The Price of Exclusion: Dallas Municipal Policy and its Impact on African Americans

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Until very recently, historians have neglected the contributions women made to the civil rights crusade. Many remember Rosa Parks of Montgomery, Alabama, and Daisy Bates of Little Rock, Arkansas, but few recall local or regional leaders such as Juanita Craft of Dallas, who helped desegregate one of the largest cities in Dixie.

Some people overlook the civil rights movement in Dallas because it appeared to lack the deep segregation of other Southern cities. A *Texas Monthly* article in 1991 claimed that the movement bypassed Dallas. But blacks in Dallas experienced the same discrimination as African Americans in other parts of the South. Even after all the civil rights advances of the 1950s and 1960s, in 1970 Dallas ranked fourth on a list of the twenty most segregated cities in the nation. Before the *Brown* decision of 1954, Jim Crow maintained a strong foothold in Texas in segregated state parks, education, and transportation, and a Texas statute outlawed miscegenation. Although there were only five Jim Crow laws, Juanita Craft recalls that, “they had the strength of a thousand. And they were doubly enforced by tradition.”

In the 1950s and 1960s, while other Southern cities reluctantly integrated public facilities, Dallas lagged behind. Blacks in Dallas lived in conditions similar to those at the end of the Civil War, and most African Americans worked as janitors or domestics, for lower wages than whites. Women’s jobs were relegated overwhelmingly to the service sector. As in most Jim Crow cities, whites barred African Americans from eating in restaurants, trying on clothes in department stores, or using public restrooms and drinking fountains. Housing was also segregated; blacks mostly lived in the South Dallas area of Oak Cliff.

Dallas had a small percentage of blacks compared to other Southern cities, but that percentage was growing. In 1960, African Americans constituted approximately nineteen percent of the total population in Dallas. By 1970, although they only made up 24.8 percent of the population, they ranked the highest of any group, 44.5 percent, in the Dallas Independent School District.

When the Supreme Court announced its decision in *Brown vs. Topeka* in 1954, Dallas whites recognized that desegregation was inevitable but did not take voluntary action to accelerate it. After the violence that erupted in Little Rock, Arkansas, Birmingham and Selma, Alabama, and Jackson, Mississippi, Dallas’ elite decided to begin the process of integration and control it before others launched the local civil rights movement on a path they did not wish to trod. In the 1960s, a small group of white businessmen and clergy ran the city’s government. Known as the “Dallas Way,” these men governed the social, economic, and political structure of the city. Hand-picking African Americans, they sought an integrated council that would peacefully oversee local desegregation. The white business leaders had one primary goal – preventing violence in order to promote business.

With the tragic assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas, citizens realized they must make changes to restore the city’s image. Earlier,
Dallasites had assaulted Ambassador to the United Nations Adlai Stevenson when he tried to give a speech there. Shortly after Stevenson was mobbed, Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson and Mrs. Johnson were attacked in downtown Dallas by reactionaries, dubbed the "mink coat mob" because many were wealthy. They struck Mrs. Johnson several times. Indeed, Dallas had a bad image. While local leaders continued to allow militant whites free reign, the Dallas Way decided to reform the city's image through censorship of local affairs. The leading newspapers, including the African American owned *Dallas Express*, agreed to practice self-censorship by refusing to report activities or demonstrations that might lead to violence on the part of blacks. Dallas businessmen were willing to undertake any task to maintain a good image for their city that would foster prosperous business relations. Thus, when the civil rights movement started to gain strength in Dallas, a strong, intelligent, and dedicated leader was willing to fight the white business structure to end segregation. Juanita Craft proved to be the perfect choice.

Juanita Jewel Craft was born in 1902 in Round Rock, Texas. The granddaughter of slaves, she graduated from Prairie View Normal and Industrial School in 1921 with a certificate in dressmaking. After a failed marriage, she moved to Dallas in 1925 and became a bellmaid at the Adolphus Hotel, twice attending Eleanor Roosevelt. After watching her mother die after white physicians refused her entrance to an all-white hospital, Craft became involved in the struggle for black equality.

In 1935, Craft joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The Texas NAACP had two primary goals in the 1930s - ending discrimination in the Texas Democratic primary election and expanding educational opportunities for blacks. In 1945, Craft led a massive NAACP membership campaign in Dallas, expanding its rolls to 7,000 in 1946. The NAACP also appointed Craft state organizer in 1946, an unpaid position that she held for eleven years. Traveling from town to town, Craft held meetings, solicited contributions, and organized new chapters – she was "like a blood transfusion to a very weak patient." By 1958, Craft had organized 182 new branches in Texas. She also was involved in voter registration drives and was the first black woman deputized to sell poll taxes and the first black woman to vote in Dallas County. She traveled throughout the state, convincing African Americans it was worth paying the $1.50 poll tax to vote. She recalled, "You had to put on your best argument to convince a lot of people that it was worth it."

With the aid of A. Maceo Smith, the NAACP's Executive Secretary, Craft sought to strengthen the NAACP in Dallas and promote it statewide. Thus, the Dallas chapter of the NAACP became the center from which flowed the efforts to integrate the University of Texas, overturn the Democratic primary, and equalize teachers' salaries. Although Craft organized numerous branches and held a number of important positions, she never became president of the Texas NAACP. Only in recent years has the NAACP and the city of Dallas recognized her contribution.

The most important position Craft held in the NAACP was that of youth advisor. Through the NAACP, Craft's goal was to end de facto segregation in Dallas and give African American youths equal opportunity in education, in jobs, and in social situations. Although the NAACP Youth Councils served
primarily as social organizations, Craft tried to make them educational instruments as well. She viewed the Councils as training programs for the youths, teaching them about the NAACP and the many doors the organization opened for blacks. The children also served an important role for the NAACP. The youths were more than future NAACP members, they were "vitally needed as plaintiffs in school cases as well as discrimination suits involving employment and recreation facilities." Only through training of the young people could the NAACP succeed, and education was the key to preparing the youths for school integration and to reduce prejudice.

Besides organizing new local and collegiate chapters, Craft encouraged young people to attend the NAACP national conferences. She held youth meetings in her backyard and taught children about the responsibilities and privileges of citizenship. Occasionally, as many as one hundred youths gathered in her yard to socialize; in time, they became members of the NAACP and active in the civil rights movement. From strategy planned in some of these backyard meetings came perhaps the most memorable event of Craft's term as Dallas youth director - the desegregation of the State Fair of Texas, held annually in Dallas.

The Youth Council, in 1955, threatened to demonstrate against the Negro Achievement Day at the State Fair. Negro Achievement Day, usually the last day of the fair, was set aside for blacks to enjoy the State Fair and promote their school organizations apart from whites. By peacefully demonstrating against Negro Day, the young people hoped to make whites recognize the "burden and humiliation of a one day restriction." Although blacks were allowed to attend the State Fair on any given day, local white hostility and local tradition forced all but the most daring to wait for "their" day despite the obvious discrimination - a problem the State Fair's board of directors claimed had not existed since 1953. James H. Stewart, general manager of the Fair, admitted in 1955 that two rides remained closed to blacks because they entailed physical contact with whites. Some eating establishments did not serve African Americans, and those that did forced them to eat standing or perched on stools. Stewart justified these actions as maintaining "harmony and good operations," to prevent a racial crisis that "would lead to violence." Ironically, Stewart concluded by stating that the State Fair "belongs to everyone and is open to all people at all times regardless of race, creed or color."

In 1955, the Youth Council decided to investigate the validity of Stewart's statement. The members agreed that if they found no discrimination, they would not picket Negro Achievement Day. The investigation proved Stewart's pronouncements false. The Fair's employees allowed some of the black children to ride, eat, and drink, while refusing others. Pepsi Cola consistently refused to serve blacks, and all were denied access to the two rides that put them in direct contact with whites. The youths also discovered that Stewart had issued a letter the day before their investigation, warning all concessions to "be nice to them." Concluding that the State Fair practiced inconsistent, but obvious, discrimination, the young people decided to set up a picket line at the State Fair on Negro Achievement Day. The youngsters peacefully marched throughout the day, carrying signs that read, "This is Negro Achievement Day at the Fair - Keep Out," "Racial Segregation is Un-Clean, Un-American, and Un-Moral - Stay Out," and "Don't Sell Your Pride for a Segregated Ride - Stay Out."
The Youth Council also sent warnings throughout the state to African Americans who planned to attend Negro Achievement Day. The Parrott, the NAACP Youth Council’s newsletter, cried, “Up to date Negroes have been too dumb and stupid to see through the whole scheme of the Negro Achievement Day.” Stating that even one incident of segregation was too much, the paper discouraged blacks from crossing the picket line. The Dallas Express warned blacks that their attendance would “encourage the officials of the Fair to further insult every intelligent Negro in the state of Texas, and will do irreparable injury to our children.” The larger grievance, however, claimed that a day set aside for African Americans was “segregation within itself, aside from the fact of discrimination.” Although many high school bands turned away from the picketed gates, several blacks continued to participate in Negro Achievement Day.

Craft knew that most white Texans would not approve of the demonstration, but she was surprised that some African Americans did not agree on the issue of picketing. The Texas Citizens Council, a lily white organization, condemned the NAACP’s tactics, as was expected. Stewart claimed he did not understand the picketing, stating the State Fair “has been a pioneer in making available to Negroes … facilities that are not open to them anywhere in the state.” Even more discouraging, African Americans did not overwhelmingly support the boycott. The Dallas Negro Chamber of Commerce first denounced the picket, then supported it, and many blacks crossed the picket line. The Dallas Express and the Dallas Morning News debated whether the demonstration actually discouraged attendance. Three days after the event, the Morning News claimed that a larger crowd attended Negro Achievement Day in 1955 than the previous year, rendering the boycott unsuccessful. In rebuttal, the Express stated that the participants noticed far fewer people than the previous year, and many who attended did not know about the picket or they would have stayed at home. The Dallas Express concluded that the issue of picketing the State Fair split blacks throughout the state.

Regardless of its success, the picket demonstrated the discontent of African Americans with the segregation and discrimination at the State Fair; but, it did not change the Fair’s policies. So, the next year, Craft encouraged another statewide boycott. Urging members of the Youth Council to meet with people in their churches, organizations, and homes to discourage attendance, Craft offered a prize to the person who brought the most people to help picket. But because of problems within the state NAACP organization, the Youth Council canceled the demonstration in 1956. The young people continued their campaign the following year, mailing out letters discouraging attendance and sponsoring a dance to compete with Negro Achievement Day. When the Fair finally desegregated in 1963, adults had taken over the picketing, but they remembered it was the Youth Council who had initiated the fight. Craft and her kids had made local history. Theirs was the first picket line organized in Dallas for the purpose of direct action against segregation.

Craft also worked with the NAACP to desegregate the University of Texas and North Texas State University. In 1946, Heman Marion Sweatt, encouraged and supported by the NAACP, applied for the University of Texas Law School. When he was denied, the NAACP took direct action, demonstrating and picketing while also bringing suit in court. Craft assumed the jobs of organizing the youth for demonstrations and helping raise funds for Sweatt’s
suit—a case he triumphantly won in 1950, four years before the *Brown* decision. It was a time Craft remembered as "the most traumatic period" of her NAACP activity. Craft, through the NAACP, also desegregated North Texas State University in 1955. In July, she took an African American student to the university to enroll. When he was denied, Craft got the administration to admit they would not enroll him because of his race. The NAACP and Craft filed suit against the university, and in December a federal judge ordered the university to integrate. Although Craft never participated directly in the public school desegregation cases in Dallas, she attended many of the NAACP meetings and listened to the deliberations, the majority of which led to successful litigation.

As a strong proponent of school desegregation, she hoped to "get young Negroes to see the importance of a first-class education."

Juanita Craft and the Youth Council turned their attention in 1961 to the desegregation of lunch counters. The young people developed a simple tactic. The NAACP lawyers told them that they could not be denied service unless the owners displayed a sign stating "No Negroes Allowed." The majority of stores in Dallas did not display such signs. Therefore, the youths visited such stores, purchased items, then walked to the lunch counter and asked for Cokes. When the waitress refused, they questioned why they could buy items at any counter except that one. While they asked to speak to the manager, two more waited outside to repeat the process. In the meantime, others called, inquiring about the store's lunch counter policy. The young people's goal was not only to draw attention to discrimination, but also to frustrate the employees and slow business. Adults decided that the desegregation of restaurants should be their jobs, so they took over the sit-in movement by summer. To prevent the further disruption of business, stores agreed to serve African Americans. By July, thirty-six restaurants and lunch counters peacefully desegregated, including the "up-scale" Zodiac Room at the Neiman Marcus department store. Although African Americans claimed a few Dallas lunch counters still practiced segregation, it was the Youth Council who initiated the sit-ins, prompting Dallas "on its way to integration."

Soon after the Youth Council began the lunch counter sit-ins, members also started their attack on the downtown Majestic and Palace theaters with "stand-ins" and freedom walks. As with the sit-ins, the Council had a system. Every Sunday, the black youths got in line to purchase movie tickets. When the ticket clerk refused to sell tickets to them, they put their money back in their pockets and went to the end of the line. They continued this throughout the day, causing one clerk to cry in frustration, "I cannot take this any longer." Highly effective, these "stand-ins" caused business to slow. The youths also staged a freedom walk at Ferris Plaza. They peacefully walked in a circle, clapping hands, singing, and praying for "Freedom - NOW!" As the young people demonstrated, some of them wearing holes in their shoes, Craft tried to hustle food for them. During one walk, the *Dallas Express* noted "traffic cruised to a near halt as they watched the peaceful but effective demonstration." The protests gave the Dallas elite yet another message that integration could no longer be delayed. When asked the meaning of the stand-ins and freedom walks, Juanita Craft offered, "these kids are tired of not enjoying the full rights of democracy and want their Freedom - Now." By the mid-1960s, most public facilities in Dallas desegregated, in part because of the efforts of Craft and her Youth Council.
Craft focused her attention on educating her community and getting citizens to vote after 1963. She also continued to put her energy primarily into educating the youth. In one of the many speeches she made to high schools, she frankly told the children, "no matter how many doors are open you can’t go in them unless you have some money, and you’re not going to have the money if you don’t have the education." Part of Craft’s educational activities with the Youth Council was taking the members on summer trips. She took them to observe the various businesses in Dallas, and she traveled with them across the country to NAACP national conferences. She took more than one thousand black youngsters coast to coast during the 1960s, on trips funded by donations made by local businesses. In 1968, she sponsored the first integrated bus trip to Atlantic City, stopping in Washington, D.C., to attend a Coke party in Senator Ralph Yarborough’s office in their honor. Craft hoped the kids might “know the people that are governing them. Let them see their Congress in action.” She gave many African American children an opportunity to see the United States and to be exposed to their government.

Craft also organized a number of programs for the Youth Council. She understood the difficulty of teaching African American children – who had been denied an equal education – to come forward and accept the responsibilities of full citizenship and freedom. Thus, she did everything possible to prepare the children. In 1967, the Youth Council sponsored a “Stay in School” program. Members plastered bumper stickers reading “Stay in School,” and “Learn and Earn; Stay in School,” around town. They also went to the public pools, parks, and playgrounds wearing sandwich signs stating “I’m Going Back to School. What About You?” In 1968, the group sponsored a program that honored thirteen African Americans – the first black postman, the first black policeman, first black to attend class at University of Texas, and others who had made contributions to the civil rights struggle. Craft also worked hard to find clothes for needy children in her community, and she got scholarships and jobs for many blacks. Having no children of her own, she dedicated herself to those in her community. She considered them her family. In 1975, she told an interviewer, "I don’t have any children of my own. They’re all mine. I’m in better shape than the old lady who lived in the shoe.”

Many observers and later historians noted that the civil rights movement in Dallas was peaceful. The efforts of Craft are at least partially responsible for controlling militant youths. She was actively preaching non-violence when the New York Times reported that curbing militancy was perhaps one of the major contributions of African Americans in Dallas during the desegregation process. Yet, the all-white Citizens Council still feared violent protests in 1964 and was concerned that a visit by the NAACP executive secretary, Roy Wilkins, might spark violence. To forestall such a development, the Dallas businessmen decided to establish the bi-racial Committee of 14. When whites picked African Americans for the committee, they selected Craft primarily because of her close contact with youth and her aversion to violence. Although the Committee played an instrumental role in helping desegregate Dallas, its primary function was to prevent riots. Craft feared that if the Committee of 14 had not been successful, the same violence that swept the country from 1965 to 1968 might have reached Dallas.

As riots swept major cities throughout the country in 1967, Craft and other African American leaders found effective ways to prevent violence in
Dallas. She decided to take a bus load of teenagers to Watts in 1966 so they could see what happened when violence got out of control. She told them, "Remember that when you are burning down houses, you are burning down your houses." Craft felt that young peoples' charges of white domination did not justify violence. She spoke frankly to the youngsters and told them that they were not old enough to know of white domination; she stated, "if your mind cannot be dominated, then you can't be dominated. Now, this is up to you whether or not you're going to let somebody tell you that you're inferior." Her most successful effort to curb violence was an "Anti-Riot" program in the summer of 1968. The Youth Council and Craft distributed approximately 20,000 bumper stickers and placards reading, "Keep it Cool. Don't Be A Fool," "Think Before You Act," and one that just said "Don't." Craft also tried to quell rumors. She told the kids to talk to their parents or to her if they heard rumors of violence. Although she never considered herself a follower of Martin Luther King, Jr., she preached that violence and riots proved detrimental to the gains and goals of the NAACP. Craft told the youths that the NAACP's "slow but steady" legal route resulted in the major civil rights legislation. She also reminded them that it was the NAACP that "bailed CORE freedom riders out of jail." Craft strongly believed that the "glamour of dissent [violence] is not the way to reach equality." She never felt that African Americans should not fight for their freedom - only that they should do it within the legal framework. She once said about herself, "I'm violent only with words. I work within the system and play by its rules." The New York Times repeatedly applauded the success of African Americans in Dallas in their attempt to "curb militancy."

Juanita Craft's work did not go unrecognized. In 1956, Roy Wilkins presented two awards to her for her distinguished achievements in NAACP youth activities; the awards recognized her "valiant fight" against segregation. Craft also received four White House invitations - two from Kennedy, one from Johnson, and one from Nixon - to attend conferences that dealt with the growing problems and concerns among the nation's youth. When Kennedy took his fateful trip to Dallas in November 1963, Craft was among those invited to a luncheon to honor the President and Mrs. Kennedy. Amid Craft's honors, the most notable was the Linz Award, Dallas's oldest civic honor, for her 1968 campaign exposing fraudulent trade schools. These schools lured young people to Dallas, promising luxurious housing, food, and jobs; the reality was poor housing, no food, and no jobs. As Craft sheltered, fed, and found employment for the youths who were misled by the trade schools, she provided authorities with information to close the schools. Her work resulted in the passage of state, local, and federal legislation that regulated trade schools. The following year, she received the Linz for her success.

Craft's work with young African Americans not only gained her recognition, but also led to her participation in wider civic activities. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Dallas mayor Erik Jonsson held a number of conferences entitled "Goals for Dallas," to which he invited Craft. Jonsson and the conferences drew up goals for Dallas in the areas of city government, health, safety, education, and economy. Craft felt honored by the invitation, telling Jonsson that it was the first time she ever felt like an American citizen. She also kept busy traveling throughout Dallas, speaking to white churches of all denominations. Her purpose was to get through "to some of the people that otherwise
would not have paid any attention to a Negro." In the process, Craft gained the respect of many Dallas citizens who, in 1975, urged her to run for city council. Her campaign issues included the revitalization of the inner-city and the development of low-interest home improvement loans for South Dallas. Although her age seemed an issue for some, Craft responded with, "Stupidity. I've never heard anyone criticize Eleanor Roosevelt because of her age ... Old wine is the best wine." Winning at age seventy-five, she became, at that time, one of four African Americans ever to sit on the Dallas City Council. After three more successful elections, she decided that the civil rights "struggle isn't over yet" and retired from the Council in 1980 to resume her activities and trips with the youth.

Craft accumulated a number of awards and honors throughout her life, becoming one of Dallas's most respected and admired citizens. The NAACP readily acknowledged Craft's contributions. In 1978, the organization honored her with the Golden Heritage Life Membership Award, and in 1985 she served as a special delegate to the NAACP national convention where attendees honored her for fifty years of service and leadership. She also received the Eleanor Roosevelt Humanitarian Award for "public service which best exemplifies the civic example of Mrs. Roosevelt." When Mrs. Craft died in 1985, at the age of eighty-three, Dallas mourned the loss of a great lady. Among those who spoke at her funeral were Governor Mark White, State Treasurer Ann Richards, State Attorney General Jim Mattox, and United States Senator Ralph Yarborough.

Juanita Craft actively pushed for African Americans' civil rights throughout her lifetime. She courageously took on the Dallas elite and won more battles than she lost on the civil rights front. More importantly, she always put the needs and education of children first. She fulfilled the role of informal educator, encouraging children to become responsible citizens and to recognize the importance of education. Although she worked primarily with the NAACP Youth Council, she reached out to all young people in her community. For many children she became a second mother. Before her death, she expressed the importance of working with children: "Everything comes down to the child ... the child acquires the world, (s)he carries on what we have left, what we have prepared. If we want to know who we are, what we have accomplished, then just look at the children." 

NOTES

3 Juanita Craft, interview by David Stricklin and Gail Tomlinson, March 29, 1979. Dallas Public Library, Texas/Dallas History and Archives Division, Dallas.


Gillette, "NAACP," p. 29.


Dallas Express, January 12, 1952, p. 10.


Dallas Morning News, October 17, 1955, p. 2


Dallas Express, October 15, 1955, p. 10.


Parrott, October 15, 1955, Juanita Craft Collection, Box 23.

Parrott, October 15, 1955, Juanita Craft Collection, Box 23.

Dallas Express, October 15, 1955, p. 10.

Dallas Express, October 22, 1955, p. 17.


Juanita Craft, interview by Egerton, June 10, 1968.


Dallas Express, August 5, 1961, p. 8.


Speech notes, Juanita Craft Collection, Box 1.


Dallas Morning News, October 1, 1967, p. 11.


This is Their South.” Southern Living, 7 (June 1972), p. 76.


Craft attended two conferences under Kennedy’s administration that dealt with integration and the prevention of school dropouts. She was also one of the participants in Johnson’s “To Secure These Rights” program which sought to promote the civil rights movement and the passage of the Voting Rights Act. Nixon invited Craft to attend his White House Conference on Children, a program intended to encourage youths to achieve their maximum potential.


“Campaign issues.” 1975, Juanita Craft Collection, Box 4.

Dallas Morning News, December 24, 1975, p. 5.


Juanita Craft, funeral program, August 10, 1985, Juanita Craft Collection, Box 52.