

One of the most significant socio-economic impacts resulting from the notion of white supremacy, and its attending corollary of Black inferiority, was the use of race as a determinant of residential housing patterns, which caused African American families to be forced into the isolation of segregated neighborhoods. For Zinetta Burney and her African American neighbors in Houston's Third Ward, Alabama Street was the de facto color line that, throughout most of the twentieth century, divided this central city community according to race.

In urban communities throughout the nation, the enforcement of allegedly "legal" race-based deed restrictions and other residential restrictions were common practice. In Houston de facto law—meaning it was custom but not written city code—dictated that homes south of Alabama Street were reserved for white families, while African Americans were confined to the northern section, above Alabama. As one of those families, the Burneys resided at 2828 MacGregor, which was renamed Winbern. Burney asserted that changing her street's name reflected a practice used to preserve exclusivity and racial demarcations as increasing numbers of African Americans



*At age fourteen, Zinetta Burney "passed" to gain entrance to a movie but left soon after arrival in fear of being caught.*

University. I always wanted to go there. I guess I got that from my father. I never felt free. Always conscious of the isolation. Always conscious of the restriction. Always wanted to walk across Alabama. Just walk across it." Visits to Hermann Park were never completely satisfying for a young Zinetta. She now laments that "you could visit, but I never felt I could get out and roam free."<sup>4</sup> The rigidly enforced Jim Crow rules of a segregated Houston denied Burney and other young African Americans such opportunities.

African American kids experienced a childhood filled with contradictions when it came to accessing the public places and resources of the city. Local amusements like Playland Park at Main and Kirby restricted the access of African American children to only one day a year—June 19. Known as "Juneteenth" that day has been commemorated by African Americans since Reconstruction as the day that enslavement ended in Texas.<sup>5</sup>

Amidst the gathering momentum of the modern civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, downtown Houston remained a bastion of segregation. Unable to even try on clothing in downtown stores prior to purchase, African Americans were

## Zinetta Burney: Crossing Alabama Street

By J. R. Wilson

moved into Third Ward. Thinking back to the 1940s and 1950s, when her mother was cleaning houses as a maid "over on the southern end past Alabama," Burney pointed out that Blacks now live in houses that are in areas that "as a kid, we could not have visited . . . We lived in a segregated world."<sup>1</sup>

Even in childhood, the lack of respect shown her father and other African Americans always distressed Burney and contributed to the deep sense of justice, fairness, and civic obligation that has become evident in her adult life. Reminiscing about her highly intelligent father who only finished the third grade, Burney recalled, "I always thought it was disturbing to him, and I guess it was, with going to work, with the seeing of the things he always wanted to explore. I could feel it in him. He wanted the freedom. I could always feel it."<sup>2</sup> She observed her father's struggles as he redeemed his dignity by repudiating the racial degradation and subservience of the Sambo role that he was expected to fulfill as a rail car porter. She proudly remembers that he ". . . one day just told them he was sick of it; he was tired and quit."<sup>3</sup>

When he found other work, Burney and her mother often drove him to his various jobs in their family Chevrolet. As they rode along, journeying through Hermann Park and well-off white neighborhoods, she found it disturbing that she had no access to the things she saw around her. "[There were] . . . places that as a kid, I just always wanted to go to visit. I'd see Rice

urged to shop in the bargain basement of Foley's department store where the "colored restroom" was housed. Unwelcome even in the balcony, they were prohibited from entering downtown theaters such as the Loews or Metropolitan to go to the movies. Burney remembers Houston having only three "colored theaters," though they lacked the luxurious red carpet and gilded moldings of the white theaters. These included the Deluxe Theater near Lyons Avenue and Gregg Street in the Fifth Ward, and the Park and the Dowling on Dowling Street in the Third Ward.<sup>6</sup>

One Saturday afternoon in 1955, fourteen-year-old Zinetta was amazed to find herself sitting in the darkened confines of the all-white Loews Theater. Her pervasive childhood curiosity about what lay beyond the "veil" of segregation had taken her to the other side of the color line on an incredible downtown adventure. On this day, choosing not to wait for "ten years" for the *Tarzan* movie playing at the white theaters to get to the Black theaters, Burney decided to "pass" for white to gain entrance.<sup>7</sup>

The daughter of Louisiana French Creoles, the teenaged Burney had fair-skin, straight-hair, and sharp European facial features, leading to her often being mistaken for Latina. On that particular Saturday afternoon, Burney, a student at St. Nicholas High School, joined a friend from Yates High School who looked white, bought tickets, and nervously sat down to watch the film. But, as Burney sat there, a sense of foreboding

and menace overcame her. Unable to ward off her growing trepidation about being detected and arrested, Burney leaped from her seat and ran out of the theater to the bus stop, where she boarded the first bus out of downtown and back to the security of her Third Ward community.<sup>8</sup>

Zinetta Burney dropped out of high school and got married in August 1957. Her daughter Sharon (who completed her studies at Texas Southern University's Thurgood Marshall School of Law in 2007) was born the following year at Connally Air Force base in Waco, Texas. Within a couple of years, however, Burney found herself a single parent without an education and living with her parents. She described herself as having been "uneducated, unemployed, and unemployable."<sup>9</sup>

Recognizing her own predicament, Burney enrolled in the licensed vocational nurse [LVN] program at St. Elizabeth Hospital, intending to "study her way through something and become somebody through education."<sup>10</sup> After becoming an LVN, she returned to HISD night school and completed high school. With her high school diploma in hand, and working as an LVN, Burney determined that the best use of her savings was for college tuition and enrolled at Texas Southern University, the historically Black university located in the Third Ward. The initial transition into college was an overwhelming shock for this working single mother. After flunking the entrance exams, she had to take remedial classes while reserving afternoons as dedicated time for her daughter. After six years, Burney completed her undergraduate degree in mathematics in 1967.<sup>11</sup>

She worked as a substitute teacher, before landing a position at Shell Research and Development writing computer programs.<sup>12</sup> However, Burney's dream was to be a physician;




*Cousin Willie Senegal, Zinetta, and her brother John "Butch" Arceneaux, (left to right) celebrate Easter on Winbern Street in 1955. Her father's Chevrolet is in the background.*

All photos courtesy of Zinetta Burney.

but with a young daughter to raise and no African American medical school in the city, she instead chose to study law. She "went back to nursing . . . held down a forty hour per week job, and completed law school in 1974" at thirty-four years old.<sup>13</sup> By 1976, Burney along with four other Houston lawyers, Joan Edwards, Shelvin Louise Hall, Haroldeen Hartsfield, and Algenita Scott Davis, founded the first African American female law firm in America — Burney, Edwards, Hall, Hartsfield, and Scott — known affectionately as "The Sisters in Law."

Burney served on numerous leadership and development boards throughout the nation and is now presiding judge of Harris County Justice of the Peace Court, Precinct 7, Place 2. Prior to her election to the bench, she was senior partner in the law firm Burney and Foreman for more than thirty years, and served on the University of Houston Board of Regents and the Board of Commissioners for the Housing Authority of the City of Houston.<sup>14</sup> Numerous awards from local,

state, and national organizations attest to the integrity, forthrightness, and generosity of Zinetta A. Burney. She currently resides in Third Ward, south of Alabama Street. 

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*Zinetta Burney attended school at St. Nicholas Catholic Church, the oldest black Catholic church in the city, founded in 1887. Zinetta, age six in a plaid jacket, is seated in the center of the front row of the 1947 class photo with Sister Patronella.*