

GLADYS NOEL BATES:
NO SHRINKING VIOLET IN THE MAGNOLIA STATE

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Imagine for a moment...close your eyes if you must...imagine one of those days at the end of summer when, by the calendar and the heat it is not quite fall but the fact that you are on your way to school means it really is fall. Remember the promise school held when only school and summer marked the passing of time. Remember wearing your best new school clothes, or at least your newest, most fashionable hand-me-downs, and how good it felt to be so clean and pressed after the grimy, sweaty summer. Remember what it was like to hope you had a good teacher this year and the worry that you would not find your friends right away. Recall the excitement of a whole new year. You are walking under a beautiful southern sky, the anticipation of school making the walk seem too long.

Then, a sharp tap on the back of your head, and then, another. The school bus passing is carrying students, white students, who are throwing erasers, pencils and racial epithets at you and your walking partners. Your eyes are opened to the fact that you are black, you are in Mississippi, and it is the 1920s.

Black students in 1920s and 1930s Mississippi did not receive free transportation to school. Where white students rode government provided busses at the taxpayers' expense, black students did not because they could not afford the cost charged to them. In Jackson, Mississippi where Gladys Noel lived and attended school, black children rode the public busses to school. Gladys and her siblings did not. The Noels' father, Andrew J. Noel, refused to subject his children to the humiliation of having to ride at the back of the bus and had them walk instead.

Marion Wright Edelman, the first black woman admitted to the bar in Mississippi, once noted of her background, "The outside world told black kids when I was growing up

that we weren't worth anything. It told us we were second-class, that poor kids weren't valued. But our parents said it wasn't so and our churches and our schoolteachers said it wasn't so. They believed in us and we, therefore, believed in ourselves."¹ Gladys Noel Bates grew up in such a community.

Gladys Noel Bates' early life and family background prepared her to file what is commonly thought of as the first civil rights suit in Mississippi asking for equal salaries for black and white teachers. Bates came from a relatively privileged, educated, and religious black family and was raised in a manner that led her to file this suit. We will begin with Gladys' grandfather, James Noel, and follow the family from slavery through the civil rights case and through to today.

James was born a plantation slave in the Mississippi Delta in Holmes County in 1855. Although a slave, James led a more privileged life than most as a valet and buggy driver to future governor of Mississippi, Edmond F. Noel's family. After the South's defeat in the Civil War, the Noels gave each of their newly freed slaves some land and told them "you're all free now, and you take your mammy's names" since they traditionally were known only by their given names.² However, Noel asked young James if he would consider remaining on the plantation in the same capacity, only as a free man. James stayed, adding his former master's surname to his own becoming James Noel. When James reached adulthood the future governor gave him 7 acres of land on which he built a house and started a family with Winnie Lester, another of the Noels' former slaves. James fathered four sons and one daughter. As the boys reached adulthood and longed to begin families, their father gave each son a part of his land, a horse and a buggy.

Each of James' sons took their land in time, with the exception of Andrew Jackson. He chose to make his mark in another way. Rather than becoming a farmer, Andrew asked his father for the money instead of the land and went to Alcorn Agricultural and Mechanical College.³ Andrew graduated in 1911 trained as an elementary school teacher. His diploma made him unique in the black community; colleges had awarded fewer than thirty thousand bachelors degrees to black students nationwide by 1936 and in the four years following Andrew's graduation only another 1,064 American blacks received undergraduate degrees.⁴

A year after beginning his teaching career, Andrew met and fell in love with Susie Hallie Davis. Susie's mother was the daughter of a slave and her master. After emancipation, Susie's mother married Susie's father, John Wesley Davis, another former slave. Susie spent her early years in Homes County but after the death of her mother, she moved in with her brother, a Pullman car waiter, in Chicago. She met Andrew J. Noel while on vacation in Holmes County. After a year of long distance correspondence between Andrew in Mississippi and Susie in Chicago while she attended the University of Chicago Preparatory School and he taught, Susie ran away and the two were married on August 15, 1913.⁵ Andrew continued to teach while the newlyweds settled in on his parents' land in Homes County. Quickly discovering that he could not support a family on a black teacher's salary, he studied for and passed the written examination to become a United States railway mail clerk. The couple then moved to Jackson, Mississippi, where Andrew could take the position he held until his retirement in 1946.

The day after their marriage, the Noels signed a contract that set the tone for their marriage and for raising their children. In this contract the Noels stated that they would

make every effort to educate their children, teach them to fear God and uphold moral standards. Andrew and Susie began their family immediately with five children born in quick succession: two boys then two girls and finally another boy. Periodically the Noels gathered their children together, read their “marriage contract” kept in the family bible, and explained their commitment to each other. Later, contracts were prepared for each Noel child in which they committed themselves to the same principles. In addition, each child pledged to live lives of service and elevate their race with every action.⁶

The Noels were ambitious for their children, expecting each of them to become educated and enter a profession. Andrew took great pride in calling the oldest boy, Edmond, his “little doctor” and the next son, Andrew Jr., became his “little dentist.” The oldest daughter, Myrtle, studied to become a concert pianist, the second daughter, Gladys, a bookkeeper and the youngest son, John, a pharmacist. Andrew and Susie planned that the oldest Noel boys would open a clinic, the youngest son would fill their prescriptions and the second daughter would do the books for the boys. The Noels implemented this plan with toy doctor’s kits and typewriters for the children’s after-school play. They also taught their children a strong sense of history by reading them stories of the past instead of fairy tales. The Noels, especially Andrew Sr., supplemented the children’s stories with oral slavery stories, told to him by his parents.

Gladys, the fourth child born in 1920, dreamed of something other than becoming a bookkeeper as her father wanted. This young, headstrong woman decided early that she had no use for the toy typewriters and office supplies her parents provided for her. She would become a doctor, not a bookkeeper. Gladys attended Jim Hill School on Lynch Street, in the heart of Jackson’s black community and excelled in all of her subjects, but

held a particular fondness for science. However, her parents still thought she should become a bookkeeper and bought her a secondhand typewriter. They hired a private teacher to teach Gladys typing and shorthand since the schools did not offer the training.⁷ After completing elementary school, Gladys attended Lanier High School and Alcorn College Preparatory School.⁸

After grade school Gladys attended her father's alma mater where she enrolled in business administration and met her future husband, John Bates. Soon she found that the business administration courses at Alcorn included only typing and shorthand classes. Since Gladys already knew how to do both, she defied her unknowing father's wishes and studied biology. While pursuing a biology degree, Gladys met the football coach and fell in love. While he enjoyed working at Alcorn, he held stronger feelings for Gladys a pretty girl elected "Miss Alcorn" by her peers. The president of Alcorn, William Bell, told John that he must quit fraternizing with the students or lose his contract for the next year. John answered, "you can have the job if I can get the girl." Eighteen year old Gladys married John after her freshman year and they left Alcorn to begin their life together. Alex Haley, a classmate of Bates' and author of Roots, once compared the story of this courtship and marriage to the story of Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson.⁹

Buffalo Creek School in Kosciusko, Mississippi, occupied the Bateses' time during the school year after their marriage in 1938. Gladys became the music and home economics teacher at the little school yet, ironically, she did not know how to cook and had completed only her first year of college. The Noel girls did not learn cooking skills at home because their parents refused to train them for domestic work, by far the most common non-agricultural occupation open to the state's black females.

The school patrons, its parents, supplied rabbits, squirrels, possums, sweet potatoes and greens while the children taught Bates how to make a meal from these ingredients. Projects completed in home economics provided lunch for forty students attending Buffalo Creek. Outfitting sports teams in these small black rural schools also became the responsibility of the home economics classes.¹⁰

Bates made the best of her situation at Buffalo Creek and enjoyed learning to cook and sew. However, when she received her first check she found something she could not tolerate about her job. Bates' principal instructed her to pick up her paycheck and cash it at the white superintendent's office. The superintendent was more than happy to cash the teachers' checks; he took five dollars out of every check for himself. Refusing to put up with such graft, Bates took her first check from the superintendent's hand and put it straight into her purse, never losing the five-dollar "check-cashing fee." No one else followed her lead.¹¹

Following their year in Kosciusko, the Bateses moved to Gladys' hometown of Jackson, where John became an industrial arts teacher at Lanier High School. Gladys decided to continue her education at Tougaloo College north of Jackson. She still longed to become a doctor and enrolled in pre-med coursework. While at Tougaloo she served three years as the president and secretary of her class. In addition, Bates participated in choir, glee club, and the campus YWCA. After realizing that she would not become a doctor even with her biology degree from Tougaloo due to the lack of opportunities for black women at that time, Bates re-enrolled at Tougaloo to obtain her secondary teaching certificate.¹²

After Gladys' graduation the Bateses taught for a year in North Carolina then returned to Jackson.¹³ Bates became a science teacher at Smith Robertson Junior High School and her husband an industrial arts teacher and coach at Lanier High School in the fall of 1944. During that time she and her husband became active in the Progressive Voters' League and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), joining her father in these organizations. Bates also joined the Jackson Teachers' Association and the Mississippi Association of Teachers in colored Schools (MATCS).

During her four-year tenure in the Jackson Separate School District, the young educator became a very good teacher. In her classroom, discussions occurred on many subjects other than science and Bates developed a good rapport with her students.¹⁴ Some days she and her students neglected their science studies and she would tell them about the importance of voting and encourage them to tell their parents to vote. Gladys truly enjoyed teaching, which made her decision to file a suit against the school district that much harder.

The United States Supreme Court produced the notion of "separate but equal" in the 1896 *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision. In the case of education as in many other areas, Mississippi only abided by the "separate" portion of the doctrine. The average annual black teacher's salary in Mississippi for the 1945-1946 school year was \$426. In the same year white teachers made \$1,211, a difference of \$785, for the same work.¹⁵ Mississippi's blacks had protested this inequality for many years but it was now time to turn to the courts.

Gladys Noel Bates became the primary candidate for plaintiff when the teachers' association and the NAACP decided it was time to file an equalization suit. After receiving her bachelor's degree, Bates completed eighteen hours toward her master's degree at the University of West Virginia.¹⁶ She held the highest teaching certificate the State of Mississippi issued and had received no complaints from her employers. In only her fourth year of teaching, twenty-eight year old Bates began considering the suit. The NAACP's interest in Bates stemmed from her and her father's involvement in the various groups interested in bringing the suit. However, after first being introduced as the possible plaintiff, Bates began to have second thoughts. The risks involved were many. Fears regarding her personal safety as well as the safety of her family, her home, and her job kept Bates from deciding too hastily. While Bates entertained second thoughts, she and her husband met with her father to discuss the impact that filing the suit would have on all of their lives.

Andrew Noel told his daughter and son-in-law that if Gladys decided to file suit "for a time it's going to look very dark for you . . . you will have thought that you have lost everything." Then he reassured them that, "You will be doing something that will benefit the majority of your people at some point in time."¹⁷ Noel also reminded them of Jesus' admonition that, "He that loses his life for my sake will indeed find his life." With her father's blessing and promise of support, Bates made up her mind.¹⁸ By mid-January Bates began preparing for the case and it was filed March 4, 1948.¹⁹

Other fears arose after Bates decided to protest her salary. Sometime after Bates' petition to the Board, nightriders shot into the house on Deerpark Street, ". . . attempted to burn it, and left burning crosses nearby."²⁰ The Bateses quickly rebuilt, but in the

meantime concerned citizens discussed their situation and the Bateses' need for protection. Once the Bateses rebuilt their home, two NAACP stalwarts stood guard outside the Bates house during the preparations for and the early stages of the suit.²¹

News of the suit reached the front page of the Clarion Ledger the day after it was filed. Bates recalls walking up the long walk to Smith Robertson with teachers and the principal all reading the headline, "Negro Teacher Here Seeks Equal Pay."²² As she moved closer, the crowd moved away from her, scattering, "just like mice" from the woman pictured on the front page.²³ Bates received two anonymous, supportive notes during that first day, brought by students; otherwise, the rest of the year was quite lonely for her. The fear of losing their jobs led all teachers with the exception of two, Geneva White and Essie Haley, to keep their distance from Bates.²⁴

The teachers' fears were well founded. First, the Bateses' house was attacked by nightriders. Then Bates and her husband, John who taught at Lanier High School, finished the year under contract but did not receive renewals for the 1948-1949 school year.²⁵ In addition, at least one of John Bates' colleagues at Lanier High, Rose Howard, lost her job for openly showing support for the suit.²⁶ The Bates family then lived on money drawn from a fund set up by the teachers' association. Both attempted to secure jobs and only did so through the charity of friends and black organizations.

Unbeknownst to the Bateses but not unexpectedly, the State Superintendent of Education, J.M. Tubb, was pressured by white citizens to maintain the status quo. "Your Supporter" wrote anonymously that he had read the Clarion Ledger article and saw the suit as "a chance for the K.K.K." He ended his letter to Tubb with the warning, "So Wake up boys."²⁷

An already harrowing experience became more difficult to tolerate upon entering the federal courthouse for the first time on Monday, December 12, 1949 as the courtroom in Jackson exemplified the force the suit tried to fight. An enormous mural depicting Mississippi's history from a very white perspective graced the walls. The painting, commissioned by the Works Progress Administration during the Depression, showed a stereotypical view of the South rooted in antebellum myth. One side showed the privileged white aristocracy in their finery and the other, blacks next to bales of cotton in scenes portraying hard labor and poverty, harking back to the days of slavery. In addition, on the first day of trial, blacks accustomed to "staying in their place" lined the walls for want of a balcony. State and local judges perpetuated segregation within the halls of justice so local people attending the trial thought the same held true of federal judges.²⁸

Before trial the attorneys spent time convincing Judge Mize to refer to Bates as "Mrs. Bates" and attorney Constance Baker Motley as "Attorney Motley" instead of "that Bates woman" or "that Motley woman." In addition, the lawyers faced the problem of having few choices of where to stay and dine in segregated Jackson. Bates' attorneys stayed in a rooming house and took their meals with generous citizens.²⁹

Though the equalization case was lost due to failure to exhaust administrative remedies provided for in the law, the historian John Dittmer notes that Mississippi's politicians "had seen the handwriting on the wall."³⁰ Just before the Bates case was turned down on a writ of certiorari by the Supreme Court, Governor Fielding Wright and the state legislature allocated funds for the equalization of teachers' salaries.³¹ In 1952 under Governor Hugh White the legislature approved a \$50 million appropriation over

two years for a reorganization of school districts to reduce administrative and financial problems. The following year, a committee appointed by Governor White found that funds allocated for salary raises between 1946 and 1952 had not been allocated correctly; the governor tried again in 1954.³² In the shadow of the impending *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision, legislators approved \$50 million for education in the coming two years. In addition, they designated \$60 million for equalization, contingent on the Supreme Court's upcoming ruling in the *Brown* case.³³

Beginning in 1950 Bates worked for the MATCS editing its journal and acting as Assistant Executive Secretary. She stayed with the MATCS for the next decade. Her husband found employment as a teacher at Southern Christian Institute and later, as a dean at Campbell College, both black institutions.³⁴

In 1960, Bates and her husband traveled to Colorado to see her brothers. The doctor and dentist suggested that the Bateses apply to teach in the integrated Denver Public School system. The Bateses moved to Colorado to return to their first love, teaching. Gladys became a science teacher at Baker Junior High, and John a shop instructor at Manual High School. Both became intimately involved in the community they adopted receiving many awards for their dedication to, among other causes, ridding their neighborhood of drug dealers. The Colorado Education Association's most prestigious honor is named the "Gladys and John Bates" award for their service. Denver Mayor Wellington E. Webb declared October 17, 1996 "Gladys Noel Bates Day" in her honor. Bates' alma mater held the "Gladys Noel Bates Teachers' Conference" in April 1999. In April of 2002, Webb again honored Bates with the President's Award at the National Conference of Black Mayors 28th Annual Convention held in Bates' hometown

of Jackson, Mississippi.³⁵ These are just a very few of the awards and honors Bates received for her contributions to her profession and the world around her.

Reminiscing recently on the suit that came near the beginning of this extraordinary life of activism Bates stated, “I may sound immodest, but it was time for *someone to do something*.”³⁶ Bates filled a gap between the seed planted in the upheaval brought on by the Second World War and the eventual flowering of the civil rights movement. The Bates suit, though unsuccessful, helped lend shape to the protest of the future. Petitioning for change could now more likely be accompanied by litigation. Equity did not come quickly or without a fight, but the first blow had been struck.

¹Brian Lanker, I Dream a World: Portraits of Black Women Who Changed America (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1989), 121.

²Gladys Noel Bates, interview by author, tape recording and transcript, Denver, Colo., 23 December 1997, 25, in the author’s possession. This interview is reproduced as, Shana Walton and Catherine Jannik, eds., An Oral History with Gladys Noel Bates, Volume 689, 1996 (Hattiesburg: University of Southern Mississippi, 1998) housed in the McCain Library and Archives on the campus of The University of Southern Mississippi and also available at the Coleman Library, Tougaloo College. Also available online as part of the “Mississippi Oral History Project” <http://www.lib.usm.edu/spcol/coh/cohbatesgb.html> [accessed 16 May 2003]. (hereinafter cited as Bates Interview.)

³Known as Alcorn University from its founding in 1871 until 1878 when it became the first land-grant college for blacks under the 1862 Morrill Act. Alcorn underwent another name change in 1974 when it became Alcorn State.

⁴Charles S. Johnson, The Negro College Graduate (Durham, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1938), 7-8.

⁵Bates Interview, 27.

⁶Ibid., 10.

⁷Ibid., 5.

⁸“Profile,” (no date or author given), Gladys Noel Bates Papers, Coleman Library, Tougaloo College, Jackson, Miss. (hereinafter cited as Bates Papers).

⁹Bates Interview, 6. Alex Haley story from Bates, conversation with author, Denver, Colo., 23 December 1996.

¹⁰Bates Interview, 7-8.

¹¹Ibid., 8. Bates was unsure of whether or not this white superintendent did the same for the white teachers over whom he also had authority.

¹²Ibid., 11, 44.

¹³Ibid., 12.

¹⁴Ibid., 44.

¹⁵Neil R. McMillen, Dark Journey: Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 87.

¹⁶Bates eventually earned the Master of Arts degree from West Virginia University in 1952.

¹⁷Bates Interview, 10.

¹⁸Ibid., 10.

¹⁹Johnson to Noel, 14 January 1948, Bares Papers.

²⁰Townsend Davis, Wary Feet, Rested Souls: A Guided History of the Civil Rights Movement (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1998), 213; “Black Educator, civic leader John Bates dies at 81,” Denver (Colo.) Post, 12 October 1995, second edition; “John Bates never lost faith in racial harmony,” Denver (Colo.) Rocky Mountain News, 12 October 1995.

²¹Bates Interview, 36.

²²Ibid., 12; Jackson (Miss.) Clarion Ledger, 5 March 1948.

²³Bates Interview, 12.

²⁴Ibid., 12; “Reminiscences,” 16 May 1992, Bates Papers.

²⁵“Vacancies,” 6 May 1948, *Gladys Noel Bates, Individually and on Behalf of the Negro Teacher and Principals in the Jackson Separate School District b. John C. Batte,*

*President, B.B. McClendon, Vice resident, T.M. Hederman, Jr., Secretary, R.W. Naef and W.R. Newman, Jr., constituting the Board of Trustees of Jackson Separate School District and K.P. Walker, Superintendent of the Jackson Separate Schools, Civil Action No. 1174-Civil, District Court of the United States for the Southern District of Mississippi, Jackson Division, National Archives and Records Administration, Southeast Region (Atlanta), East Point, Ga. (hereinafter cited as *Bates v. Batte*, NARA).*

²⁶Bates Interview, 12.

²⁷Your Supporter, A Subscriber to J.M. Tubb, 6 March 1948, Anonymous Letter file, Superintendent's Correspondence, 1945-1967, Record Group 50, Vol. 224, Mississippi Department of Education Records, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

²⁸Constance Baker Motley, Equal Justice Under Law (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 76.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 75, 73, 78, and Jackson State University Department of Mass Communications, Panel Discussion Regarding the *Bates* Case, (Jackson, Miss.: Jackson State University, 1981). Videotape. Bates Papers.

³⁰John Dittmer, Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 36.

³¹*Ibid.*, 36.

³²Kenneth H. Williams, "Mississippi and Civil Rights, 1945-1954" (Ph.D. diss., Mississippi State University, 1985), 234-6.

³³*Ibid.*, 244.

³⁴"Reminiscences," 16 May 1992, Bates Papers.

³⁵Webb to Noel, 14 January 2002, photocopy in the possession of the author.

³⁶Bates, telephone conversation with author, Denver, Colo. to Marietta, Georgia, 15 May 2003.

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