



# Minority Contributions to Hancock County, MS

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# INTRODUCTION

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People have proud recollections about Pearlinton's bygone years. It is still attractive, occupying the last scenic bluff on the lower Pearl River, and nowhere are the Cherokee roses more beautiful every spring. The number of residents declined, but history is still there and can be seen and felt in the ancient oaks and the layout of the streets. History cries out from the soil and in the movement of the river's muddy waters. It is written on granite markers in an ancient cemetery.

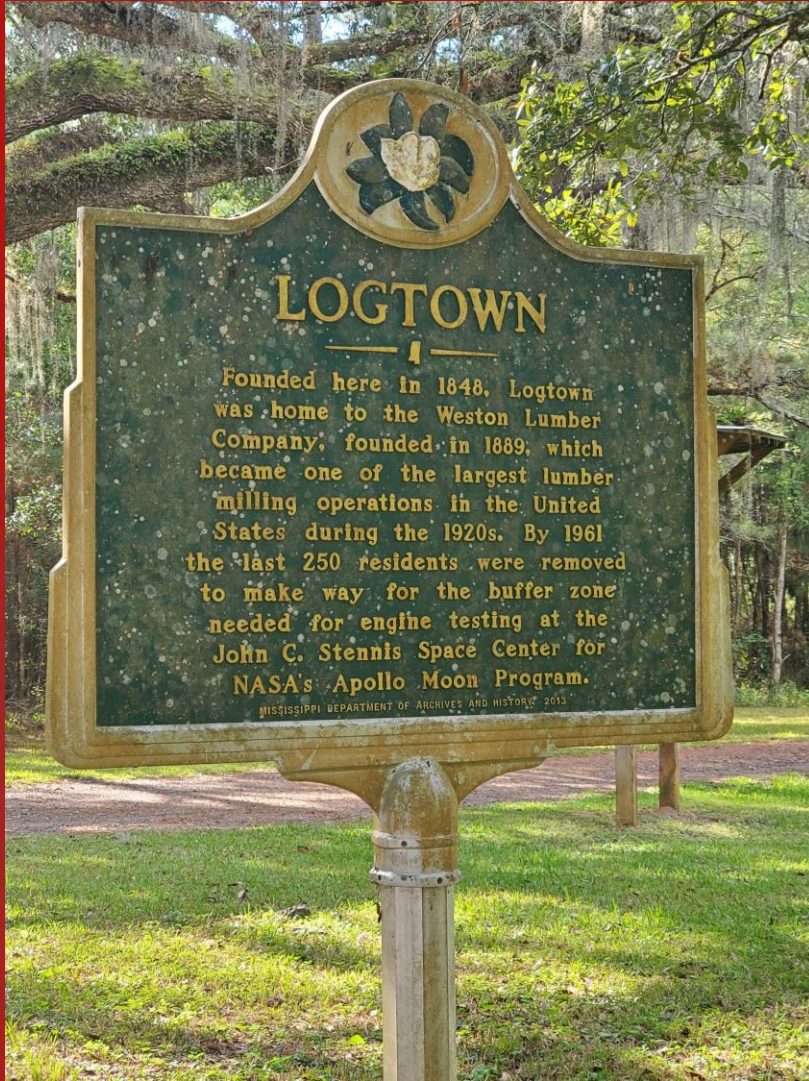
Two oak trees still stand as witnesses for more than 400 years on the corner of Hancock Street and Whites Road and Hancock Street at the intersection of Jefferson Street. With their many twists and turns, the gnarled oaks remind us of the struggles of the minority in Hancock County, MS, and throughout the entire United States of America.

Hurricanes have never been kind to any communities they pass through. Indeed, some areas act like magnets attracting storms to them, and so, it was with the Hurricanes called the Hurricane George of 1947, Camille of 1969, and Katrina of 2005. Open fields and cement steps now standing alone are reminders that there were once communities of people. There were once houses and schools where families worked and prayed together, and children laughed and played. There is now a single, two-pump gas station and one convenience store in Pearllington.



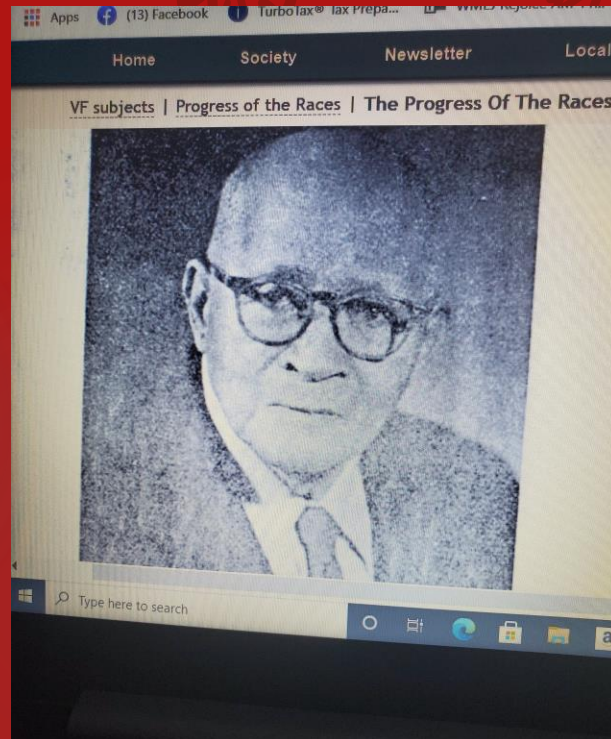
# Early History – Pearlinton, MS (Russell B. Guerin, July 7, 2017)

Justifiably so, perhaps some former residents might feel like rejected lovers, but they still proudly proclaim the city that at one time possessed what was said to be the largest lumber mill in the country. Some people go it one better, saying it was the largest mill in the world. That reputation is something to hang on to while we unconsciously reject how the many sawmills that dotted the riverbank disappeared from the land. Gone too are the stands of virgin pine and cypress trees, once said to have been “inexhaustible.” The “Acts of God” called hurricanes were not the only problem. Without pointing the finger of blame, many manmade causes contributed significantly to the demise of a once bountiful land.



By the end of 1962, Western Hancock County sustained another devastating blow. The United States Federal Government, later referred to as The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (N.A.S.A.), acquired Logtown, Gainsville, Napoleon, and Westonia under Eminent Domain. Many families relocated to Pearlinton to learn that their once owned land could only be replaced by leasing property designated as "16th Section" land in Pearlinton.

We give honor to some of the most memorable White settlers of Hancock County – the Favres, Claiborne's, Prays, Poitevants, and Westons, but we also pay homage to those Black men who labored to shape the area, such as the log dancers who floated the logs downriver, the sawyers, and the men who slung the axes, the shrimpers and oyster fishermen who rose long before others were awake. They – all of them – built the towns and communities of Hancock Co. Ms.



Adelaide Favre, my maternal great-grandmother, was Etienne William Maxon's sister, and he was dubbed "Bud" by my family. In his 1930 booklet "The Progress of the Races," Etienne William Maxson wrote one of the only detailed glimpses into the extent of those Black watermen, ship's masters, and captains involved in the Gulf Coast's waterway trade of the 19th century.

Uncle Bud named 89 Black minority schooner captains along with the names of their vessels. Also identified were six engineers, six sawyers, 13 carpenters, two blacksmiths, three bricklayers, ten foremen of lumberyards and dry kilns, two loggers, one well-digger, one physician, and Mr. Courtney Young, a businessman, and shingle maker. These minority men were skilled workers who contributed to the development of Pearlington, the neighboring towns, and the progress of Hancock County.



# The Progress of the Races – Etienne William Maxon (1930)

Maxson was a Black man with an impressive work history wrote Gail Fusco in her book, *Mama Nettie's Time for Love*. She noted,

Uncle Bud was retired, but he had earned an impressive work history in service for the government of over 30 years. He was appointed Deputy Collector of Internal Revenue at New Orleans and served from 1891 through 1892. His next appointment was as the Commissioner of Elections of Hancock County, MS., where he served for two years, from 1892 to 1894. Uncle Bud worked as Manager and Commissioner of Elections representing the Republican Party, and he served in the county and state as a party delegate. On Dec. 6, 1898, he was appointed Postmaster of Pearllington and served from Jan. 3, 1899, to May 31, 1916. Uncle Bud was removed from office under President Wilson's administration and operated under the same administration as a war worker in the Air Services Bureau of the War Department in Washington DC. After World War I, he was transferred to the U. S. Department of Agriculture and appointed Census Enumerator for the District of Columbia in December 1919. Uncle Bud conducted the census during his annual leave in January of 1920, and he served under eight different presidents throughout his career that included Presidents Harrison, McKinley, Roosevelt, Taft, Wilson, Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover. (pp. 73-74).

## The Progress of the Races – Etienne William Maxon (1930)

Etienne William Maxon died on Mar. 13, 1957, leaving a legacy of accomplishments hard to equal in a time when Blacks, Mulattos, Choctaws, and White slave owner descendants all lived and thrived together in peace and harmony as an example for all.



# The “Improvement Association”

Reverend Taylor Fryson led the Improvement Association. He purchased tracks of land to build homes, churches, and schools, and he helped men invest. Mr. Arthur Acker was a noted carpenter and merchant, and Mr. Zozo Isadore acquired 88 acres of land and started a settlement.

# Education

Reverend Charles Chase of the First Baptist Church of Pearlinton formed the School Board, and Rev. Taylor Fryson organized board members Alexander Peterson, Samuel Snell, George Burton, James Thomas, James Burton, Olan Walker, and William Winston in Pearlinton.

Local leaders frequently sought Etienne William Maxon's political expertise, and he taught, lectured, and encouraged all to educate the masses that they might contribute to society.

He is a learned man who understands one subject, a very learned man who understands two. Learning is wealth to the poor, an honor to the rich, an aid to the young, and support and comfort to the aged. - A man cannot leave a better legacy to the world than a well-educated family (Maxson, 27).

# 20th Century Educators

Portia Labat, Cecilia Rowless, Bernadette Benjamin, Sarah Williams, Dan Fredrick, Juanita Thomas, and Willie Bradley were all dedicated members of the Black minority who worked tirelessly to educate the lives of the young people entrusted in their care. More recent Hancock County School Board members included Charles Johnson, Coach Cleveland Williams, and Joan Lemay.

One of the successes of in education can be seen in Dr. Myron Labatt who received a bachelor of business administration from Jackson State University with a concentration in marketing, a master of arts degree from The University of Mississippi in higher education and administration and a Ph.D. from The University of Southern Mississippi in educational leadership and research. Dr. Labatt served the educational community and the community with honor and dedication and recently retired.

# The Community of Churches and Organizations: 1962 – Present

The church has always been the institution that raised the banner of awareness and United with organization to develop the Black community. The First Baptist Church of Gainesville, MS, with Reverend Jessie James, Pastor, relocated to Pearlinton with the families displaced by N.A.S.A. after the 1962 takeover. The entire town of Gainesville was erased. The relocated church was renamed New Hope Baptist Church, and it is still operating today. Likewise, Mount Zion African Methodist Church of Logtown, MS, with Pastore R. E. Sams, relocated to Pearlinton and retained its name. The established Black churches of Pearlinton were Holmes Chapel United Methodist Church with Reverend Charles Giles, Pastor, and the First Baptist Church of Pearlinton.

## Organizations: 1962 – Present

The four Black churches of Pearlinton formed a “League of Churches.” Thus, the league addressed the church, political, human, and social issues and coordinated them appropriately. Other formerly predominately Black churches in Hancock County include St. Rose de Lima Catholic Church, the First Missionary Baptist Church, and Valena C. Jones United Methodist Church – all of Bay St. Louis, MS. The doors of the churches are open to all races. However, everyone works together for a better community while primarily addressing the needs of the minority



# Black Entrepreneurship

Mr. Percy Peters, a Black man, acquired 40 acres of property in Gainesville, and he allowed the entire Black community to plant crops on his land to feed their families. Mr. Peters was also a businessman who built a sugar cane processing facility. People from all over Hancock County harvested their sugar cane crops and transported them to Gainesville - usually by wagons owned by Mr. Leon Lymuel or Mr. Oscar White, both Black men. Mr. Peters processed the sugar cane using two mules walking in a circle following a feed bag. The animals pulled a wooden sweep that turned a screw-type auger. The auger-powered conveyor belt fed the cane through a giant press that extracted the sweet juice. Then, the juice funneled down to heated metal trays that cooked the sweet liquid until it turned into molasses. No money was involved. The barter system remained in place well into the early 1960s.



# Construction

Black carpentry contractors throughout Hancock County included Reverend Robert Sams of Logtown, Albert Acker and Arthur Acker of Gainsville, Joseph Powell of Pearlington, James T. Newkirk of Kiln, and Robert Lee Hargett of Waveland.

*Leo Paul Maurice, Sr.*

Leo Paul Maurice, Sr. of Bay St. Louis, developed a strong reputation for the boats he built, his son said. In his letter to the [Maritime & Seafood Museum] hall of fame nomination committee, the junior Maurice said, “Two of his skiffs are on the front cover of (Bay St. Louis’ photographer Ken Murphy’s book) ‘My South Coast Home.’... Not only was my father known for his fishing skills, he was a master craftsman in carpentry and plastering. He helped build many of his friends’ homes, including ours. He also built the only Black-owned service station in Hancock County” (Belcher).

# Construction

*Maurice Singleton, Sr.*

Maurice Singleton Sr. was a lifetime member of St. Rose de Lima Catholic Church, where he served in numerous roles including, usher, choir, and Parish Council member. He was a 65-year member of the Knights of Peter Claver and served as Grand Knight. Mr. Singleton also served on the Bay St. Louis School Board and was a founding member of the Bon Noir Amies Social Club. He was a long-time member of the N.A.A.C.P. He owned and managed Singleton Janitorial Services for 30 years. Mr. Singleton enlisted in the army and served in Europe during WW II and was honorably discharged in 1946. He retired from Johnson Control at N.A.S.A., where the Main Propulsion Test Team member was awarded the Public Service Group Achievement Award (Lockett-Williams).

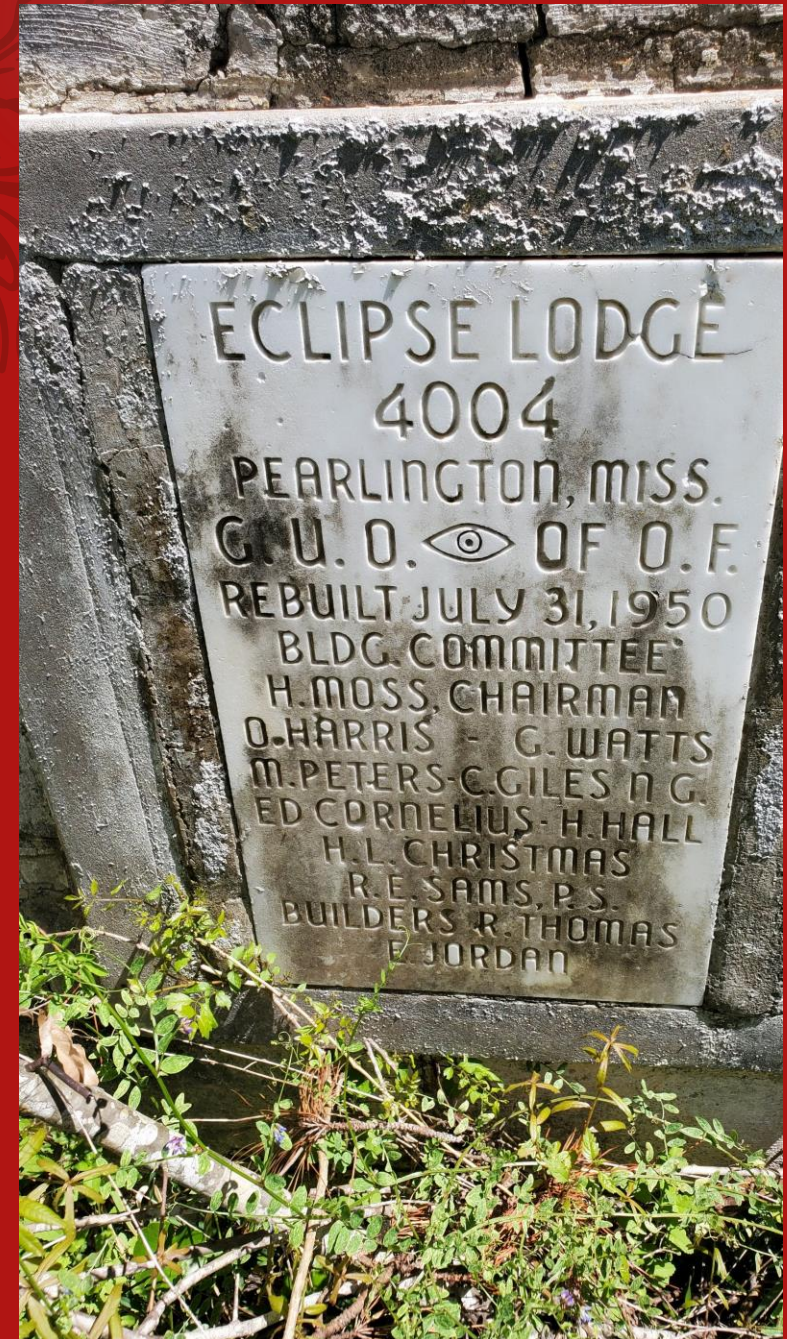
# Black Media

Mr. Ira and Mrs. Bennieyetta Hatchett are the owners and operators of the first Black-owned Radio station W.M.E.J., 1190 AM and 104.3 FM serving Bay St. Louis and the Gulf Coast since 1983. The Hatchett's continue to support the coastal communities with Religious Programming as well as public service Announcements.

# Ordinary People Doing Extraordinary Things

During the lean years between 1890 and 1964, Jim Crow laws permeated the south. Two of those laws referenced "Literacy" and "Poll Tax" requirements. Again, the Black church and the institutions rose to action - namely, Pearlington's Eclipse Lodge 4004, Grand United Order of Odd Fellows. Its officers were Herbert Moss, Oris Harris, G. Watts, Matthew Peters, Charles Giles, Horace Christmas, Robert Sams, and other members of Hancock County, MS, who used their collective wisdom to overcome the voting roadblocks.

By 1958, boys as young as ten years old were brought to the lodge to read and recite the Preamble to the Constitution to the men who could not read. After weeks of preparation, the men could pass the Literacy portion of the voting requirement. Some lodge officers frequently met with the local candidates and negotiated community issues that needed attention. This action somehow resulted in a donation of enough \$2.00 bills to pay the poll taxes for every Black voter at upcoming elections.



# Ordinary People Doing Extraordinary Things

Community organizations were not a male-dominated arena. The Household of Ruth of Pearlinton was composed of the wives of the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, widowed mothers, and unmarried daughters. Some of those women were Mary McGee, Mildred Wheat, Lilly Sams, Elizabeth Willis, Lillian Rogers, Arnette Giles, Mary Lee Evans, Shirley Giles, and Myrtle Terrell, to name a few who performed extraordinary feats as well. These women took care of their families and the families of their White employers. They coached and advised young girls into adulthood, and they conferred with their husbands to protect and preserve the rights and dignity of the Black community.

Black community organizations throughout Hancock County included the Masonic Lodge of Bay St. Louis, Operation Wake Up, Men & Women of God Ministries, Helping Hands of Waveland, Retrofit of Bay St. Louis, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P) of Bay St. Louis. Exceptional community activists included Rev. Charles Giles, Rev. Robert Sams, James Wheat, Percy Peters, Lillian Rogers, Mary Lee Evans, Albert Abrams, Robert Whavers, Thomas Farve, Harry Farve, Saunders Bell, Sullivan Bell, Geraldine Lang, Willie Bradley, Thad Williams, James Drummond, Mamie Drummond, Gloria Payne, Clarence Harris, and Cleveland Williams.

# Law Enforcement & Politics

Bay St. Louis Police Chief Douglas J. Williams served in the department from 1965-1985. William (Bill) Lee served as a law enforcement officer covering Hancock County between Logtown, Pearlington, Waveland, and Kiln. Wilbert (Bro), Dorsey, Sr. served on the police force in Bay St. Louis, and Allen James and Thomas Powell served in law enforcement for the county. Eugene Hughes was a police officer for the Waveland Police Department for 12 years, and Joel Wallace worked as a Mississippi State Highway Patrol.

Bay St. Louis City Council Members included Thomas Farve, Harry Farve, Connie Payne Lampley, Charles Johnson, and Bishop Jeffery Reed.

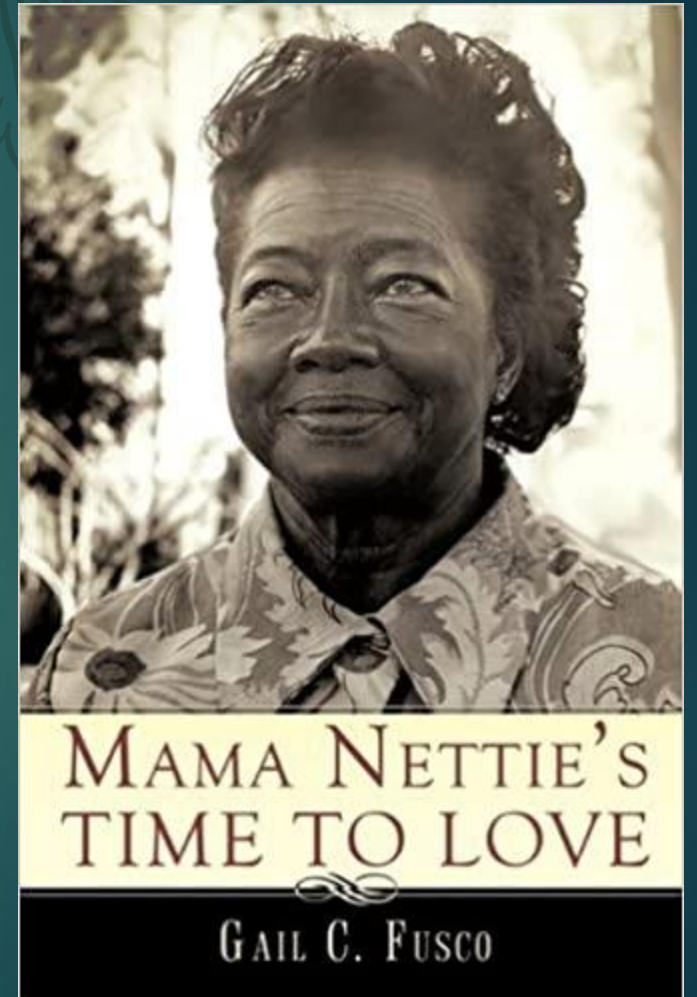
## Some Noteworthy Individual Efforts

Ms. Geraldine Lang mentored many who needed advice regarding programs that benefited the community. Ms. Lang founded the save our children program, an after-school program that tutored and helped the children of Hancock Co. Ms. Lang was instrumental in bringing Costal Health back to Bay St. Louis a much-needed program in this community. All of spoke of Ms. Lang said of her, "She is a real go getter".

Mr. Robert (Bugger) Whavers fostered community athletic activities for youth and adults for over thirty years. Basketball and softball were his specialties. His Adult Male Softball Team called the Red Machine entertained Hancock Co. families most every weekend. Many individuals and families received help through softball tournaments conducted to benefit their specific causes. One Bay St. Louis, past city Consul members said of Mr. Whavers "I never saw a Man command the respect of an entire community like that man did".

## Arnett T. Giles (1901-1976)

Following in her uncle, Etienne William Maxon's footsteps, Arnette Giles was probably the only other citizen of Pearlinton to grace the halls of the United States Capitol in Washington, DC. Mrs. Giles was married to the Reverend Charles R. Giles of Pearlinton for nearly 55 years. During her youth, Mama Nettie worked as a midwife delivering babies in both Black and White neighborhoods, and she is still famous for piercing the ears of every young girl in Pearlinton. Mama Nettie cured many illnesses with the Native Choctaw Indian remedies learned from her grandmother. Between 1953 and 1963, she owned and operated a little log cabin restaurant called "Arnett's Pie Shop." People came from as far away as New Orleans to purchase her famous cakes and pies.





## Arnett T. Giles (1901-1976)

During her lifetime, she was lovingly referred to as “Mama Nettie” because she was a mother to all. After her turbulent and dysfunctional childhood, Mama Nettie vowed to leave no child behind. Over the years, she and her husband fostered or adopted more than 43 children, many of whom suffered from mental disabilities. She read every book in the library and developed a strategy for teaching mentally challenged children to talk. Even children deemed brain-damaged learned to walk, and they experienced overall improvements in cognitive and motor skills.

The news of Mama Nettie’s success with the children resounded throughout the county. Eventually, she was invited to train mentally challenged children at the Hancock County Elementary School in Lake Shore, MS. The United Givers Fund of Hancock County under the direction of Mrs. M. Beyer, Secretary-Treasurer, sponsored Mama Nettie’s division at the school. It was not long before her school children began to improve, but she dreamed of having the funds to supply for the unique needs of her classes.

## Arnett T. Giles (1901-1976)

Around 1970, Warren Carver, Mayor of Bay St. Louis, submitted Mama Nettie's name to a Washington DC committee, and my grandmother was recognized as the 1971 recipient of the first National Volunteer Award. I had the great honor to escort my grandparents to Washington, where Mama Nettie was honored at a banquet in the Kennedy Center. Along with a plaque, she received a check for five thousand dollars. At last, she had the funds to buy those school supplies.

Helping children was not Mama Nettie's only virtue. She and my granddad made a special effort to care for the elderly and anyone in need. They shared the crops from their small farm, and a holiday never passed if my grandmother did not fill baskets with seasonal foods for us kids to deliver to the elderly, the sick, and the shut-ins. They raised their children to love God, love their neighbors, and be humble, kind, and charitable.

# Acknowledgements

I shall end my story by honoring and acknowledging all the outstanding members of the Black minority community who contributed to the prosperity of Hancock County, MS.

With all of those who have contributed to our past, I am equally Honored to identify a new era of community minded, dedicated people and Organizations that tirelessly give of their time, talent and resources. They are as follows: Ivory Jackson and her Family, Rosa Jackson Thomas, Joseph Keys Pearlinton Impact Inc., Aurelia Marshall, Kevin Hill and family, all of Pearlinton. Maurice Singleton, a veteran educator, journalist and long-time contributor to the local paper, Sea Coast Eco. RetroFit Community Organization, The Knights of Peter Calver and Ladies Auxiliary with Marylin Smith. Operation Wake Up Men and Woman of God Ministry and its Founder Danin Benoit. Helping Hands Community Organization founded by

Clarence Harris and Earlean Washington. Continue to strive for a better tomorrow.

# Acknowledgements

Upon closing his book, *The Progress of the Races*, Etienne William Maxon wrote,

The writer now comes to the end of his story, like all of us someday will come to the end of our journey. But, if one has done well in the service of God and man, he may take a retrospective view of the past that will touch him to the deepest and loftiest reminiscence. And, as he goes on his way rejoicing, through the path of the just which is as a shining light, he will catch a vision of the future, and of the light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.

If righteousness exalts a nation, it will exalt a people or a race. It will do more to make the world better than a League of Nations or a World Court; it will recognize the independence of nations and assist them in making progress; it will stop imperialism and even war.

Therefore, I would implore the Colored people to have faith in God and cultivate a friendly spirit with all with whom you may come in touch, educate, and acquire wealth. Doubtless, you will then be in a position to demand all the civil rights you are now deprived of in the United States of America.

I would exhort the races everywhere to accept the religion of Jesus Christ, the religion that brought peace on earth, goodwill toward men, the religion that makes one pure and undefiled before God, the religion that detests hypocrisy, the religion that will eliminate prejudice and race discrimination, the religion that saved our fathers, the religion that will save the races and bless humanity in this world and the world to come, the religion that loves God supremely and your neighbor as yourself (38).

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# Thank you

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