1880-1920," *The Journal of San Diego History* (hereafter *JSDH*) 27, no. 2 (Spring 1981) <http://www.sandiegohistory.org/journal/81spring/blacks.htm> (accessed July 9, 2014).
2. Fikes, "SDNAACP Chronology"; Carlos M. Larralde and Richard Griswold del Castillo, "San Diego's Ku Klux Klan, 1920-1980," *JSDH* 46, nos. 2 and 3 (Spring/Summer 2000) <http://www.sandiegohistory.org/journal/2000-2/klan.htm> (accessed July 9, 2014); San Diego NAACP Chapter to National NAACP, Letters, July 6, 1927, September 17, 1927, February 7, 1924, Walter L. McDonald, NAACP Branch Files (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1991); Frank Norris, "Logan Heights: Growth and Change in the Old 'East End,'" *JSDH* 29, no. 1 (Winter 1983), <https://www.sandiegohistory.org/journal/83winter/logan.htm> (accessed July 16, 2014); African Americans lived in downtown San Diego, Coronado, Julian, and the East County. Robert Carlton, "A Talk with Bert Ritchey: An Interview by Leonard Knight," *JSDH* 42, no. 2 (Fall 1996), <https://www.sandiegohistory.org/journal/1996/april/ritchey/> (accessed August 25, 2016); Lorenza Taylor Pace, "La Jolla, California's Early Black Settlers, 1880-1930," in *La Jolla, California Black Pioneers and Pioneer Descendants, 1880-1974*, ed. Bettye Brown, Charley Buchanan, Donnie Epps, Catherine Hayek, and Lorenza Taylor-Pace (San Diego: private printing, 2010), 17; Kathryn A. Jordan, "Life Beyond Gold: A New Look at the History of Julian, California," *JSDH* 54, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 101-112; Madyun, Malone, and Fikes, "Black Pioneers in San Diego, 1880-1929"; Irene Bell Outlaw, *Through the Years...Reflections of Timeless Service* (San Diego: Epsilon Xi Omega Chapter, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, 2013); Robert Fikes, "Presidents: Biographical Sketches of the Presidents of the San Diego NAACP."
3. "Council Expected to Confirm Slate of Appointments," *The San Diego Union*, May 12, 1919; "Give Addresses on Protection of Children," *The San Diego Union*, May 21, 1919; William H. Chafe, "Women's History and Political History: Some Thoughts on Progressivism and the New Deal," ed. Nancy A. Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsack, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 103-104; Jane Addams, *The Spirit of Youth And The City Streets*, (Chicago: MacMillan, 1915), 5; Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn, *Black Neighbors* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 2.
4. Margaret O'Connell to Eva Bowles, Letter, July 10, 1925, July 23, 1925, YWCA of the U.S.A. Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, MA; Nancy Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA, 1906-46* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 191; United States Census, 1920, United States Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/prod/www/decennial.html> (accessed July 21, 2014); The Girl Reserves Handbook, "The object of the [Girl Reserves] movement is to give girls through normal, natural activities, the habits, insights, and ideals which will make them responsible women, capable and ready to help make America more true to its best hopes and traditions," Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) of San Diego County Records, Special Collections and University Archives, Library and Information Access, San Diego State University (hereafter YWCA Records, SDSU); "A.M.E. Church Conference is Adjourned," *The San Diego Union Tribune*, October 24, 1919; "Ministers of Bethel A.M.E. Church, Los Angeles," http://bethelamela.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=47:chronology-of-ministers-at-bethel-ame-church&catid=34:history&Itemid=59. The church had a high turn over of ministers. "Bethel History: A Brief History of Bethel Memorial AME Church," Bethel Memorial A.M.E. Church, <http://www.bethelamesd.com/about-bethel/bethel-history/> (accessed July 21, 2014).
5. "Logan Heights Play Center To Continue," *The San Diego Union*, August 18, 1925; "Community Day To Be Feted By Schools," *The San Diego Union*, November 15, 1929; "Recreation Pier Will Be Opened To Public Today: Swimming Program, Dance, In Evening Will Feature Long-Awaited Event," *The San Diego Union*, July 26, 1929; Rebecca Craft was the director of the

- Young People's Community Center. "Mrs. Rebecca Craft," *The San Diego Union*, December 7, 1945; "Will Leave Bank Post for Health: Chas. H. Dodge and Wife to go North for Higher Altitudes; Absence indefinite," *The San Diego Union*, May 6, 1930; "Plan Benefit for Colored Group Aid," *The San Diego Union*, April 13, 1931; "Negro Baritone to Appear Here," *The San Diego Union*, April 19, 1931.
6. Fikes, "SDNAACP Chronology"; E.J. Gentry, Branch President, to James Weldon Johnson, Director of Branches, Letter, February 18, 1924; E.J. Gentry and Mrs. C.H. Dodge to the National NAACP, Letters, February 7, 1924, February 18, 1924; Hattie Freeman to Robert Bagnall, Letter, October 1, 1928, Walter L. McDonald, NAACP Branch Files.
 7. Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood*, 41-43.
 8. San Diego NAACP Women's Auxiliary to National NAACP, Letter, February 17, 1928 Women's Auxiliary; "Mrs. Craft in San Diego, CA, Makes Race Relations Hum," speech, January 10, 1930, Walter L. McDonald, NAACP Branch Files.
 9. Eva Bowles made the recommendation that they begin holding meetings in their churches. The Young People's Community Center opened in Logan Heights in 1925 and was directed by Rebecca Craft. Eva Bowles to Ornie Branford and Margaret O'Connell, Letter, November 9, 1925; "History of Clay Avenue Branch YWCA," Letter, 1948; San Diego YWCA Newsletter, "Clay Street Center Girl Reserves" (June 1933); "Descriptive Report of the Clay Street Clubs" (January 1940). The group was also referred to as the "Colored Girl Reserves," San Diego YWCA Board of Director Minutes: "Negro Center," March 16, 1933, YWCA Records, SDSU; Google Maps show that they were next to each other. <https://www.google.com/maps/place/2905+Clay+Ave,+San+Diego,+CA+92113/@32.7029534,-117.1336847,17z/data=!3m1!4b1!4m2!3m1!1s0x80d953748f3d7f9d:0x5319670129f6addb> (accessed July 22, 2014). There was also a sizable number of Latinos, a few whites, and Japanese Americans. Cristin M. McVey, "Traces of Black San Diego, 1890-1950" (PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 2004), 52.
 10. There was also a kitchen, second living room, dining room, laundry room, sewing room, and gym. "Description of San Diego YWCA Building," Report; "National Questionnaire from the Interracial Commission Report," October 16, 1949; San Diego YWCA Constitution, March 23, 1935, and June 26, 1944, YWCA Records, SDSU.
 11. Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), 22.
 12. San Diego YWCA Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, "Announcement," November 14, 1932; "Girl Reserve Statistics," Report, January 1932-January 1933, YWCA Records, SDSU; Clare Crane, *The San Diego YWCA: A Short History, 1907-1982* (San Diego: The YWCA of San Diego County, 1982), 24.
 13. Thelma Gorham Thompson, student at San Diego State University, was the advisor of the Higher Thinking Triangle at Memorial Junior High School. "Girl Reserves," *The San Diego Union*, October 21, 1933; San Diego YWCA Newsletter, "Clay Street Center Girl Reserves," June 1933, YWCA Records, SDSU; "Mrs. Craft in San Diego, Cal., Makes Race Relations Hum," Speech, Walter L. McDonald, NAACP Branch Files. In 1931, "The Negro in History" Course was created for young and old adults, taught on Thursdays from 7 to 9 p.m. at San Diego High School by Antoinette W. Powers. "School Offers Course on 'Negro in History,'" *The San Diego Union*, April 9, 1931; Octavia Payne Coleman graduated from SDSU with a BA in Music. She sang in The San Diego Harmony Singers "colored chores," under D.V. Allen's management. She was also a charter member of Hampton's Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority (Beta Kappa). "Music at the Churches" *The San Diego Union*, January 12, 1929; Marguerite E. Bowlby, "Adult Education Classes," *The San Diego Union*, December 7, 1936; "Beta Kappa: Octavia Coleman," *The San Diego Union*, December 7, 1936. Coleman's family had attended Bethel Baptist Church since the 1930s. They migrated to San Diego from Texas. Delphia McPherson, phone interview by Charla Wilson, August 15, 2014.

THE JOURNAL OF SAN DIEGO HISTORY

14. San Diego Board Meeting Minutes, April 20, 1933, YWCA Records, SDSU; Crane, *The San Diego YWCA*, 27.
15. Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood*, 42; Gail Madyun, "In the Midst of Things: Rebecca Craft and the Women's Civic League," *JSDH* 34, no. 1 (1988): 29-37; Bessie Irene Smith to Clay Avenue Branch, Letter, "Civic League Celebrates Golden Jubilee: Golden Jubilee of Women's Civic League," October 15, 1984, YWCA Records, SDSU; "Civic League Offers Talk," *The San Diego Union*, April 28, 1934.
16. Board of Directors Meetings, June 18, 1936, December 1935 or January 1936; San Diego YWCA Newsletter, "Our Youngest Child is Growing Up," April 1935, YWCA Records, SDSU. There were some members of Clay Street Clubs, possibly parents, who disapproved of a branch transition. The reasons are unknown. However, I speculate it was because members would be required to pay an annual fee. Considering this transition took place during the Great Depression, this possibly deterred African Americans from YWCA participation. It is also possible that African Americans were aware of white YWCA opposition. "History of Clay Avenue Branch YWCA, Report, 1948, YWCA Records, SDSU.
17. "Report of Conferences and Meetings Held with Mrs. Cordella A. Winn by the Clay Street Committee During Her Visit, February 25 to 28, 1936"; San Diego YWCA Board Meeting Minutes, "Guests," December 17, 1936, YWCA Records, SDSU; Margaret O'Connell to Eva Bowles, Letter, July 10, 1925; "Pamphlet on the Constitution, Definition of a Center," July 1938, 54, in *San Diego's YWCA*, U.S.A. Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.
18. Alice Childress was elected the first Chair of Committee Management, but was replaced by Alvessie Hackshaw following Childress' death. "Report of Conferences and Meetings Held with Mrs. Cordella A. Winn by the Clay Street Committee During Her Visit, February 25 to 28, 1936"; "Clay Street YWCA Clubs," San Diego Board of Directors Meetings Minutes, December 17, 1936; "Clay Street Young Women's Christian Association Clubs: General Aims and Objectives," Report, 1936, YWCA Records, SDSU; "The Industrial Awakening of the YWCA," <https://www.smith.edu/library/libs/ssc/ywca2/case4.html>; National Board Visitation Report, March 18-21, 1936, YWCA of the U.S.A. Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.
19. Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 36; Martha H. Swain, "A New Deal in Libraries: Federal Relief Work and Library Service, 1933-1943," *Libraries & Culture* 30, no. 3 (Summer 1995), 265; National Board Visitation Report, March 18-21, 1936, July 14, 1936, YWCA of the U.S.A. Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College. The 1936 audit only shows the amount paid to the Clay Avenue Executive Secretary. "Salary Scales San Diego YWCA," Report, April 20, 1939, YWCA Records, SDSU.
20. Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, April 21, 1938. The San Diego Trust and Savings Bank considered this a fair price after they appraised the property at \$3,960. Seaman paid a monthly mortgage fee, committing to \$100 monthly, \$50 toward the mortgage, and \$50 for operating expenses. "Gifts," Report, date unknown, possibly 1942; Clay Avenue Audit, November 18, 1938, YWCA Records, SDSU.
21. Board of Directors Meeting Minutes, March 21, 1940; San Diego YWCA Newsletter, "Interracial," May 1940; National Board Visitation Report, May 22, 1940, YWCA Records, SDSU; Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), 154, 161, 172.
22. Helen D. Beavers to Katherine C. Halsey, Letter, May 22, 1940; National Board Visitation Report, May 28, 1940, YWCA of the U.S.A. Records, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College.
23. San Diego Board of Director Meeting Minutes, "Clay Avenue By-laws Accepted," February 27, 1941; San Diego YWCA Newsletter, "Clay Street Center Girl Reserves," April 1941, YWCA Records, SDSU; Robin D.G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), 4, 75.