

THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE CONTEXT

# Feature

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## FINDING FLORENCE:

*The Need for  
Community College  
Educators as Topics of  
Historical Research*

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I found a New Journal & Guide article about Florence Beatty-Brown during the fall of 2015 while conducting background research for my dissertation. There was something about her eyes that drew me in. She was an instructor at my alma mater during the 30s and 40s and the article celebrated her recent master's degree in sociology from my graduate institution, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

I tucked her photograph away in a file for future research. After I completed my program during the summer of 2020, her photo, which I'd posted years ago, reappeared in my social-media timeline. I realized that what I saw in her eyes was determination and hope. I decided to do everything in my power to uncover her story and was heartbroken to find that Beatty-Brown passed away in 2002.

I presumed I would not find much because I was relegated to digital collections and the extent to which archivists would be available during a pandemic, which caused the closure of countless universities and colleges or greatly reduced their availability to the public. I write this essay four months after beginning my life history study. I found a surprisingly robust amount of information about her life and conducted a wonderful interview with her only child, Robert D. Brown, Jr., and his wife, Dr. Annie Woodley-Brown.

I located much of what I now know about Beatty-Brown's pursuit of higher education and her career trajectory through newspaper clippings about her many public scholarly presentations in Missouri, where she spent most of her career. I learned of her personal feelings and motivations through interviews with her family members and a collection of letters written between Beatty-Brown, her parents, and her uncle, Bruce Barton. When her father, Webster Beatty, was a child, a white preacher took him in and raised him alongside his own children. One of his sons—an advertising executive, Barton—remained a part of the Beatty family until his death in the 1960s. I found the least amount of information about her life in the archives of the institutions she worked at.

While several guiding questions drove me to continue my search for Beatty-Brown, the answers left me more confounded than when I started the study. Why didn't I know anything about her prior to this research? As a scholar of Black women's experiences pursuing higher education in the United States, I am familiar with the necessity of going back and learning about our foremothers who have been lost to history, or, in some cases, misfiled in the historical record. There was no reason I could think of that the life of Beatty-Brown would not be taught or at least studied alongside other early graduate-trained educators who were Black.

Under the auspices of the Association for the Study of Negro (now African American) Life & History (ASALH), Carter G. Woodson contributed graduate-education funding to several early Black historians. A 1933 graduate of Fisk University, Beatty-Brown was the only woman on this list as he contributed to her completion of her M.A. in history at the University of Illinois in 1936. She served as a member of the founding editorial board and author of several biographical sketches for the Negro (now Black) History Bulletin. Additionally, she conducted research for and earned a prestigious doctoral research fellowship from the Rosenwald Fund. In fact, the "honorary" Master of Science in Sociology degree she earned in 1939 from the University of Illinois was discussed in the newspaper article that piqued my interest in this study. The piece talked about the embedded ethnographic research she did on rural education in Louisiana for the Rosenwald Fund. She was one of a select few researchers (called explorers) who conducted a two-year study that led, in part, to major legislative discussions and changes in tenant farming in the South.

As was the case with most Black women with graduate degrees, Beatty-Brown was an itinerate educator. That is, she changed institutions often and furthered her graduate education mostly during summer breaks. Fayetteville State Teachers College (Fayetteville, NC) was her first faculty position (1937-1945), followed by several institutions in Missouri: Lincoln University (1945-1947); Stowe Teachers College (1949-1954); formerly all-white

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Harris Teachers College, after its merger with Stowe (1954-1963); and Meramec Community College (1963-1983). She earned her doctorate in sociology from the University of Illinois in 1951 while working full time at Stowe Teachers College and raising her son. By 1967, Beatty-Brown was one of only 14 Black women with doctorates in sociology in the United States (Conyers, 1986). Her dissertation, "The Negro as Portrayed by the St. Louis 'Post-Dispatch' from 1920 to 1950," is still widely cited in studies of media coverage of African Americans in the United States.

She spent two years (1961-1963) as an educational specialist among a group of Tuskegee Institute educators and administrators who developed curriculum and opened the [Zorzor Rural Teacher Training Institute](#) in Liberia, which is still in operation today. While employed at Meramec Community College she was a [Fulbright scholar](#) at Chiang Mai University in Chiang Mai, Thailand, where she helped create a graduate sociology curriculum.

I shared this brief overview of Beatty-Brown's career to explain how perplexed I was at having never before heard of her. While there may be any number of reasons, I can only surmise that having spent the majority of her career as a community college educator, she was

misfiled in the historical record. I can't think of a single historical Black American educator who taught at a community college. When I refer to Beatty-Brown as "misfiled," I mean that she existed in an interstitial space in higher education history. In 1999, education historian [Philo Hutcheson](#) argued that "community colleges do not exist as text." He meant that community college archives were either nonexistent or did not exist in a way that represented them as autonomous institutions. The few primary documents that existed did so as a much-forgotten part of some larger institution's history, thereby rendering the community college an apparition—there but not there.

In a random selection of 14 historical studies of community colleges (all dissertations written in the last 20 years), I found that each of the researchers had to conduct or use previously recorded oral-history interviews to either strengthen or drive their studies due to a dearth of institutional archival material at their respective community colleges. It follows, then, that outside of these oral-history interviews of key institutional leaders, faculty members, and students that there is equally little written archival material that tells the stories of community college educators. It may be impossible, for example, for me to determine the extent of the courses Beatty-Brown taught at Meramec Community College, committees on which she may have served, or her path to tenure. [Pedersen \(2000\)](#) found that careful mining of local sources are often necessary to reconstruct community college histories, and those were the means that were most helpful in my finding of Florence. Digital repositories of various Black newspapers, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, and the Meramec Montage, a student newspaper, were instructive in my study.

In closing, as I near the end of my research on Dr. Florence Rebekah Beatty-Brown, I issue a call to historians of higher education and Black women's studies. A great deal of distant historical material relating to community colleges and their employees is lost or was not preserved. For this reason, I implore scholars to conduct more oral-history

interviews with active and retired community college educators as well as administrators, staff, and community college alumni. Where written record falls short, the oral record may provide all that we have of the early days of some of our community colleges and the educators who made them possible. In a recent essay, [Bañuelos \(2020\)](#) made the case for a historical study of institutions of higher education outside the four-year-model—namely, predominately white elite institutions and elite historically Black colleges and universities. While the Bañuelos study focused on a lack of historical institutional and curricular study of for-profit institutions and police-training institutes and programs, much of her reasoning also supports a broadening of the kinds of educators we study. [In the fall of 2018, community colleges enrolled 41 percent of all undergraduates nationally.](#)

I am calling attention to a dire need for further historical study of community college educators in general, particularly Black women community college educators. I believe that a lack of such research exists for a few reasons.

First, graduate programs treat both qualitative research on community colleges and careers at community colleges as lesser endeavors. Additionally, scholars of Black women's history also have not explored Black female educators at community colleges as among our reclaimed exemplars. This may be due to the false narrative that community college educators were and are taskmasters or practitioners, not intellectual beings. As Bañuelos stated, however, "Most histories of higher education ignore the ways in which the base [community colleges and their educators] shapes knowledge through practice" (2000, p. 251). I would add that most histories of higher education forget that community college educators are often active researchers and published scholars. As long as universities continue to do little to reduce the notion that community colleges are deemed inferior institutions—thereby relegating community college educators to inferior status as well—few will choose to undertake historical study of the educators who taught the overwhelming majority of college students in the United States.

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## Photo Source

Fayetteville Teacher Given Honorary M.S. (1939, Oct 28), *New Journal and Guide*, p. 5. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Norfolk New Journal and Guide (1916-2003).

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