

## Mary Rayford Collins: Mississippi's Finest (1887-1970)

Mary Augustus Rayford Collins was born in 1887 in Lauderdale County, Mississippi, the second of three children born to Bryan Henry and Missouri Emma Walker Rayford. The family moved to Meridian, Mississippi, where her father founded the Jackson branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and was an ordained minister in the Methodist Episcopal Church. The Methodist Episcopal Church looms prominently over the Rayford and Collins families for three generations.

Collins attended Meridian Academy, now the Haven Institute, which the Methodist Episcopal Church founded. After graduation, she attended Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and Hampton Institute in Virginia, where her family had lifelong affiliations. She worked in her family's business, Rayford Grocery and Mercantile Company, which began in 1893. Her family lived a very comfortable life in Mississippi despite Jim Crow segregation. They were entrepreneurs providing services that were limited to the Black community under strict segregation within the society.

Collins went on to teach fourth grade at Wechsler Junior School. Wechsler School is a historic school in Meridian, Mississippi, erected in 1894, now designated a Historic Place and Mississippi Landmark. "The school was the first brick public school building in Mississippi built with public funds for African-American children. It originally served primary through eighth

grades but was later expanded to include high school as well.”<sup>1</sup> In 1894, when Wechsler was built, thirty percent of the children in the city were African American. Named for Rabbi Judah Wechsler, who pushed to raise money for its construction, it was the first public school paid for with public funds.

When Collins became the librarian for the Carnegie Negro Library of Meridian for five years, she was Mississippi’s first Black public librarian. “The 13th Street (St.) Colored Branch was a segregated public library established by the city of Meridian, Mississippi, in 1912 and opened in March 1913. It was one of the first free public libraries for African Americans in the state of Mississippi and one of twelve segregated libraries Andrew Carnegie funded during his library philanthropy program of the early twentieth century.”<sup>2</sup> The Haven Institute, operated by the African Methodist Episcopal Church and where Collins attended grade school, was instrumental in establishing the library and donated the site for the library. The library served the large Black community in Meridian, over a third of the population, and was used as an educational support center and a community meeting place.

Andrew Carnegie was responsible for establishing many public libraries in the South and all over the world, but he had a checkered past as it relates to Black people:

Carnegie’s assessment of the Black race in the United States was that they were less developed than their White counterparts. On one hand Carnegie believed that the Black

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<sup>1</sup> Wechsler School. *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wechsler\\_School](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wechsler_School).

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Griffis. “13<sup>th</sup> Street Colored Branch Library, Meridian Mississippi (1913-1974),” *Black Past*, (September 20, 2017): 1-2. <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/13th-street-colored-branch-library-meridian-mississippi-1913-1974/>.

race was not ready to hold the same status as White Americans. But Carnegie went on to state that Whites and Blacks may “remain separate and apart as now or may intermingle,” and that race relations “lies upon the lap of the gods.”<sup>3</sup>

Carnegie purposely funded “his favored HBCUs,” the two institutions that Collins attended, which were connected with Booker T. Washington. “Booker T. Washington contacted Carnegie in 1890 to solicit funds for Tuskegee and was awarded \$20,000 for a library in 1900. Carnegie toured that library in 1906, and what he saw and experienced convinced him to further fund Tuskegee, with \$620,000, and Washington’s alma mater, Hampton University, with \$441,045.”<sup>4</sup> Meridian was an example of the separate and unequal treatment by Carnegie, library funds were requested as early as 1904, but it was not until 1911 that the library program’s manager, James Bertram received “\$30,000 for a main, whites-only library and \$8,000 for a “colored” branch.”<sup>5</sup>

Collins’ work as a librarian represents her lifelong dedication to learning. This dedication is also demonstrated in her 46-year association with the Mary Church Terrell Literary Club, where she also served as vice president. In numerous ways, Collins’ life was very similar to that of Mary Church Terrell, who was one of the first African American women to earn a college degree. The Terrell family was well off due to their business acumen, like the Collins family, who were part of an elite cadre of African American families in Mississippi. Terrell co-founded the National Association of Colored Women. He served as the organization’s first president, while similarly, Collins was a member of the board of the Mississippi State Federation of Colored Women’s

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<sup>3</sup> Dr. John N. Berry. “Andrew Carnegie and Race.” *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*,” [Andrew Carnegie and Race - Higher Education \(diverseeducation.com\)](http://diverseeducation.com), June 17, 2008 (New York): 1-3.

<sup>4</sup> Berry, Andrew Carnegie, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Griffis, 13<sup>th</sup> Street, 1.

Clubs. This organization promoted self-help and was mostly populated with educated middle- and upper-class Black women. Terrell's dedication to uplifting Black women is mirrored in the work that Collins pursued. Like Collins, Terrell was also a charter member of the NAACP who helped found the Jackson chapter.

In 1914, she married Malachi C. Collins, a mathematics teacher and Dean of Men at Haven Institute. Collins was co-founder of the Hall & Collins Funeral Home of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, in 1916. Collins began to work with her husband in 1924, assisting in building the business as one of Jackson's most successful funeral homes. After her husband died in 1939, she became president and sole owner of the Collins Funeral Home and Insurance Companies. Under her leadership, she managed a large staff developed a sound structure for the Funeral Home that led to its success and growth. This business offered a means of providing burial needs and independence for the Black community. She was well-known as a businesswoman and philanthropist who supported institutions of higher learning throughout Mississippi. She was a member of the Mississippi Funeral Directors & Morticians Association for over 50 years. Her only child, daughter Clarie Collins Harvey, became the first African American to receive a mortuary science degree in 1942.

The Collins Funeral Home became a multi-million-dollar enterprise under the leadership of Collins and her daughter Clarie. The business was in the heart of Jackson, Mississippi's famed Farish Street Neighborhood. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, it serves as "a material legacy of what Blacks accomplished when they were commonly considered inferior to

whites.”<sup>6</sup> Often compared to Beale Street in Memphis, Auburn Avenue in Atlanta, and Rampart Street in New Orleans, Farish Street “is special in that it was built for Blacks by Black carpenters, plasterers, brickmasons, and other craftsmen...it is a prime example of Afro-American architectural styles.”<sup>7</sup> Harvey is quoted throughout the article and noted that “Farish Street was a flourishing, lucrative, good environment of businesses. It was also a place where Black women kept the culture of the city going.”<sup>8</sup> Farish Street section of Jackson was also considered a haven for the Black community, but racism and violence were never far away. Medgar Evers, who was assassinated in 1963, established the first field secretary office for the NAACP on Farish Street. The Collins Funeral Home also handled his funeral after Byron De La Beckwith murdered him. Those attending the funeral included Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., representatives from the National Council of Churches, *Life Magazine* photographer Flip Schulke, and other civil rights leaders.

Both Collins and her daughter were very engaged in church work, and their faith was the most important motivation for their lives. They both married ordained Methodist ministers. Collins was a lifelong Methodist and was a St. Paul Methodist Church member in Jackson. She served as the only female member of the Board of Trustees for the Central United Methodist Church from 1939 to 1967. She was a member of the board of directors of the William Johnson Bethlehem Center, a Methodist social service institution in Jackson, and a life member of the Women’s Society of Christian Service of directors. In addition, she supported other civic and religious

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<sup>6</sup> Mike Alexander. “Jackson’s Farish Street: A Neighborhood Built by Giants,” *American Visions*, (August 1988): 32-37.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander, Jackson’s Farish Street, 32.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander, Jackson’s Farish Street, 35.

entities such as the Eastern Star, the Federated Clubs, the Knights and Daughters of Tabor, the YWCA, the Afro-American Sons and Daughters, and other groups. In 1949 the Zeta Phi Beta Sorority honored her for her work in business, church, and civic leadership naming her “The Outstanding Woman of the Year.” At the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Prentiss Institute in Mississippi in 1967, Collins was awarded the Honorary Doctor of Humanities Degree.

Prentiss Normal and Industrial Institute had been founded by Bertha LaBranche Johnson, who studied under Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee Institute.

Before her death in 1995, Harvey sought to raise funds to establish a library for her mother at Atlanta University, where she graduated. She instead established the Mary Rayford Collins Scholarship at the Atlanta University School of Library Science. In addition, Harvey purchased a life insurance policy with Clark Atlanta University as beneficiary. At her death, the proceeds established this scholarship for any Mississippi resident committed to working in the library service area in Mississippi for two years after receiving a master’s in library science.

The Amistad Research Center at Tulane University houses the papers of the Collins Family, the Collins Family Funeral Home, and Clarie Collins Harvey. All three collections document three generations of this Mississippi family. Collins and her daughter Clarie grew the families’ fortune and represent a unique story of exceptional Black women in the male-dominated funeral and mortuary science profession. They both used their wealth to inspire the Black community and are role models that the world needs to recognize.