

## Racial Stirrings in Colored Town The UNIA in Miami during the 1920s

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On Thursday evening March 8, 1928, Laura Koffey, a black nationalist, spoke before a large gathering of supporters in Fox Thomson's hall located in Colored Town—Miami's segregated black community now called Overtown. She claimed to be an African princess and spoke of black pride, self-help, and African repatriation. Her message was very similar to that of Marcus Garvey and members of his international movement, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Just days before, Koffey was a UNIA member whose dramatic, inspirational, and passionate speeches led to an increase in the organization's membership throughout Florida. By the time of her address in Fox Thomson's hall Koffey was a former member of the UNIA, taking with her most of its members to form the African Universal Church (AUC). This address was her first as a member of the AUC, but it was cut short by an unknown gunman who fired two fatal shots at her head through a crack in a door fifty feet from the podium. Koffey's departure from the UNIA and subsequent death brought an end to the UNIA in Miami, a movement that spanned eight years, claimed hundreds of members, and gained wide support in Miami's black community.<sup>1</sup> This article tells the tale of Miami's UNIA division (chapter) and its impact upon the city's black community in the 1920s.

While scholarship exists for Laura Koffey and the AUC, very little is known about UNIA's Miami chapter or division. Clearly the existence of a black nationalist movement such as Garvey's UNIA was challenging in Miami given the city's racial climate during this time. In many ways, Miami was a typical southern city racially. Since its

incorporation in 1896, Miami's lawmakers established through Jim Crow laws a racially segregated society.<sup>2</sup> White violence against the black community, along with a police force that overlooked and sometimes participated in these atrocities, was commonplace.<sup>3</sup> A resurgent Ku Klux Klan (KKK) terrorized the black community. Moreover, the white community feared the UNIA as a black subversive group working to overthrow the white establishment, and occasionally lashed out at it with violence. Yet the UNIA persevered and was able to establish itself in Miami and become an intrinsic part of the black community. While the beginning and end of Miami's UNIA is marked with high drama and violence, its existence and role in Miami imparts an understanding of the black community's social and race consciousness. The UNIA was arguably one of the strongest forms of expression of these communal elements during this racially turbulent time in the city's history.

Attempts to form a UNIA chapter in Miami began in 1920, only four years after Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican "firebrand," came to the United States and created an international organization with the goal of improving the social conditions of blacks, establishing racial pride and solidarity, and reclaiming Africa from European control and making it the new homeland for African Americans. The movement grew quickly and soon hundreds of UNIA divisions were operating throughout the country and abroad, with one division formed as far away as Australia. The majority of the chapters, however, were rooted in northern cities within the U.S., and in various Caribbean nations.<sup>4</sup> The UNIA eventually moved South, but it was met with strong resistance from white communities that feared the movement would lead to a black upheaval against white domination.

By 1920, Miami contained 29,571 residents, 9,259 of whom (30 percent of the total population) were black. Large numbers of black Miamians were immigrants, who hailed from the Bahamas, and to a lesser degree, the West Indies. Black "islanders" totaled 4,815, comprising 52 percent of the city's black population and 16.3 percent of all residents.<sup>5</sup> Escaping from economically depressed conditions in the Bahamas, many came to Miami hoping to prosper; they also brought with them a strong black nationalist sentiment that proved to be an important element in the formation of Miami's UNIA. The majority of the American-born blacks resided in Colored Town where-



Colored Town was a bustling, congested quarter in its early decades. Courtesy of the Black Archives, History and Research Foundation, Inc. HMSF, 1988-102-6

as Bahamians predominantly resided in the nearby Coconut Grove community.<sup>6</sup>

Colored Town lacked proper plumbing, sewage facilities, and roads, causing it to become congested with crime and infected with disease. In spite of the rapid growth of Colored Town's population, the white community resisted the expansion of Miami's black quarter—sometimes in violent fashion. Many black Miamians fought these conditions and violence, forming organizations to address the community's needs. The Colored Board of Trade and the Negro Uplift Association of Dade County, comprised of black businessmen and community leaders, fought segregation legislation, white terrorism, and police brutality. These groups lobbied for better job opportunities, improved living conditions, more parks, and for the presence of black policemen in Colored Town.<sup>7</sup> The Negro Uplift Association of Dade County and the Colored Board of Trade were precursors of the UNIA in Miami. Indeed, many members of these groups became UNIA leaders.<sup>8</sup>

A considerable percentage of UNIA chapters arose in black churches, which, in addition to their spiritual offerings and social ministrations, served as venues for black solidarity and independence, and provided an outlet for nationalist sentiment.<sup>9</sup> Miami was no exception as local black ministers were organizers of the local UNIA division and remained active members. The UNIA carefully worked with Miami's black ministry, though it remained a political and social movement as opposed to a religious movement.<sup>10</sup>

In 1920, national UNIA organizers arrived in the Miami area to solicit members and form a local chapter. They collaborated with such locally important figures as the Reverend John A. Davis, minister of the Ebenezer A.M.E. Church, and Dr. Brookings, the presiding elder of the Florida District A.M.E. Church. Both had attended the 1920 UNIA National Convention in New York City.<sup>11</sup> This convention, one of the largest in the UNIA's history, reached its climax with Marcus Garvey's address to an estimated 25,000 blacks at Madison Square Garden. In his speech, Garvey boasted that, "The nations of the world were aware that the Negro of yesterday has disappeared from the scene of human activity and his place has been taken by a new Negro who stands erect, conscious of manhood rights and fully determined to preserve them at all costs."<sup>12</sup>

Davis was appointed Miami's district UNIA organizer at the convention and he, along with Dr. Brookings, returned to Miami and quickly went to work soliciting prospective UNIA members at local churches and lodges. The division's first organizational meeting in Colored Town took place on September 16, 1920.<sup>13</sup> Two months later, on November 14, 1920, the Miami chapter of UNIA was born in the English Wesleyan Church. Percy Styles, a local businessman and a prominent citizen of Colored Town, chaired the meeting and was nominated as "traveling organizer" to gain further support for the UNIA. Dr. Alonzo Burgess Holly, a local doctor and another prominent resident of Colored Town, delivered a "fiery" speech on "the revolutionary activities of his native country of Haiti."<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Reverend J. H. Le Mansley, minister of the English Wesleyan Church, "outlined some of the wrongs committed against the Negro."<sup>15</sup> Reverend G. E. Carter, who had recently moved to Miami from the North, was also actively involved in the meeting.<sup>16</sup>

Dr. Holly possessed a long history of involvement in black nationalist causes before the inception of the UNIA in Miami, while the Reverend Carter would use Miami's UNIA as a springboard for a career as a prominent international figure. Dr. Holly was the son of James Theodore Holly, a mid-nineteenth century black nationalist and emigrant who left the United States for Haiti. He became Haiti's Episcopal Bishop, the first African American to achieve that rank.<sup>17</sup> Dr. Holly was born in Port-au-Prince, educated at Harrison College in Barbados, Cambridge University and the New York Homeopathic Medical College where he received his medical degree in 1888. After a successful medical practice in Nassau, he moved to South Florida around the turn of the century and established practices in West Palm Beach and Miami.<sup>18</sup> There is no evidence that Holly became an official UNIA member, but it is known that he was a faithful supporter of the movement.<sup>19</sup> Dr. Holly had strong nationalist feelings and was an outspoken proponent of black concerns. He had allegedly been run out of town several times by the KKK. The white community perceived him as one of the more radical activists in the black community, but he continued to maintain a clinic in Colored Town in spite of all the threats he received advising him to move.<sup>20</sup>

Reverend Carter was a member of the Colored Board of Trade and Secretary of the black YMCA. Carter became an active member of the UNIA and was the first delegate to represent Miami at the International Convention of Negro Peoples of the World in 1921. Eventually he left Miami for New York where he became active in the UNIA at the international level. Carter became the assistant to the UNIA President-General at the 1922 convention and was appointed UNIA Secretary-General in 1924, holding that position until 1926. He was also Secretary of the Black Cross Navigation and Trading Company, the UNIA's shipping company. In addition, Carter authored the "Weekly Sermon," one of the longest running features in the UNIA newspaper *Negro World*.<sup>21</sup>

As soon as Davis and Brooking arrived and organized these early UNIA meetings, the local police and FBI began monitoring Miami's UNIA activities, and continued to do so for the eight years of the organization's existence in Miami. On December 5, 1920, another UNIA meeting was held at a Baptist church. FBI agent Leone E. Howe

claimed that a general call was made at this meeting to establish equality with whites and eventually to bring about black supremacy. Agent Howe also claimed that interracial marriage was advocated. The FBI reported that by the time of this meeting, the UNIA chapter contained 400 members and was meeting once a week.<sup>22</sup>

The FBI correspondence indicates that the agency feared that the Miami UNIA was being formed by blacks who came from the Bahamas and West Indies to overthrow the white establishment of Southeast Florida.<sup>23</sup> The FBI was also concerned with a report that alleged that "90 percent of the Negroes in the area are in possession of fire arms." There are further indications that the FBI or local authorities might have instigated violence against UNIA members, or suspected members, in mid-1921.<sup>24</sup>

The violence actually began in Key West and appeared to be connected to similar violence in Miami. By June 1921, the Key West chapter of the UNIA had great momentum and boasted 700 members. Local whites became wary of the movement, especially after Garvey himself arrived on the island to assist the UNIA chapter in recruiting new members. The FBI feared that the large Bahamian and West Indian populations were poised for violence against the white community. Reverend T. C. Glashen, President of the Key West UNIA, was quoted as saying, "We have been under white people's control long enough. The time has come for us to strike, and all of us Negroes must let the world know that we are a power strong and ready to defend our rights. If we can't succeed with words, we will use other methods, and never mind what happens. If blood is needed let it be shared. We fought to help this and other countries to be free, so let's fight to free ourselves."<sup>25</sup>

These words, along with fear of a black revolution, were enough to reactivate the Key West Chapter of the Ku Klux Klan that had been long dormant, exacerbating racial tensions on the island. The president of the chamber of commerce gave Glashen twenty-four hours to leave town. When Glashen refused, he was arrested for inciting a riot and was jailed, which angered the island's black citizenry creating further potential for violence. A representative from the parent UNIA in Harlem and a judge visited Glashen and begged him to leave before a racial clash between the UNIA and the white mob ensued. Glashen finally left for New York by boat via Havana due to threats that he



The Ku Klux Klan maintained a visible presence in Miami and Key West throughout the 1920s.  
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would be pulled from a train and lynched if he tried to leave Key West over land.<sup>26</sup> Shortly after Glashen's arrest, Dr. Kershaw, Key West's UNIA vice president, was arrested on allegations that he stole UNIA funds. Kershaw turned over the UNIA books and papers to FBI agents, was released on bond, and resigned from the UNIA. The books and minutes were examined by those agents who noted membership size, and forwarded a list of 690 members to the FBI regional headquarters in Jacksonville.<sup>27</sup>

The KKK announced its presence in Miami in the spring of 1921 with a parade of 200 men clad in the traditional hoods and robes. On July 1, 1921, Reverend Reggie H. Higgs, a black minister in Coconut Grove and an associate of the exiled Glashen, was kidnapped by eight hooded men from his home. Higgs was a Bahamian who became involved with the UNIA through Glashen before moving to Coconut Grove as a minister of St. James Baptist church. Higgs continued his involvement with the UNIA, becoming vice president of a smaller chapter located in Coconut Grove. The *Miami Herald* noted that some of his "revival meetings" had created violent race conditions leading to the shooting of two black men by the police. After his abduction, Higgs was taken to a wooded spot, was tied and placed face down on

the ground, and was whipped with a rope. The kidnappers placed another rope around his neck and ordered him to leave town within forty-eight hours. He was taken back the same night and dumped on a Coconut Grove street.<sup>28</sup>

The kidnapping of Higgs angered black residents of Coconut Grove and many took to the streets with guns the night he was abducted, resolving to find Higgs and his captors. The riot alarm was sounded, bringing in the police. One black man was shot and seriously wounded by a police officer when he allegedly “failed to halt upon command.” The police disarmed twenty-five blacks and arrested nine, releasing them the next day.<sup>29</sup>

On July 5, 1921, Albert Gibson, also a UNIA member, claimed that he and other friends put Higgs on a British vessel destined for Nassau. “We put him on the boat, gave him a couple hundred dollars and let him get lost. He hasn’t been back since, but he dared them to come and get him,” Gibson told the *Miami Herald* in February 1975.<sup>30</sup> Oscar Johnson, financial secretary of the Miami branch of the UNIA, became frightened by the treatment of Glashen and Higgs and left with Higgs for the Bahamas, although it was believed that he was not directly threatened.<sup>31</sup>

Prior to these incidents, the FBI and local authorities had placed Higgs, Glashen, Holly, and other UNIA members under surveillance and had reportedly intercepted a letter that was sent to Glashen from Higgs. The FBI claimed that Higgs advised Glashen to “organize the Negroes in Key West and on the given date poison everybody and take possession of the island.”<sup>32</sup> The content of the letter was released to the press; on July 3, 1921, the *Miami Herald* reported that the Higgs kidnapping unveiled a plot to kill whites in Key West. The *Herald’s* source was the Miami Police Department, which claimed that Higgs’ scheme to kill whites led to his kidnapping. The letter from Higgs to Glashen was not mentioned in the article, but the authorities claimed that Higgs spoke of such plans in speeches to the Miami UNIA.<sup>33</sup>

The violence continued. On July 17, 1921, twelve days after Higgs left the country, eight masked men abducted Archdeacon Phillip S. Irwin, the white minister of the St. Agnes Episcopal Church in Colored Town. Irwin claimed his abductors handcuffed, gagged, hooded and forced him into a car. After driving for one half-hour, the car stopped, Irwin was taken into the woods, strapped to a log and stripped of his



clothing. The men told Irwin that he had been preaching racial equality and interracial marriage and that it would not be tolerated. Irwin was whipped thirty to forty times and then tarred and feathered. He was told to leave Miami within forty-eight hours or he would be lynched. He was dumped on a street in downtown Miami where he was found by a police officer.<sup>34</sup> Irwin left Miami two days later.<sup>35</sup>

The white community appeared unsure of the origin and purpose of the UNIA. The *Miami Herald* reported that the UNIA was a clandestine branch of the Overseas Club headed by a man named "Garvin" (misspelling Garvey's name) that was disbanded by not following the policy of the parent organization. Even though there was no apparent connection between the two organizations, Father Irwin was linked to the UNIA through his association with the Overseas Club.<sup>36</sup> Irwin may have supported the UNIA, but it is unlikely that whites would have been allowed to become members.

In spite of the violence and intimidation, the Miami UNIA endured and grew. The FBI was able to obtain the books containing a membership list and detailed meeting minutes. The agency noted that Miami's UNIA membership had reached one thousand and included members in Coconut Grove and Homestead, as well as Colored Town. The membership was predominantly Bahamian. Financial records indicated that the organization took a year's lease on the Airdrome Building in Colored Town, renamed it "Liberty Hall, UNIA Branch No. 136," and purchased a motion picture machine. The FBI believed that the UNIA was in "flourishing condition."<sup>37</sup>

The FBI also reported that tensions remained high between white and black residents and it predicted a recurrence of racial troubles. The report indicated that residents of Colored Town were well supplied with arms and ammunition, which, it claimed, prompted the city to obtain nineteen machine guns, riot guns and large quantities of ammunition in anticipation of a black uprising. The agency stated that since the Higgs and Irwin incidents, the UNIA had required a warning to refrain from meeting.<sup>38</sup>

It appears that the racial tension subsided with no further recorded acts of violence between the black and white community.<sup>39</sup> This is curious since both the *Miami Herald* and the FBI reported considerable concern from the white community towards UNIA activity, with the latter eventually reconvening its meetings in spite of the warnings.

Whether the UNIA allowed for a cooling-off period or perhaps made some sort of conciliatory gesture towards whites is not known.

Garvey himself became concerned over KKK violence directed toward the UNIA, and, in spite of protests within his ranks, met with its leader, Edward Young Clarke, in 1922 to discuss this problem. After recognizing similar goals such as racial purity and agreeing that the United States was a white man's country while Africa should be reserved for Africans, Clarke offered his assurance that the Klan would refrain from further attacks on the UNIA.<sup>40</sup>

How the UNIA avoided further violence during this formative period remains a mystery. Garvey's meeting with the KKK may have played a part in the UNIA's peaceful existence in Miami in the following years, but it does not explain how the tension between the UNIA and white community subsided. In order to survive in Miami, the UNIA needed to gain acceptance by the black community and its churches and to assure the white community that it was not a threat to it. It appears that the Bahamian and West Indian community championed the movement and comprised the majority of the chapter's membership. This is consistent with the predominantly West Indian character of the UNIA's main body in the northeast and during the pivotal first half of the movement's history. However, many black Americans were elected to positions of authority, including the chapter's first three presidents and its first chaplain. These American chapter officials were also community and church leaders in Colored Town.<sup>41</sup> The UNIA respected the authority of the powerful churches in the black community yet firmly identified itself as a political and social organization as opposed to a religious movement.<sup>42</sup>

Once established, the Miami UNIA conducted its affairs consistently within the guidelines of the parent organization. The members voted for a president, three vice presidents, a financial secretary, assistant secretary, treasurer, trustees, chaplain, and advisors. Elections were held annually and only UNIA members could vote. There was a women's division that met separately; its officers were elected by the women members of the organization.<sup>43</sup>

The UNIA conducted its meetings in the open after it built Liberty Hall, thus removing the "clandestine" atmosphere that surrounded it in the early years. The UNIA held meetings three times a week, and on special occasions. The women's division held one meet-

ing a week. A general public meeting was held on Sundays. James Nimmo, a one time UNIA member, claimed that the UNIA allowed whites to attend some meetings to observe their activities. "The police would sit in on meetings attempting to intimidate us and see what we were up to, but we would proceed with the meetings as planned to show them what we were about."<sup>44</sup>

A typical meeting began with a call to order by the designated chairman of the meeting. An opening ode was sung, usually "From Greenland's Icy Mountain" or "God Bless our President." The associations elected chaplains or a guest chaplain conducted prayer and scripture readings. Then the meeting would be turned over to a speaker who usually spoke on a wide range of topics. A meeting often contained a reading from the UNIA's newspaper, *Negro World*, or a reading from a message from Garvey. The band would perform, or Miss Mabel Dorsett, long time UNIA member, would play a piece on the piano. Sometimes movies or a movie reel from the parent organization in Harlem would be shown. Songs were sung by the choir and the chapter President would give a short talk followed by a collection. Each meeting ended with a singing of the National Anthem of the United States.<sup>45</sup>

Like most UNIA chapters, Miami's chapter contained a uniformed branch called the African Black Legion headed by Nimmo. Nimmo was a Bahamian who came to Miami at sixteen in 1916 to enlist in the United States Army, after being refused a similar request by the British. He served with American Forces in France during World War I and returned to Miami after his discharge. Like many southern cities, Miami welcomed home black veterans with violent reminders that the city was segregated and that their service to the country did little to change this situation. Nimmo felt disenfranchised and found that the ideals of the UNIA corresponded to his growing black nationalist sentiment. He joined the UNIA and was put in charge of 150 to 200 uniformed men and two officers.<sup>46</sup>

The Miami chapter purchased its uniforms from the parent organization in Harlem. The uniform was blue with brass buttons and a red stripe running down the trouser legs, spit-and-polished shoes, and a military cap with insignia. The officers had dress swords while the others had wooden rifles made by local black carpenters for drill practice on Sundays after church in Colored Town's Dorsey Park.

Members also bought regular rifles, but drilled with the wooden rifles. One would imagine that a large group of uniformed black men marching with rifles, albeit wooden rifles, would be viewed with consternation by the white community. Nimmo claimed that the police broke up the drill only on a few occasions and confiscated the rifles. "We would just go home, make new rifles, and drill next week," he noted.<sup>47</sup>

As Miami's UNIA grew, it became an active participant in Colored Town's political and social affairs. Politically, the UNIA offered its Liberty Hall, one of the largest halls in Colored Town, as a meeting place for debates and discussion of issues affecting the black community. The UNIA also sponsored guest speakers at the hall. Socially, the UNIA opened its hall for dances, prayer meetings, parties, fundraisers, and celebrations.<sup>48</sup> The UNIA participated in parades along with the uniformed African Black Legion. Judge John D. Johnson reflected, in a later era, when he was a teenager in Colored Town: "We heard about Garvey and knew something about the movement. I was too young to fully comprehend the full meaning of it all, but I do remember the Legion marching in the parade—that was new. We never saw that before and I was filled with pride."<sup>49</sup>

In 1926 Miami's UNIA chapter lobbied Calvin Coolidge, the President of the United States, for executive clemency for Garvey after he was sent to the Atlanta Penitentiary for mail fraud.<sup>50</sup> Collections were made for a relief fund to benefit Garvey's wife, Amy Jaques. Miami's UNIA members sometimes visited other Florida UNIA chapters such as those in West Palm Beach, Tampa, and Key West. At the same time delegates from other UNIA chapters visited Miami's division.<sup>51</sup> The Miami division participated in the State UNIA Convention in West Palm Beach in August 1925, which was recognized as a great success, and which ended with Nimmo marching 150 UNIA men in honor of the West Palm Beach division.<sup>52</sup>

By the mid-1920s, Miami's UNIA chapter was recognized by the parent organization as one of its larger and more influential divisions. It was growing and gaining support while other divisions were in decline after Garvey's imprisonment. Many high-ranking UNIA officers paid visits to the Miami division.<sup>53</sup> Fred A. Toote, who succeeded Garvey following his imprisonment, visited Miami in 1926 and received a warm welcome in Colored Town.<sup>54</sup> One of the most successful meetings for Miami's UNIA chapter was a visit in 1927, from

J. A. Craigen, the executive president of the Detroit division and special representative to the parent body. Liberty Hall was filled to capacity with people standing in the street to see the man that worked closely with Garvey. The entire division of the African Black Legion turned out for the occasion, along with members and non-members of the UNIA, to hear “inspiring speeches from Craigen and his associates.” Motion pictures were also shown at the gathering.<sup>55</sup>

Two large, successful fundraisers were held by Miami’s UNIA. One was staged in 1926 to pay for renovations to Liberty Hall; the other was held to raise money for repairs to the UNIA-owned ship, *George W Goethals*, which made an unexpected visit to Miami in June 1925. The *Goethals* was one element of Marcus Garvey’s attempt at initiating a black-owned shipping company. The ship had been touring the Caribbean to raise money by selling stock for the line. Returning from an unsuccessful fundraising drive in Jamaica, the ship hit a reef and docked in Miami for repairs although it did not have the funds for the work. A fundraising dance was held aboard the ship with a great turnout from Miami’s black community. Nineteen hundred dollars were raised and the ship was repaired prior to its return to New York.<sup>56</sup>

By 1927, the Miami UNIA division was firmly in place and it continued to grow. Laura Koffey’s presence in Miami only bolstered the UNIA and further increased its membership. Prior to her involvement there, Koffey had been active in a UNIA division in Jacksonville, Florida. The *Negro World* noted in a May 14, 1925, issue that the Jacksonville UNIA was experiencing rapid growth after a visit from Koffey, who was described as a worker from the West African Gold Coast. Koffey was hailed as a “real conscientious race lover ... and a radical one too.” She claimed to have a “burning message from the kings of the Gold Coast, West Africa ... that the door is now opened in the Gold Coast to the four hundred million Negroes of the world, and no power can shut it until all have entered.” Koffey spoke every night of the week and twice on Sundays. The *Negro World* claimed that forty to fifty new members joined the Jacksonville UNIA every time she spoke. In all, nine hundred new members joined the Jacksonville UNIA during her stay in that city.<sup>57</sup>

Koffey claimed to be an African princess from the West Gold Coast of Africa sent by her father and her people to America to find the “lost children of Africa” and bring them back home. She had plans

to build sawmills in Alabama to pay for leased Japanese boats to carry out the exodus. She further claimed to have met with Garvey in prison and to have received his blessing to speak before the chapters. Those who opposed Laura Koffey considered her a fraud. Some claimed that she was an African American from Athens, Georgia, who betrayed the black community both by luring blacks from their traditional churches and by subverting the nationalist goals of Marcus Garvey. Others claimed that she hailed from Detroit, was a Red Cross nurse who had spent time in Africa during World War I, and later worked in New Orleans as a teacher.<sup>58</sup> Followers and detractors agreed that Koffey was a powerful, inspiring speaker.

On May 29, 1927, Koffey came to Miami to deliver a week-long series of speeches; according to the *Negro World*, over three hundred members enrolled in Miami's UNIA chapter that week, indicating that "Garveyism is spreading like wildfire in Miami." Koffey stayed another week "to see if she could convince 300 more that they need freedom and Africa needs them." Three thousand persons were reported to have gathered to hear Koffey speak at Liberty Hall during a mass meeting. A report in *Negro World* indicated that "another 300 more were looking through black spectacles."<sup>59</sup>

Later in August of the same year, Koffey and four other Miami UNIA members visited Garvey in prison. Claude Green, president of Miami's UNIA and former president of the Jacksonville UNIA, wired ahead to Garvey announcing Koffey's visit. Green asked Garvey to "please take note of the fact that Lady Koffey will visit Miami..." and to "get in touch with her we find her worthwhile." Koffey made the visit with UNIA members Kitty Jones, James Baltrau, Thomas Brooks and Maxwell Cook. Cook was a captain of the African Black Legion under Nimmo's command. What was discussed between Koffey and Garvey is not known.<sup>60</sup>

Early in 1928, Koffey began breaking away from the UNIA, though she continued to speak to UNIA chapters throughout Florida. Koffey began mixing black nationalism with a prophetic religious message: "I am a representative from the Gold Coast of West Africa, seeking the welfare of Africa's children everywhere. God called me out of Africa to come over here and tell you, His people, what He would have you do."<sup>61</sup> She began to speak on Sundays, which emptied the churches of their members. This upset the UNIA's delicate

relationship with local ministries. Koffey also rankled UNIA members by criticizing its dances and other fundraisers, and by advocating prayer meetings in their place. She also criticized Nimmo's uniformed African Black Legion for drilling on Sunday. Many within the UNIA now became suspicious of Koffey's intentions. The ministers oversaw her expulsion from Miami.<sup>62</sup>

Koffey left Miami to travel throughout Florida and speak at UNIA halls, but she continued to criticize UNIA activity. She reportedly collected nineteen thousand dollars during this speaking tour. UNIA chapters in St. Petersburg and Jacksonville had Koffey arrested for unknown reasons. While she was in jail in Jacksonville, Koffey was stripped in order to discover if she had, as her enemies claimed, 'voodoo roots' on her body to explain her charismatic power.<sup>63</sup>

Koffey returned to Miami in March 1928 and again spoke before large audiences in the UNIA hall, as well as local churches. Suspecting that Koffey was a fraud, three UNIA members, Professor Leslie, a local teacher, Maxwell Cook, who accompanied Koffey during her Garvey visit to the Atlanta Penitentiary, and Nimmo wired Garvey on March 7, 1928, inquiring about Koffey's 'Back to Africa' exodus. Garvey responded that he had not given Koffey the authority to collect funds for any type of African exodus and denounced her as a fraud.<sup>64</sup>

Armed with the Garvey telegram, Nimmo and the others returned to the UNIA hall that same day to confront Koffey while she was speaking. They were largely ignored, and resorted to heckling Koffey, which prompted a division between loyal Garveyites and Koffey's followers. After both factions sought police protection for use of Liberty Hall, the police padlocked the facility and prohibited its use by either group. Defying her opponents within the UNIA, Koffey continued to speak at Fox Thomson's hall the following night, March 8.<sup>65</sup>

Koffey encouraged her followers to break with the UNIA and join her African Universal Church (AUC). Maxwell Cook was there to heckle her, and Nimmo planned to join him but was working late. Someone fired a gun at her head in mid-speech, killing her instantly. The frenzied mob beat Cook to death with bricks, stones, and fists. A mob bent on revenge sought out Nimmo, but he went to the police for protection. The police arrested Nimmo and UNIA President Claude Green and other UNIA members. Most were set free the next day, but

Nimmo and Green were indicted in the murder of Koffey, tried, and acquitted. Koffey's killer was never caught or, according to some, found guilty.<sup>66</sup>

While the AUC continued to operate, Miami's UNIA chapter died the same night as Koffey. An organization called the 'Garvey Club' was started, but it failed to garner the support or popularity of the UNIA. The majority of the UNIA members stayed with the AUC, but it too declined in numbers without the charismatic leadership of Koffey.<sup>67</sup>

While the nature and persona of Laura Koffey, as well as the complicity of Nimmo in her murder, was discussed and debated for some time, these issues detract from the importance of the UNIA's presence in Miami. Since Miami's incorporation as a city, blacks had challenged, usually without success, the racial tyranny afflicting their community. The UNIA's contribution in this struggle lies in the fact that it brought the message and philosophy of black nationalism to Miami's blacks thirty to forty years before the civil rights movement. Many former UNIA members, including Nimmo, were in the forefront of Miami's mid-century labor and socialist movements, and later a civil rights movement, which helped desegregate such facilities as lunch counters before other areas of the South. While UNIA's existence in Miami was brief, its influence was long-lived.

### Endnotes

- 1 While there is little information available on the Garvey movement in Miami, there is an extensive article on Laura Koffey and the African Universal Church. See Richard Newman, "Warrior Mother of Africa's of the Most High God: Laura Adorker Koffey and the African Universal Church," *Black Power and Black Religion: Essays and Reviews*, (Cornwall, Locust Hill Press, 1987),109-131.
- 2 Jerrell Shofner, "Custom, Law, and History: The Enduring Influence of Florida's Black Code," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, LV (January 1977), 290.
- 3 The author gained perspective on Miami's black community in the Garvey era through the scholarship of Dorothy Fields of Black Archives, History and Research Foundation of South Florida; Paul S. George, Raymond Mohl and Jean C. Taylor. See: Paul S. George, "Policing Miami's Black Community, 1896-1930" *Florida Historical Quarterly*



- (*FHQ*), LIX (January 1981), Paul S. George, "Colored Town: Miami's Black Community, 1896-1930," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, LVI (April 1978); Dorothy Fields, "Reflections on Black History: Fun and Games in 'Overtown'," *Update*, vol. IV, no. 6 (August 1977); Raymond Mohl, "Black Immigrants: Bahamians in Early Twentieth-Century Miami," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, vol. LXV, no. 3 (January 1987).
- 4 See Edmund D. Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association*, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1955); Elton C. Fax, *Garvey: The Story of a Pioneer Black Nationalist*, (Cornwall: Cornwall Press Inc., 1972).
  - 5 US Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Population II (Washington 1922), 960, 795; Marvin Dunn, *Black Miami in the Twentieth Century* (Gainesville, FL: The University Press of Florida, 1997) 120.
  - 6 US Bureau of the Census, Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Population II (Washington 1922), 960, 795.; Mohl, "Black Immigrants," 271-272.
  - 7 George, "Colored Town," *FHQ*, 440-441; George, "Policing Miami's Black Community," *FHQ*, 437; David Cohen, "The Development and Efficiency of the Negro Police Precinct and Court of the City of Miami," (MA thesis, University of Miami, 1951), 21.
  - 8 George, "Colored Town," *FHQ*, 433-439.
  - 9 See Rodney Carlisle, *The Roots of Black Nationalism* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1975), 131-132; *Black Nationalism in America*, editors, John H. Bracey, Jr., August Meier, Elliot Rudwick, (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Inc., 1970); Wilson J. Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism 1850-1925* (Hamden: The Shoe String Press Inc., 1978).
  - 10 Robert Hill, ed., "Reports by Bureau Agent Leon E. Howe, Miami, Florida, 7/6/21," *Marcus Garvey Papers and the Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers*, vol. VI, (Berkley: University of California Press, 1984), 514; Transcript of interview with James Nimmo conducted September 11, 1990, in possession of Dr. Gregory Bush, University of Miami, Department of History, Coral Gables, Florida.
  - 11 Hill, ed., "Reports by Bureau Agent Leon E. Howe, Miami, Florida, 7/6/21," *Garvey Papers*, vol. VI, 514.
  - 12 Fax, *Garvey*, 2.
  - 13 "Reports by Bureau Agent Leon E. Howe, Miami, Florida, 7/16/21," *Garvey Papers*, vol. VI, 514.
  - 14 "Report by Bureau Agent William C. Sausele, Jacksonville, Florida, 11/22/20," *Garvey Papers*, Hill ed., 91.

- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Carlisle, *Roots of Black Nationalism*, 58-59.
- 18 Hill ed., *Garvey Papers*, vol. VI, 91-92; Interview Kip Vought with James Nimmo, Judge D. Johnson and Thomas Johnson, Miami, Florida, October 12, 1990, in possession of Dr. Gregory Bush, University of Miami.
- 19 Interview with Nimmo.
- 20 Interviews with Nimmo, Thomas Johnson and Judge John D. Johnson.
- 21 "Report by Bureau Agent Leone E. Howe, Miami, Florida," *Garvey Papers*, vol. VI, Hill ed., 112.
- 22 The philosophy of Marcus Garvey is found in Marcus Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, Volumes I and II (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969). The Bureau of Investigation, founded in 1908, was renamed Federal Bureau of Investigation by the Congress in 1935.
- 23 Garvey, *Philosophy*; Hill ed., "George Washington to Harry Daugherty, Attorney General, 615 Thomas Street, Key West, Florida, April 28, 1921," *Garvey Papers*, vol. VI, 375-376; Hill ed., "Report by Bureau Agent Leone E. Howe, Miami, Florida, 6/29/21," *Garvey Papers*, vol. VI, 494-495; Hill ed., "W. J. H. Taylor, British Vice-Consul, to Tom Ffennel Carlisle, British Consul, New Orleans, Key West, Florida, July 5, 1921," *Garvey Papers*, vol. VI, 512-515.
- 24 Hill ed., "Report by Bureau Agent William C. Sousele," *Garvey Papers*, vol. VI, 112.
- 25 Hill ed., "Report by Bureau Agent Leone E. Howe, Miami, Florida, 6/29/21," *Garvey Papers*, vol. VI, 494-495.
- 26 *Negro World*, July 16, 1921.
- 27 Hill ed., "Howard P. Wright, Bureau Agent in Charge, to Lewis J. Bailey," *Garvey Papers*, vol. VI, 244-247. Dr. Kershaw's first name was never mentioned in any of the documents or FBI correspondence.
- 28 Hill ed., *Garvey Papers*; *Miami Herald*, July 2 and 3, 1921, 1; George, "Policing Miami's Black Community," *FHQ*, 446; Dunn, *Black Miami*, 117. The Klan maintained a visible presence in the Magic City throughout the 1920s and 1930s. It appears that members of the KKK were the perpetrators of the Higgs abduction and subsequent race-related crimes in Miami, although no one was ever arrested for these crimes.
- 29 *Miami Herald*, July 2, 1921, 1.
- 30 Ibid., February 12, 1975; "Report by Bureau Agent Leon E. Howe 7/6/21," *Garvey Papers*, vol. VI, Hill ed., p. 513.
- 31 Ibid., July 3, 18, 1921, 1.

- 32 Ibid., July 3, 1921, 1.
- 33 Ibid., July 18, 1921, 1.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Ibid., July 3, 18, 1921; Hill, ed., *Garvey Papers*, vol. VI, 247.
- 36 *Miami Herald*, July 18, 1921, 1.
- 37 Hill ed., "Report by Bureau Agent Leon Howe, Miami 7/6/21," *Garvey Papers*, vol. VI, 513-515.
- 38 Hill ed., *Garvey Papers*, vol. VI, 515.
- 39 Interviews with James Nimmo and Thomas Johnson.
- 40 Tony Martin, *Race First: The Ideological and Organizational Struggles of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1976), 183-187; Judith Stein, "The UNIA Goes South: Garvey and the Ku Klux Klan" in *The World of Marcus Garvey: Race and Class in Modern Society* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 153-170. *Racial Stirrings in Colored Town 75*
- 41 Hill ed., *Garvey Papers*, vol. VI, 514. The FBI documents noted the nationality of the UNIA members.
- 42 Interview with Nimmo.
- 43 Interview with Nimmo; Hill ed., "Report by Bureau Agent Leone E. Howe 7/8/21," *Garvey Papers*, 514.
- 44 Interview with James Nimmo.
- 45 The *Negro World* was published in New York. *Negro World*, February 2 and July 19, 1924; March 21 and June 20, 1925; March 27, May 22, August 7, 1926; February 19, March 12, May 7, June 11, July 23, July 30, August 1, September 17, October 1, October 8 and October 15, 1927.
- 46 Interview with James Nimmo.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid.
- 49 Interview with Nimmo and Judge John D. Johnson.
- 50 Interview with Nimmo and Judge John D. Johnson; *Negro World*, May 22, August 7, 1926.
- 51 Interview with Nimmo and Judge John D. Johnson; *Negro World*, March 21 and September 24, 1925.
- 52 Interview with Nimmo and Judge John D. Johnson; *Negro World*, September 24, 1925.
- 53 Garvey intended to visit Miami after first going to Key West and the Caribbean in mid-1921, but Dr. Holly warned him that Miami's racial climate could imperil him. See Hill ed., "Howard P. Wright, Bureau Agent Leone Howe, Miami, Florida, March 11, 1921," *Garvey Papers*, vol. VI, 244-246.

- 54 *Negro World*, March 26, 1926.
- 55 *Ibid.*, March 12, 1927.
- 56 Interview with Nimmo.
- 57 Newman, *Black Power and Black Religion*, 131-134; *Negro World*, May 14, 1925.
- 58 Newman, *Black Power and Black Religion*, 131-134; Interview with Nimmo; *Negro World*, June 11, 1927 and April 7, 1928.
- 59 *Negro World*, June 11, 1927.
- 60 Copy of Western Union Telegram from Claude Green to Marcus Garvey, Black Archives Foundation Inc. of Miami; Copy of visitors registration of the Atlanta Penitentiary, August 1, 1927, Black Archives, History and Research Foundation of South Florida.
- 61 Newman, *Black Power and Black Religion*, 134-135.
- 62 Newman, *Black Power and Black Religion*, 134-135; interview with Nimmo.
- 63 Newman, *Black Power and Black Religion*, 134-135.
- 64 *Ibid.*
- 65 Interview with Nimmo; *Miami Herald*, March 9, 1928, 6; *Miami Daily News*, March 9, 1928; Interview with Gloria Bridgewater of the African Universal Church, in possession of Gregory Bush, University of Miami.
- 66 Interview with Nimmo; *Miami Herald*, March 9 and 12, 1928.
- 67 Interview with Nimmo; Newman, *Black Power and Black Religion*, 142-143.