

University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire

Velma Fern Bell Hamilton

Education and Integration: Thought, Word and Deed

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Dr. Kate Lang, Professor

Cooperating Professor: Dr. Oskar Chamberlain

By Pauline E. Olsen Basurto

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## ABSTRACT

The life of educator Velma Bell Hamilton encompassed nearly a century of change. Her family's migration from her birthplace, Pontotac, Mississippi to Beloit, Wisconsin in the early part of the century later formed the basis for Hamilton's thesis at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. The 1933 Master's thesis titled "*A Comparison of the Negro Population of Beloit and Madison*," addresses the topic of "social adjustment among groups in a period of great financial stress, and the question of the peculiar social function, if any, of each particular group." The stated outcome is that "this will be a valuable index for predicting the permanence of this latest increment to the Wisconsin population."<sup>1</sup> The topic of the thesis would serve as a precursor to the passion of Hamilton's life: her belief in African American social adjustment and the role education could have.

Hamilton would actively address the topic of African American social adjustment, the influence of education and cultural integration throughout her life in the tradition of the African American orators and writers of her day and whose intellectual example became sources of inspiration for her own speeches and writing from the late 1920's until long past her retirement from teaching in the late 1990's. An examination of Hamilton's body of work in her writing and speeches and its connection and contribution to the greater body of African American oratorical tradition is the focus of this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> Bell, Velma Fern "The Negro in Beloit and Madison, Wisconsin" (Master of Arts Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1933) Introduction. Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003. M2006-040, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

## INTRODUCTION

### Thesis

Velma Bell Hamilton developed a body of work over her lifetime which reflected her core belief in the positive influence of all types of education and the possibility that education can influence integration between the American white population and African American culture. Hamilton maintained an attitude of optimistic reflection throughout her life and was determined to become an instrument of positive influence by the change she exercised both in the classroom as an educator and as a community participant on a wide range of committees and in a number of volunteer positions. By her own acknowledgment this attitude reflected an examination of the African American literature which spanned her lifetime. In a speech given at Madison Area Technical College in February of 1995 on the subject of Black History, Hamilton stated,

It is my opinion that, strictly speaking, there is no American black history separate from general American history. Black people defined and treated as a discreet entity, have been involved in every historical event in America from Jamestown to Ronald Reagan. Their roles have been many, their courses circuitous and fraught with both successes and failures. Special books, correctly documented, and special courses help to set the record straight. Special celebrations are intended to call attention to our story as a means of educating ourselves and other segments of the public. Such history enables us to use the past to widen our view to include silent voices like those of Frederick Douglas and Nat Turner and Malcolm X, who tell us what it was like to be black.<sup>2</sup>

What was Hamilton's ongoing message? Did the message change over the course of her lifetime? Did the message change as she addressed different audiences? Could she be considered an orator or was she a lecturer? Was her message connected to African American intellectual thought as it evolved over her lifetime? If so, what was the connection to African

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<sup>2</sup>Hamilton, Velma Bell, "Black History Week – What it Means to Me" Speech given at MATC, February 1995 Box 6/24. Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003. M2006-040. State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

American intellectual thought and oratory? An examination of Hamilton's legacy in her writings and speeches from 1929 until 2003, and her belief in the positive influence of education and its impact on positive cultural integration is the topic of this paper.

Hamilton's daughter Muriel commented on her mother's core beliefs in an interview with the Capital Times of Madison, Wisconsin in 2003, "My mother believes in the importance of human respect and human interaction across all kinds of barriers and in the importance of education in the broadest sense --- not only textbook education, but people getting to know and understand each other and making the world a better place. Hopefully, that will be her legacy."<sup>3</sup>

### **Chronology of Awards**

1926 - Honor Society in her junior year in high school, second in her graduating class,

1930 - Phi Kappa Beta at Beloit College (possibly the first African American woman)

1933 - Master of Arts in Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Madison

1943 – First President of Madison Chapter of NAACP

1959 – Who's Who of American Women,

1961 - "Citizen of the Year" by the Newspaper Guild of Madison,

1965 - Distinguished Service Award from Beloit College

1972 –Named in *Outstanding Educators of America*,

1974 - "Wisconsin Mother of the Year,"

1981 – Honorary Law Degree, Lakeland College,

1989 - Outstanding Service to Women of Color by the Wisconsin Regional Chapter of the Minority Women's Network

1992 - The Alexander Company's Civic Leadership Award, along with Harry Hamilton

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<sup>3</sup> Zaleski, Rob. "Goodbye and Thanks, Velma Hamilton." *The Capitol Times*, Madison, Wisconsin, May 19, 2003.

1993 – Velma Hamilton Middle School Named (formerly Van Hise Middle School)  
(Harry Hamilton Science Laboratory Named.)

2002 – Recognized by the Board of Governors of the Madison Community Foundation  
for Leadership.

### **Historical Framework**

The historical changes which occurred over Hamilton’s lifetime are important considerations in placing her enthusiasm for and commitment to education and positive change into context. Hamilton was the lone African American in her graduating class. She graduated Magna Cum Laude with a Bachelor of Arts on Monday, June 16, 1930, from Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin. Just five years before, Hitler had resurrected the NSDAP (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei) political party. In the year that she graduated the first diesel engine had completed its first trip (fifteen days prior to her graduation), radio station WOMG (WIS-AM) in Columbia, South Carolina had just started to transmit radio waves and in February of that same year, Pluto had been discovered by Clyde Tombaugh. On March 15, 1930, the first streamlined submarine of the US Navy, the USS Nautilus, was launched and on May 19<sup>th</sup>, a few days short of a month before her graduation date, white women won voting rights in South Africa. A television patent was still eight years away. Five years later in 1935, thirty percent of all households in Atlanta, Georgia were still without indoor plumbing.<sup>4</sup>

The Great Depression affected the entire nation although its effects were felt more intensely in the stratified South. John Egerton, author of *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* writes, “There is no way to convey now an explicit sense of the look, smell, sound, and feel of the South in that somber autumn of

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<sup>4</sup> Egerton, John, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. 1994), 5.

1932, but in its practical effect, if not literally and historically, this was a feudal land, an Americanized version of a European society in the Middle Ages.”<sup>5</sup> Later, while addressing the state of the South in the 1930s, he states, “To be sure, there was such a thing as better and worse but the bigger truth was that the whole country was in pain, and the South, by almost any measure you could apply, was suffering much more than the rest of the United States.”<sup>6</sup>

The Great Depression and World War II assisted America in moving away from the idea of “Separate but Equal” toward the concept of “Integrated Equality.”<sup>7</sup> The office of the president together with the Supreme Court made strides toward achieving equality of economic opportunity, integrated public facilities and political equality.

In 1933, the year Hamilton finished her Master of Arts in Sociology and three years after her college graduation, Franklin D. Roosevelt took office. Segregation within the American military machine occupied the attention of the Negro Press. Roosevelt sought to alleviate the strain of the Depression with programs of employment and relief which later ensured the affiliation of African Americans with the Democratic Party.<sup>8</sup>

### **African American Historical Framework**

The African American population also shifted its thinking away from the “Separate but Equal” assertion created by the compromise of *Plessy v. Ferguson*; this is especially evident in

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<sup>5</sup> Egerton, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Egerton, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Condit, Celeste Michelle and Lucaites, John Louis, *Crafting Equality: America's Anglo-African Word*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 167.

<sup>8</sup> Boulware, Marcus H., *The Oratory of Negro Leaders: 1900-1968*, (Westport: Connecticut, Negro Universities Press, 1969), 24.



the African American political and intellectual rhetoric of the time. In 1920, W. E. B Du Bois wrote for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)'s publication, *The Crisis*, "We believe that social equality, by a reasonable interpretation of the words, means moral, mental and physical fitness to associate with one's fellowmen. In this sense *THE CRISIS* believes absolutely in the Social Equality of the Black and White and Yellow races and it believes too that any attempt to deny this equality by law or custom is a blow at Humanity, Religion and Democracy." In a later essay he wrote, "Of course we want social equality and we know that we will never be real men until we get it."<sup>9</sup>

African Americans began to realize that it would be necessary to achieve economic equality in order to actualize social and cultural equality. The notion of "Separate Equality" suffered growing pains through all the different levels of African American society. The irony of being a newly freed people who lacked the fruits of cultural longevity: literature, art, theater and scholarship was not lost on its leaders. While reflecting on the topic, African American leaders felt conflicting feelings of pride and inadequacy. Celeste Michelle Condit and John Louis Lucaites<sup>10</sup> comment on this state of affairs and call to the recollection of the historian, Alexander Crummell.<sup>11</sup> Historically Crummell preceded Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois in

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<sup>9</sup> W. E. B Du Bois, "Social Equality," *The Crisis* (November 1920): 16. Condit, Celeste Michelle and Lucaites, John Louis. *Crafting Equality: America's Anglo-American Word*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 149-150.

<sup>10</sup> Celeste Michelle Condit and John Louis's volume *Crafting Equality: America's Anglo-African Word* argues that the meaning of the word equality has been forged in the day-to-day pragmatics of public discourse. Condit and Lucaites make an argument for the critical role that African Americans have had in actively shaping what equality has come to mean by the active use of rhetoric and oratory as a tool.

<sup>11</sup> Leeman, Richard W. *African-American Orators: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook*. (Westport Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press, 1969), 52-53. Minister and orator of the 1800s, Alexander Crummell was born in New York City a free man in 1819. Educated at the New York African Free School, Crummell was from an early age engaged in anti-racism within the Episcopalian church and became highly respected as a minister, civil rights advocate, thinker and moralist. Crummell advocated self-improvement on the part of African Americans which combined education with training in a craft of some kind. Leeman states in *African-American Orators* that

advocating black social and economic independence. Crummell had lamented , “... as a race in this land, we have no art; we have no science; we have no philosophy; we have no scholarship.”<sup>12</sup> Condit and Lucaites argue that this state of affairs helped to bring the Harlem Renaissance into existence in the 1920s.<sup>13</sup>

The African American leadership of the 1930s used the press as a tool to advance the growing public sentiment that “Separate but Equal” in reality would not offer true equality to African Americans. Condit and Lucaites write, “As the twentieth century matured, African America’s leadership spoke in a voice that clearly distinguished itself from its late nineteenth-century precursors by challenging all of the bases of *Plessy v. Ferguson*.”<sup>14</sup> The black press had developed its mechanism to the extent that it now offered a sophisticated and valuable critique of America’s many and varied racial stories: stories which ranged from news of lynching and loss to tales of educational triumphs and fortitude. Migration of blacks from the south to the north ensured that tales of repression and the depths to which some southern supremacists would persecute their newly-freed fellow citizens were spread throughout the country. Some southern white supremacists attempted to put a stop to the education of blacks by arguing that education increased black criminality by raising black expectations to unrealistic levels. Ironically, blacks were educating themselves at such a pace that it was apparent that education itself was the great unifier and equalizer.

The July 1933 issue of *The Journal of Negro Education* titled “A Survey of Negro Higher Education” covered the topic thoroughly in thirteen articles. Fred McCuistion compared the

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this pre-Civil War period was marked by rhetoric which focused on the notion of fast-approaching freedom and an optimistic belief in imminent justice.

<sup>12</sup> Condit and Lucaites, 153.

<sup>13</sup> Condit and Lucaites, 153-154.

<sup>14</sup> Condit and Lucaites, 154.

number of schools educating African Americans from 1921 to those of 1932 in the article titled “The Present Status of Higher Education Negroes.” The figures covered Negro institutions in the South and demonstrate the increased growth from year to year during this time period. He states that he bases his analysis upon figures from the 1930 census.<sup>15</sup>

Year	Number of	College	High School	Elementary	Total
<b>1921-22</b>	70	5,231	15,361	13,692	34,284
<b>1923-24</b>	82	7,641	18,706	11,938	38,285
<b>1926-27</b>	99	13,197	18,387	10,325	41,909
<b>1931-32</b>	106	22,609	8,859	4,321	35,789

Table 1: Enrollment in Negro Colleges, 1921-1932

Velma Ferne Bell was finishing her own education at an exciting time in African American education. The higher education of African Americans had only been in existence for about seventy years. McCuiston wrote that the first part of the period had been characterized by the establishment of a large number of schools, dominated by private and religious institutions, enrollment at the colleges consisted mostly of elementary and secondary students and economic support had primarily been given by individuals and organizations from outside of the South.<sup>16</sup> The second half of this time period was marked by changes in all of these areas, including increased public funding. Negro colleges of the South also began to demonstrate a tendency to merge and to develop in centers of greater population.

<sup>15</sup> McCuiston, Fred, “The Present Status of Higher Education of Negroes,” *The Journal of Higher Education of Negroes* Vol. 2, No. 3, “A Survey of Negro Higher Education,” (July 1933): 383.

<sup>16</sup> McCuiston, “The Present Status of Higher Education of Negroes,” 387-389.

McCuistion compiled a chart of the degrees held by Teachers in Negro Colleges in 1933.<sup>17</sup>

	College "A"	Colleges "B"	Junior Colleges "A"	Junior Colleges "B"	Total
<b>PhD Degrees</b>	20	9	0	0	29
<b>M.A. Degrees</b>	95	273	4	11	383
<b>B.S. or B.A.</b>	73	167	6	22	268

Table 2. Degrees Held by Teachers in Negro Colleges, categories "A" and "B", 1933

Hamilton addresses the topic in her Masters of Art Thesis. "There are fifteen Negro students in the University of Wisconsin (1932), four of whom are Madison residents, and one a resident of Beloit. One Negro boy is enrolled at Beloit College. Two Madison girls are attending Fisk University at Nashville Tennessee. The number of Negroes in institutions of higher learning is so small that problems of prejudice do not arise in any marked degree."<sup>18</sup> Hamilton only considers the northern institutions of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Beloit College.

The number of African Americans in the process of acquiring advanced degrees was also in a state of growth. Hamilton could count herself as a member of a very small group. The singularity of her standing as an African American is noted by Dave Mason in *Sweet Mad Youth*:

<sup>17</sup> McCuistion, "The Present Status of Higher Education of Negroes," 392.

<sup>18</sup> Bell, Velma Fern, "The Negro in Beloit and Madison, Wisconsin - A Comparative Study of the Population in Beloit and Madison," (Master of Arts Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1933), Box 2, File 23, Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003, M2006-040, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

*An Unconventional Chronicle of the Coming of Age of Wisconsin's Historic and Unconventional Beloit College,*

Velma Bell Hamilton,'30, who also had ably served as a trustee a few years earlier, was one of Beloit's few black students in the late 1920's, now retired from a lifetime of teaching and volunteerism, she has earned wide recognition, including being named Wisconsin's "Mother of the Year," having a Madison school named in her honor, and being awarded an honorary degree from her alma mater.<sup>19</sup>

### Oratory

An understanding of the difference between oration and lecture assists in a percipience of Hamilton's work. Marcus Boulware addresses the subject in *The Oratory of Negro Leaders: 1900-1968*, "The lecturer appeals primarily to the intellect, while the orator influences both the emotions and the mind."<sup>20</sup>

Hamilton, while certainly a teacher and, as a sociologist, a lecturer, was also passionate about the subject of education in all of its manifestations, ardently believing in its power as a machination of change never attempted to cover her passion with facts. Indeed it is quite possible that the argument could be advanced that she used facts *with passion* in order to convince her audience, thereby advancing the case that she was engaging *in oratory*. Boulware quotes Mabel Platz as saying, "The highest attainment of an orator is to deal with the convictions of the audience in such a way as to emphasize what is already in their minds. All who today seek to influence the public by oratory must present common forms of knowledge in such a way as to hold the attention and impress judgment of those who hear."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Mason, Dave, *Sweet Mad Youth of Old Beloit: An Unconventional Chronicle of the Coming of Age Of Wisconsin's Historic and Unconventional Beloit College*, published by the Beloit College Press in celebration of the College's Sesquicentennial, 1846-1996, Beloit, Wisconsin, 1997), 605.

<sup>20</sup> Boulware, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Boulware, 6.

What do Condit and Lucaites say of rhetoric? How does what they say relate to Hamilton's use of oratory? Although Condit and Lucaites' volume is an examination of African America's rhetorical use of a specific word, they examine the topic of oratory more broadly in their Preface. They call it "discursive interaction" and state that it mediates between objectivism and relativism in the world of everyday affairs.<sup>22</sup> Hamilton's willingness to make a connection between the written and spoken word and daily practical application in the form of community action is a demonstration of the African American tradition of the use of oratory as a means of inciting its listeners to engage in political and social change. Condit and Lucaites also consider the notion that rhetoric and philosophy combine to create something they call, "public argumentation." Public argumentation receives a definition which gives it practical application to African American oratory as a field of study and as a study of Velma Hamilton's collection of speeches and writing. Condit and Lucaites write "By public argumentation we mean the domain of rhetorical interaction through which a community actively negotiates its common needs and interests."<sup>23</sup>

The study of rhetoric and the role it plays in changing and influencing social and political change has enjoyed a rebirth in the last fifteen years. Richard Leeman critically examines African American orators by the means of literary and intellectual analysis in *African-American Orators: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook*.<sup>24</sup> Molefi Kete Asante examines African American oratory in *The Afrocentric Idea* from an Afrocentric viewpoint rather than a Eurocentric one. The viewpoint acknowledges a difference in speech and listening patterns between African

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<sup>22</sup> Condit and Lucaites, xi.

<sup>23</sup> Condit and Lucaites, xii.

<sup>24</sup> Leeman, Richard W. *African-American Orators: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook*. (Westport Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press), 1969, xii-xv.

Americans and Euroamericans.<sup>25</sup> This is an idea that is certainly worth exploring with connection to Hamilton. In a paper of this length, however, this idea will not be approached, simply acknowledged.

What of her place within the tradition of African American oratory? Is there a place for Velma Bell Hamilton? Boulware is particularly definite on oratory's purpose and place within the African American tradition. He states that the African American orator is "... a special pleader, an advocate for minority rights...(who) talks to small and more intimate groups."<sup>26</sup> He argues that it is an art form which has kept pace with and adapted to radio and television. Hamilton's message is never overtly aggressive in support of African American rights. Rather, she endeavors to make a plea on behalf of education for everyone as a means of change both personal and societal. The sizes of her audiences were small: the gathering at the YWCA, the meeting of the local Madison chapter of the NAACP, a church congregation or educational conference.

The discussion of what makes a good orator both on subject of message and delivery has engaged thinkers in many different time periods. In a speech titled "Orators and Oratory," William Grant Allen told the Diallexian Society of New York Central College on June 22, 1852, "Orations worthy the name must have for their subject personal or political liberty; and orators worthy of the name must necessarily originate in the nation that is on the eve of passing from a state of slavery into freedom; of from a state of freedom into slavery."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Asanti, Molefi Kete. *The Afrocentric Idea*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987.

<sup>26</sup> Boulware, 10-11.

<sup>27</sup> Allen, William Grant, "Orators and Oratory," taken here from *The Liberator*, October 29, 1852. Excerpts were previously anthologized in Otelia Cromwell, Lorenzo Dow Turner, and Eva B. Dykes, eds. *Readings from*

Two conditions are necessary then, to produce good or even great oratory: a.) a subject matter which has as its focus personal or political freedom and b.) a nation in flux or in the midst of change. Allen's description fits Hamilton: her focus was educational freedom or an urging to engage in this freedom and the nation was certainly in the midst of change with regard to African Americans and the expansion of their liberties and opportunities from the 1920s until the early part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century when she last spoke publicly.

## CHAPTER 1

### HUMAN TOIL AND INDUSTRY

#### Early Life

*Wealth comes from industry and from the hard experience of human toil. To dissipate it in waste and extravagance is disloyalty to humanity. This is by no means a doctrine of parsimony. Both men and nations should live in accordance with their means and devote their substance not only to productive industry, but to the creation of the various forms of beauty and the pursuit of culture which give adornments to the art of life.*

**-Calvin Coolidge** quote taken from Velma Bell's autograph book, circa 1926 as an undergraduate at Beloit College, Beloit Wisconsin.<sup>28</sup>

Velma Bell Hamilton was born, by her own declaration, on February 28, 1910 in Pontotoc, Mississippi to Walter and Grace Bell. No birth certificate exists. She had one sister, Ora Bell (Clemmons). Her father, Walter Bell, was said to have been the son of a former slave and was born in the late 1800s although no documentation has been found to record either

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*Negro Authors* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1931.) Here they are taken from Foner, Philip Sheldon and Branham, Robert J., editors. *Lift Every Voice: African American Oratory, 1787-1900*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1998. (Electronic resource.)

<sup>28</sup> Autograph books were an important part of school/college life during the 1800's and early to mid 1900's. Entries could include autographs of friends, cartoons written by them, portraits, drawings, and poems. The owner also included sayings which they found pertinent, quotes of importance or clippings from newspapers or books. Hamilton's autograph book dates from her period at Beloit College. The slim, green, leather-bound volume measures 5"x7" and includes autographs from friends, hand-written quotes from friends and clippings from an unidentified volume of poetry or sayings. Some are fixed into the volume with glue and some are still loose. Many of the quotes could later be traced to actualization of Hamilton's core beliefs. Many are filled with wit



statement. Walter and Grace Bell moved from Pontotoc, Mississippi to Beloit, Wisconsin in 1914. Walter Bell obtained work at a factory which built locomotives for the build-up to World War I.<sup>29</sup> In 1938, the Industrial Commission of Wisconsin licensed Walter Bell as a Master Painter in the state of Wisconsin.<sup>30</sup> Velma attended public schools in Beloit. She achieved Honor Society, graduated second in the Beloit High School class of 1926 and was admitted to Beloit College on September 13, 1926.

### **Harry Hamilton**

Velma Ferne Bell [Hamilton] met Harry Hamilton at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1932. She completed her Master's Thesis in 1933. Together they taught in North Carolina for one year. They were married in 1934. Genealogy on the Harry Hamilton family is more complete. According to the Hamilton family reunion records found in the Velma and Harry Hamilton collection, Harry was the son of Mary Frances and Washington "Patrick" Hamilton. "Patrick" was the son of Lena Youngblood, a former slave. Lena Youngblood later changed her last name to Hamilton to reflect that of the former slave owner.<sup>31</sup> Harry Hamilton wrote for the 1980 Hamilton Family Reunion,

Washington "Patrick" Hamilton was born into slavery in Lowndes County, Alabama, near Montgomery, in about 1850.... Oral history ... recounts the following story. Young Washington was out riding his owner's horse one day when he was stopped by several soldiers. The soldiers, upon learning that Washington considered himself a slave, told him he no longer belonged to anyone and they were taking the horse of the ex-master for their own use. They gave him a mule, telling him it was his to keep and he should not give it to the ex-master.... Washington kept the mule as his own for years.

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<sup>29</sup> Zaleski, "Goodbye and Thanks, Velma Hamilton."

<sup>30</sup> Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003, Box 2, Folder 2, M2006-040, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

<sup>31</sup> Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003, Box 2, Folder 7, M2006-040, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

According to the history recorded by Harry Hamilton, his father attended the Swayne School, an American Missionary Association school (AMA) in Montgomery in the 1870s. After teaching for awhile, Washington “Patrick” Hamilton entered Talladega College to study theology. He was ordained in 1888, most likely as a Congregational minister. Five children were born to Washington “Patrick” and his wife Mary Frances, a certified teacher from the Emerson Institute. Harry and his twin brother Harold were born in 1907. Washington Hamilton, born a slave, educated as a minister, father of Harry, died in 1918.<sup>32</sup>

## CHAPTER 2

### THE FOOTPATH TO PEACE

#### College Struggles

*To be glad of life because it gives you the chance to love and to work and to play, and to look up at the stars. To be satisfied with your possessions, but not contented with yourself until you have made the best of them. To despise nothing in the world except falsehood and meanness, and to fear nothing except cowardice. To be governed by your admiration rather than your own disgusts; to covet nothing that is your neighbors's except his kindness of heart and gentleness of manners. To think seldom of your enemies, often of your friends, and every day of Christ; and to spend as much time as you can with body and spirit, in God's out-of-doors. These are little guideposts on the footpath to peace.*

- *Henry van Dyke* (quote taken from Velma Bell's autograph book, circa 1926 as an undergraduate at Beloit College, Beloit Wisconsin.)

One topic which Velma Bell undertook at the undergraduate level was that of William Lloyd Garrison and his intimate involvement with emancipation in the pre- and post-Civil War Era. Hamilton drew a comparison between Ghandi's doctrine of passive resistance and that of William Lloyd Garrison. She wrote of passive resistance,

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<sup>32</sup> Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003. Box 2, Folder 7, M2006-040, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Carried out to its utmost limit this force is independent of pecuniary or other material assistance. Violence is the negation of this great spiritual force, which can only be cultivated or wielded by those who entirely eschew violence. It is a force that may be used by individuals as well as communities. It may be used as well in political as in domestic affairs. Its universal applicability is a demonstration of its permanence and invincibility. It can be used alike by men, women and children. It is impossible for those who consider themselves weak to apply this force. Only those who realize that there is something in man that is superior to the brute nature in him; that the latter always yields to it can effectively be passive resisters. This force is to violence what light is to darkness.

Hamilton's conclusion several paragraphs later states, "It should be essential to real education that a child should learn that, in the struggle of life, it can easily conquer hate by love, untruth by truth, violence by self-sufferings."<sup>33</sup>

During Hamilton's junior year in college, she entered into financial struggles because of her father's illness. The Vice-president of the College, Dr. Louis Edward Holden, wrote on her behalf to the Julius Rosenwald Fund in Chicago. Julius Rosenwald, a philanthropist who began his millionaire career as a newspaper boy, had established the fund in order to aid Jewish and Black students and other participants in education and the arts.

He is known to have stated, "Give for the living. Those who seek by perpetuities to create for themselves a kind of immortality will fail, because no institution can live forever."<sup>34</sup>

The Julius Rosenwald Fund awarded Velma Bell the sum of \$200 toward her studies in her junior year and an additional \$400 in her senior year. "The Trustees of the Julius Rosenwald Fund have decided to grant fellowships to a selected number of Negroes who show promise of leadership or whose scholarship or accomplishment in the Arts is outstanding."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Bell (m.Hamilton), Velma Fern, "William Lloyd Garrison," historiography, Beloit College circa 1928, 29 Box 1, File 10. Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003. M2006-040, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

<sup>34</sup> Rosenwald, Julius, "The Principles of Public Giving," *The Atlantic Monthly*, 1929.

<sup>35</sup> Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003, Box 1, File 12, M2006-040, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

The philanthropist's legacy made it possible for Velma Bell to continue her studies at a time when it would have been otherwise impossible. Hamilton is listed as a 1929 Fellow Recipient in *Investment in People: The Story of the Julius Rosenwald Fund* written by Edwin Embree and Julia Waxman.<sup>36</sup> According to Embree and Waxman, Hamilton did not fall within the norms of the guidelines of the awards. Recipients were generally expected to have completed their general college coursework and have embarked on their professional training. Exceptions were made for individuals who exhibited evidence of maturity and preparation.<sup>37</sup> Evidently the members of the Fellowship Committee thought that Hamilton fell into the second category.

This step would begin a long mentorship with Dr. Holden. He wrote tirelessly on Hamilton's behalf to the leading African American universities of the South in order to assist her in her pursuit of a teaching position.

In October of 1929, Vice President Holden again wrote on behalf of Velma Bell to Robert R. Moton, president of the Tuskegee Normal Industrial Institute. The letter is notable on several accounts: Holden was acquainted with Booker T. Washington, he focused on Velma Bell as the first "colored" inductee into Phi Beta Kappa, he promoted her scholarship and character, and was connected with the Julius Rosenberg fund, which has been historically recognized for the huge amounts of financial assistance extended to the Negro and Jewish communities in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s.

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<sup>36</sup> Embree, Edwin R. and Waxman, Julia, *Investment in People: The Story of the Julius Rosenwald Fund*, (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1949), 239.

<sup>37</sup> Embree and Waxman, 148-150.

My dear President Moton:

Early in my professorial career at Beloit College I had the privilege of training a man whom no doubt you are well acquainted with, Mr. Charles W. Wood, in the class of 1895 at Beloit College, whose recent address in our Alumni Register is stated as being 70-131<sup>st</sup> Street, Richmond Hill, Long Island, New York, but for who many years served your institute at Tuskegee. I had the privilege in 1898 of introducing Mr. Wood to Booker T. Washington, your predecessor.

I now have the privilege of calling your attention to another extraordinary product of Beloit College, Miss Velma Bell, 1223 Elm Street, Beloit, the first colored girl to be elected to Phi Beta Kappa, national scholastic fraternity, at Beloit College. This young woman amassed a total of 113 grade points in three semesters of college work, only seven less than are needed for the entire college course. Miss Bell chose Sociology as her major subject and also has major grades in Zoology and Biology. She graduates next June.

Miss Bell intends to enter the field of Social Service work, helping to better the conditions of her own race, but I have advised her that the best service she can render her own race is to accept a teacher's position in one of the best colored colleges of the South, for there she will be able to influence the best minds of her race.

I write you to ask you to name for me several of the colored institutions where such a scholarly woman would be in demand and appreciated. . . . My report of her work at the end of the year was such as warranted the Trustees of the Julius Rosenwald Fund to appropriate \$400 for her Senior year, which ends next June. But for Mr. Rosenwald this splendid specimen of her race might never have been heard of. Miss Bell will be a competent and efficient teacher in almost any college department, but especially in the departments of Sociology, Zoology, and Biology in which she has majored.<sup>38</sup>

On November 14, 1929, Dr. Holden received a reply from the Principal of Tuskegee with a list of ten colleges and universities. The list included Fisk, Atlanta, Talladega, Virginia Union University, Spelman, Bennett, and Wiley - all notable African American institutions serving the best minds and offering the most excellent of educations. Eventually, Dr. Holden would assist Velma Bell in writing on her behalf to all of the institutions listed in addition to Howard, Southern, Lincoln and Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute. In November of that same year, he wrote yet again, this time to Jane Addams of Hull House in Chicago. Addams answered,

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<sup>38</sup> Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003, Box 1, File 12. M2006-040, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. Special Collections & Archives, McIntyre Library. University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

My dear Mr. Holden:

Miss Breckinridge of the School of Administration at the University of Chicago is quite delighted at the prospect of having such a delightful girl, as Miss Bell seems to be, as a student next year.

I think if her parents could possibly get along without her for another year, it would be better to get her Master degree at once and not to take it in "scraps and bits" during the summers.

I have written to Hollingworth Wood, President of the Trustees of Fisk regarding a teaching position for her and hope to hear more about her later.

Faithfully yours,

Jane Addams<sup>39</sup>

Several factors then, were responsible for the path which Velma Bell was to take in her life. Mentors along the educational path were instrumental in guiding her and believing in her potential. The climate at Beloit was particularly conducive to assisting people of color to succeed at a time when other educational institutions were struggling with the concept of integration between the races. The president of Beloit College at the time, President Irving Maurer was quoted in the Beloit Daily News as saying,

The starting point for our realizing of a democratic way of life, (Mr. Maurer said,) regardless of race, color, or previous condition of servitude, is economic. We can do everything in our power to give economic opportunity for the Negro. We can see to it that in our particular town the Negroes are not discriminated against as far as educational opportunity is concerned. We can learn to live with them as neighbors and friends. And we can declare our faith in the Constitution of the United States by joining in all worthy political movements which try to assure the Negro full enjoyment of the political equality and privilege of citizenship which have made that document a living force.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003, Box 1, File 12. M2006-040, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. Special Collections & Archives. McIntyre Library. University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

<sup>40</sup> Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003, Box 1, File 12. M2006-040, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. Special Collections & Archives. McIntyre Library. University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Record of Velma Fern Bell,  
1223 Elm St., Beloit, Wis.  
Admitted September 13, 1926.  
Beloit College.

Entrance Units

English	3	History	2 $\frac{1}{2}$	Chemistry	1
Latin	4	Algebra	1	Domestic Science	1 $\frac{1}{2}$
Spanish	3	Geometry	1	Civics	1

1926-1927

First Semester

Dept.	Course	Hrs.	Grade
English	1	3	B
French	1	4	A
Chemistry	1	4	B
History	1	4	A
Hygiene			C
Physical Ed.			A

Second Semester

Course	Hrs.	Grade
2	3	B
2	4	A
2	4	B
2	4	B
		B

1927-1928

First Semester

Dept.	Course	Hrs.	Grade
English	3	3	B
Biblical Lit.	1	2	B
French	3	4	A
Zoology	1	4	A
Economics	1	3	B
Physical Ed.			A

Second Semester

Course	Hrs.	Grade
4	5	B
2	2	A
4	4	A
2	4	A
2	3	A
		B

1928-1929

First Semester

Dept.	Course	Hrs.	Grade
Psychology	1	3	A
Education	3	3	A
Sociology	31	3	A
Sociology	33	3	A
Anthropology	3	3	A
French	7	2	B
Zoology			
Zoology			

Second Semester

Course	Hrs.	Grade
18	2	A
32	3	A
34	3	B
4	3	B
6	2	B
8	3	A
40	1	A

## CHAPTER 3

### AN ARCHITECT OF CIRCUMSTANCE

#### Building a Legacy

*Instead of saying that man is the creature of circumstance, it would be nearer the mark to say that man is the architect of circumstance. It is character which builds an existence out of circumstance. Our strength is measured by our plastic power. From the same materials one man builds palaces, another hovels; one warehouses, another villas. Bricks and mortar are mortar and bricks until the architect can make them something else. – Carlyle (quote taken from Velma Bell's autograph book, circa 1926)*

Velma F. Bell (Hamilton) was hired at Bennett College for Women in Greensboro, North Carolina and filled the years between 1930 and 1934 with several endeavors. After one year of employment, she requested a leave of absence in order to attend the University of Wisconsin – Madison and complete her Master's Degree in Sociology. Velma Bell Hamilton states, in the introduction to her 1933 Master's dissertation, the Negro Population from 1920 to 1930 more than doubled in the state of Wisconsin. Titled, "A Comparison of the Negro Population of Beloit and Madison," the dissertation addresses the topic of "social adjustment among groups in a period of great financial stress, and the question of the peculiar social function, if any, of each particular group." Her stated outcome is that she hopes that "this will be a valuable index for predicting the permanence of this latest increment to the Wisconsin population."<sup>41</sup>

She addressed the sociological method of the time period: "Contemporary sociological method and standpoint is concerned with the total social situation in the analysis of group behavior. A given social situation involves the totality of values, economic, social, and cultural which affect the conscious status of the group, the pre-existing attitude of the individuals

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<sup>41</sup> Bell, Velma Fern, "The Negro in Beloit and Madison, Wisconsin- A Comparative Study of the Population in Beloit and Madison.," Master of Arts Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1933. Box 2, File 23. Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003. M2006-040, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.



themselves and a definition of the conditions. The interaction of the individuals within a group and among individuals in other groups contributes the basis for the interpretation of the success of adjustments in the situation." In the conclusion, Hamilton wrote, "The school situation presents no problems of racial maladjustment because the colored population is distributed so widely that the numbers of Negroes in any school district remain a small percentage of the total enrollment. *Difficulties are centered in vocational guidance and placement.*"<sup>42</sup>

In 1939, Velma and Harry Hamilton moved to Madison, Wisconsin.

Velma Hamilton helped to establish the Madison chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1943. She was the first president of the organization. During the time period of the 1940s she had opportunity to speak on several different but related topics. In 1943, Hamilton addressed a meeting of Sigma Gamma Rho, a service sorority of African American teachers and professionals.<sup>43</sup> The title of the address, "Indirect Rewards of Service," again spoke of Ghandi. "A cause is bigger than people...It is a Mahatma Ghandi who allows his body to suffer pain and hunger in the hope of uniting his people. It is a Booker Washington, a Mary McCleod Bethune. Since the dawn of civilization, it is that group of men and women who have been ready to risk their well-being, their bodies and their lives sometimes, in a great cause."<sup>44</sup> She directly states that she is paraphrasing the words of

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<sup>42</sup> Hamilton, Velma Fern Bell, "The Negro in Beloit and Madison, Wisconsin- A Comparative Study of the Population in Beloit and Madison," Master of Arts Thesis, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1933. Box 2, File 23. Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003. M2006-040, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

<sup>43</sup> Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc. was organized on November 12, 1922 in Indianapolis, Indiana by seven young educators: Mary Lou Allison Little, Dorothy Hanley Whiteside, Vivian White Marbury, Nannie Mae Gahn Johnson, Hattie Mae Dulin Redford, Bessie M. Downey Martin and Cubena McClure. The group became an incorporated national collegiate sorority on December 30, 1929, when a charter was granted to Alpha chapter at Butler University.

<sup>44</sup> Hamilton, Velma Bell, Address to Sigma Gamma Rho, "Indirect Rewards of Service," 1943, Box 2, File 20. Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003. M2006-040, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Jesus Christ when she offers words of advice to the listeners. Again, her preoccupation with education as a solution is evident. Recalling that the topic of the address is “*Indirect Rewards of Service*”) she stated, “If you would be great, go out ... and heal those who are cripple mentally by ignorance and economic disability; give sight to those who are spiritually and educationally blind; bring to life those underprivileged, who are dead to the joys of the full life; preach the gospel of good houses and good food and sane living to the poor.”<sup>45</sup>

Hamilton took educator and activist Mary McCleod Bethune’s formula for speech writing and made it her own in an address titled, “The Next Item on Democracy’s Agenda: Color Equality on the Nation’s Spotlight.”<sup>46</sup> The speech appears to have been made to the Madison Chapter of the NAACP sometime between 1940 and 1945. Hamilton’s speech is remarkable in its similarity to an essay of McCleod Bethune’s from 1938 from *The Journal Negro History*, titled, “Clarifying Our Vision with the Facts.”<sup>47</sup> McCleod Bethune tabulates the strides which African Americans had made and then clearly articulates changes which still need to take place.

Illiteracy has decreased from about 95 per cent in 1865 to only 16.3 per cent in 1930. In the very states that during the dark days of Reconstruction prohibited the education of Negroes by law, there are today over 2 million pupils in 25,000 elementary schools, 150,000 high school pupils in 2,000 high schools and 25,000 students in the more than 100 Negro colleges and universities. Some 116 Negroes have been elected to Phi Beta Kappa in white Northern colleges<sup>48</sup>; and 97 Negroes are mentioned in Who’s

<sup>45</sup> Hamilton, Velma Bell, “Indirect Rewards of Service,” Address to Sigma Gamma Rho, 1943, Box 2, File 20. Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003. M2006-040, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

<sup>46</sup> Hamilton, Velma Bell, “The Next Item on Democracy’s Agenda: Color Equality on the Nation’s Spotlight,” Speech to Madison Chapter of NAACP, circa 1940-1945, Box 2, File 20. Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003. M2006-040, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

<sup>47</sup> Bethune, Mary McCleod. “Clarifying Our Vision with the Facts,” *The Journal of Negro History* Vol. 23, No.1. (January 1938): 10-15.

<sup>48</sup> Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003, Letter from Vice President Holden describing Velma Bell Hamilton as Phi Beta Kappa, Box 1, File 12, M2006-040, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives

Who in America....From this history, our youth will gain confidence, self-reliance and courage. We shall thereby raise their mental horizon and give them a base from which to reach out higher and higher into the realm of achievement.<sup>49</sup>

The conclusion of McCleod Belthune's essay advocates telling African American youth the truth of their situation and arming them with the facts. She wrote,

Recently, in outlining to the President of the United States (Franklin D. Roosevelt) the position of the Negro in the America, I saw fit to put it this way: "The great masses of Negro workers are depressed and unprotected in the lowest levels of agriculture and domestic service while black workers in industry are generally barred from the unions and grossly discriminated against. The housing and living conditions of the Negro masses are sordid and unhealthy; they live in constant terror of the mob, generally shorn of their constitutionally guaranteed rights of suffrage, and humiliated by the denial of civil liberties. The great masses of Negro youth are offered only one fifteenth the educational opportunity of the average American child. These things also we must tell them, accurately, realistically and factually. The situation we face must be defined, reflected and evaluated."<sup>50</sup>

Like McCleod Bethune, Hamilton focuses on the gains made by African Americans.

Today, with the entire democratic order under attack, men and women everywhere are probing accepted institutions and time honored ways of living and evaluating these in light of the problems of the day. In this spirit, we Americans are turning with intensified earnestness to a study of our history.<sup>51</sup>

Hamilton is intent on identifying the problem as she sees it for her audience and in building an argument for a plea. The rhetoric of the time, and the ongoing work of the administration of the New Deal assisted her in building the argument. Hamilton wrote,

Color remains the unfinished business of democracy...In the 75 years of freedom, [of African Americans] we have reduced illiteracy, we have accumulated property, we

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Division. Special Collections & Archives. McIntyre Library. University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

<sup>49</sup> Bethune, "Clarifying Our Vision with the Facts," 14.

<sup>50</sup> Bethune, "Clarifying Our Vision with the Facts," 14.

<sup>51</sup> Hamilton, Velma Bell, "The Next Item on Democracy's Agenda: Color Equality on the Nation's Spotlight," Speech to Madison Chapter of NAACP, circa 1940-1945, Box 2, File 20. Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003. M2006-040, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

have developed a few successful businesses, have built churches, homes and schools, have fought for their/our country. But just to the degree that progress has been made, social tensions have increased. In spite of his record of loyalty to the government ... [in spite of] his efforts to reduce the deficiencies produced by his heritage of slavery ... of new methodology in the social sciences and improved techniques of measurement .... His social, economic, and political position reflect a caste status dominated by the idea that he is biologically inferior – having no rights which a white man is bound to respect.<sup>52</sup>

She continues to build the argument that *now* [the 1940s] is the time to execute change and put America's domestic affairs in order with regard to her citizens of brown skin. Interestingly, this is the same thesis that John Egerton puts forth in "*Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South.*" Egerton lays claim to the thought that the four or five years immediately following the Second World War were ripe for favorable social change and that the South could have moved forward and "healed itself" and thus the stream of events which came after: federal court decisions, the actions of presidents and congresses, governors and mayors, were all a result of the South's failure to seize the moment and rectify the wrongs of the past with regard to her African American citizens.<sup>53</sup>

Hamilton's vision of the possibility of the historical moment is striking not only for its clarity but for its solutions. She itemizes her three-point solution succinctly and again puts forward the idea that education be the solution to cultural integration,

1.) It is your duty to mend this appalling ignorance about one tenth of our national population. You can do this by broadening your contacts...by reading. If you think "all niggers are alike" you are socially illiterate no matter how far you have gone in school. 2.) You can deny yourselves the luxury of feeling superior to members of colored minorities. ... it is bad taste to make underprivileged groups the butt of all your jokes. Now it creates disunity. 3.) You can participate in intelligent social action... If you sign a petition to require a real estate firm to refuse to rent or sell to Negroes, you are just as

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<sup>52</sup> Hamilton, Velma Bell, "The Next Item on Democracy's Agenda: Color Equality on the Nation's Spotlight," Speech to Madison Chapter of NAACP, circa 1940-1945, Box 2, File 20. Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003. M2006-040, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

<sup>53</sup> Egerton, 11.

guilty... You can help to improve race relations in your community by improving race relations.<sup>54</sup>

Like Egerton, Hamilton focuses on “what’s right” and concludes that the responsibility of the listener should be clear and that the moment is right to reaffirm American beliefs in the ideals of liberty, equality and brotherhood and to practice them. Like Bethune, she is interested in offering solutions to the problem presented.

The other speeches which Hamilton gave during the 1940s were also preoccupied with the theme of the position of the African American within white America. Although the speeches are not precisely dated, they may have been directed to the members of the NAACP or related groups and it is clear by their contents that they were given during the period of the Second World War. They are titled: “Every Child a World Citizen,” “Will a Long War Aid the Negro,” “Racial Minorities in the Post-War World,” “Promoting Peace Thru Personal Action,” and “Pattern for the Future.” In every one, the reader or listener can hear her message of education and integration. The speeches of this time period are the most strident in tone of the collection. She, like Bethune, engages the listener with a straightforward, no-nonsense style while adding wit and anecdote.

In 1962, thirty-four years after Hamilton would first write of passive resistance and Ghandi as a neophyte writer and nineteen years after speaking to Sigma Gamma Rho, she would again address the topic of non-violent resistance in an article for the publication *Children’s Religion*.

Since the end of World War II the world has witnessed two score or more violent political upheavals. Those seeking change, often led by students, have turned out the

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<sup>54</sup> Hamilton, Velma Bell, “The Next Item on Democracy’s Agenda: Color Equality on the Nation’s Spotlight,” Speech to Madison Chapter of NAACP, circa 1940-1945, Box 2, File 20. Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003. M2006-040, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

holders of power, while others have known obscurity, exile, or death. Established institutions have been replaced by governments expressing the full range of political philosophy. . . . In our own country the non-violent efforts of Negro students in the sit-ins, “pray-ins,” “wade-ins,” and other challenges of the patterns of racial segregation, may even be included. Despite the fact that no great overturn of previously stable political societies is involved, there are, nevertheless, radical changes in thought and permanent cracks in the power structure.<sup>55</sup>

Booker T. Washington, like Velma B. Hamilton, believed that education was the key to changing the image of the black man both to himself and in the eyes of the whites. He stated, “Good school teachers and plenty of money to pay them will be more potent in settling the race question than many civil rights bills and investigating committees.”<sup>56</sup>

Washington’s belief in slow revolution rather than a violent struggle was based on his belief that economic opportunity and power was and would be the great equalizer. Leeman writes of Washington,

To Washington, this principle was as much a matter of natural law as the operations of the physical world. Believing that true social and political progress was a slow, evolutionary process of “severe and constant struggle rather than of artificial forcing,” and convinced that economic advancement was the most important element in that process, he was willing to exchange immediate civil rights for economic opportunity, confident that such opportunity would lead ultimately to the complete civil and political empowerment of his race.<sup>57</sup>

Booker T. Washington was born into slavery in 1856. Like her father-in-law, Washington also studied the ministry. He became a teacher and in 1881 was appointed head of Tuskegee Institute. Eventually Washington helped to build it into the nation’s leading black vocational school.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Hamilton, Velma Bell. “A Teacher Looks at a Revolutionary World,” *Children’s Religion*, November, 1962. Box 6, File 24. Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003. M2006-040. State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

<sup>56</sup> Leeman, 345.

<sup>57</sup> Leeman, 347.

<sup>58</sup> Leeman, 342.

Hamilton's assertion in 1928 that a real education should include knowledge of "conquering untruth by truth and violence by self-sufferings" had by the 1960s developed to a deeper level. As she addressed the subject of "non-violent efforts" in "A Teacher Looks at a Revolutionary World," Hamilton also discusses commonalities of all revolutions. She, like Washington, identifies economic factors as important and adds leadership and political factors as influences. Additionally, she writes of the "teacher's dilemma." It is clear that she is addressing the struggles of the American social, legal, and political system to deal with integration of white and African American cultures. She wrote,

The teacher observes the revolutionary world and is faced with a dilemma...The teacher usually is on the side of change. He believes that education is for serving society by improving or reconstructing it. ... But the teacher knows that significant change involves development. What has taken hundreds of years to develop cannot be compressed into a few months. Moreover, when revolutions do not advance the cause of freedom, when new governments have only the trappings of democracy and not the real essence, the teacher is forced to oppose the empty promise of a better life for the aspiring masses.<sup>59</sup>

In 1950, fourteen years after her marriage to Harry Hamilton, she became the only African American teacher employed in the Madison area. She took a job at Madison Area Technical College, which had not yet received its North Central Accreditation. Her children were eleven, eight, and six.

Eleven years later, interviewed by George Vukelich of *The Capitol Times*, she was still the only fulltime African American teacher in the city. At the time of the 1961 newspaper interview, Hamilton had served six years (two terms) on the Wisconsin Governors Commission on Human Rights and was in her second three-year term on the Wisconsin Committee for

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<sup>59</sup> Hamilton, Velma Bell. "A Teacher Looks at a Revolutionary World," *Children's Religion*, November, 1962. Box 6, File 24. Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003. M2006-040. State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

Children and Youth.<sup>60</sup> In a speech given to the Wisconsin Committee for Children and Youth in 1961, she would reach back again to the conclusion of her 1933 MA thesis. “But in the coming decade there will be fewer jobs for unskilled and semi-skilled workers while at the same time the post war baby boom will be flooding the market. Unemployment among teenagers is now twice the rate as in the general population.”<sup>61</sup>

The topic of her presentation was titled “Developing Human Resources” and one of the purposes of the presentation was to study the subject of “school dropouts” and the consequences and possible solutions. She was adamant in her advocacy of the theme which defined her legacy while echoing her intellectual ancestors Washington and Du Bois, “... our economic system must continue to satisfy our needs, our educational system must prepare our children adequately, our political system must become truly representative of the whole body politic, our resources – both physical and human – must be developed.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Vukelich, George, “Harry Hamiltons – Parents, Kids Alike – Set Educational Records,” *The Capitol Times*, 1961.

<sup>61</sup> Hamilton, Velma Bell. “Developing Human Resources.” Speech: Wisconsin Committee for Children and Youth. 1961. Box 6, File 24. Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003. M2006-040. State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

<sup>62</sup> Hamilton, Velma Bell. “Developing Human Resources.” Speech: Wisconsin Committee for Children and Youth. 1961. Box 6, File 24. Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003. M2006-040. State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.



## CHAPTER 4

### THE EXCEPTIONAL WOMAN

#### Conclusion

Standardization means nothing more than raising of the general level, and it can no more submerge the unusual man or woman than a lake, the waters of which are rising, can submerge a well-built boat. The unusual man or woman goes higher, and after the first moments of confusion and consternation will be spurred to greater effort. The people who are submerged are not the unusual – in short standardization raises the plane of the average; it does not lower that of the exceptional man. – **Struthers Burt (quote taken from Velma Bell’s autograph book, circa 1926)**

In 1995, seven years after her retirement Hamilton was asked to give a speech at a Black History Event at Madison Area Technical College where she had spent twenty-five years teaching. The topic of the speech was “Black History Week – What it means to Me.” It was a moment in which she had opportunity to reflect on a life of achievement as an African American woman and one who had witnessed sweeping historical changes affecting the African American population.

In a small way, I have participated in the making of this history. Covering a span of seventy years, so far – there have been challenges to test the most invincible: strongly held ideas on racial superiority, racial stereotypes, public perceptions of physical differences [which] plagued me during my earliest days; statistics on family life and life expectancy, economic roadblocks, social ostracism plagued me as a young adult. That some of us are survivors is testimony to supportive families, teachers, basic values inherent in our society and to a certain amount of stubbornness of character which prevailed. My personal experiences are what might be called the single case – used to refute too [many] sweeping generalizations.<sup>63</sup>

It has been acknowledged that W. E. Burghardt Du Bois and Booker T. Washington disagreed on the means to equality, however they both wrote on the topic of education, work and social adjustment. Du Bois wrote,

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<sup>63</sup> Hamilton, Velma Bell, “Black History Week: What it Means to Me,” Speech: Madison Area Technical School, February, 1995. Box 6, File 24. Velma and Harry Hamilton Papers, 1893-2003. M2006-040, State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives Division. McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Eau Claire, Wisconsin.

I insist that the object of all true education is not to make men carpenter but to make carpenters men; there are two means of making the carpenter a man, each equally important: the first is to give the group and community in which he works, liberally trained teachers and leaders to teach him and his family what life means; ... the second object demands a good system of common schools, well-taught, conveniently located and properly equipped.<sup>64</sup>

Hamilton believed these words passionately and completely. She patterned her life in this manner and spent much of her life teaching at a vocational school and serving in her community.

The quote which she cut out and placed in her autograph book as a young woman of twenty would come to guide her intent throughout her life. Every step of her journey brought her above the average and her belief in education's ability to assist in integration made her the unusual woman who became the exceptional woman.

### **Chronology of Awards**

1926 - Honor Society in her junior year in high school, second in her graduating class,

1930 - Phi Kappa Beta at Beloit College (possibly the first African American woman)

1933 - Master of Arts in Sociology, University of Wisconsin-Madison

1943 – First President of Madison Chapter of NAACP

1959 – Who's Who of American Women,

1961 - "Citizen of the Year" by the Newspaper Guild of Madison,

1965 - Distinguished Service Award from Beloit College

1972 –Named in *Outstanding Educators of America*,

1974 - "Wisconsin Mother of the Year,"

1981 – Honorary Law Degree, Lakeland College,

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<sup>64</sup> Tuttle, William M. jr., ed. *W.E.B. Du Bois*. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1973), 41-42.

1989 - Outstanding Service to Women of Color by the Wisconsin Regional Chapter of the Minority Women's Network

1992 - The Alexander Company's Civic Leadership Award, along with Harry Hamilton

1993 – Velma Hamilton Middle School Named (formerly Van Hise Middle School)  
(Harry Hamilton Science Laboratory Named.)

2002 – Recognized by the Board of Governors of the Madison Community Foundation for Leadership.

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