

Carter Wesley

and the Making of Houston's Civic Culture Before the Second Reconstruction

by Amilcar Shabazz*

Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center,
Houston Public Library



Carter Wesley (1892-1969)

Like the proverbial nose on a spited face, Carter Wesley is an overlooked figure in the history of Houston and civic leadership in the U.S. South. The Bakers, Browns, Worthams, and other prominent white Houstonians have received ample

treatment in the scholarly literature. Recently, worthy book-length studies have appeared on lesser known black community leaders like Lulu B. White and Eldrewey Stearns, as well as prominent national leaders who hail from Houston such as Barbara Jordan. But Wesley still has not attracted the attention he is due. This essay offers a glimpse of how life in and outside of Houston made Carter Wesley and how he, in turn, helped make the civic culture of modern Houston. It provides a thumbnail sketch of a complex and courageous individual whose life spanned the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. Wesley made a difference in the history of Houston. An account of his life points to some of the important historical events and themes that should be considered in a larger inquiry of the multiple centers of civic leadership in a southern metropolis such as Houston in the Jim Crow era.

Born April 29, 1892, Carter was one of three sons raised by Mabel and Harry

Wesley in Freedmen's Town, Houston's earliest and most successfully established black neighborhood that abutted the downtown governmental and business core. Thirty years before Carter's birth, his mother was the firstborn child of enslaved Africans on a plantation in Montgomery County, Texas. Historians Patricia Smith Prather and Bob Lee note that Mabel Green had no commonly accepted "right to an education." By the time of Carter's birth, however, his mother had established a name for herself as a teacher in the schools of Houston. The type of education she knew stressed religious "character" training and basic preparation for farming or menial labor jobs. Schools taught humility and obedience, as well as manual labor and minor artisan trades. Mabel Wesley, however, knew education should and could serve to produce democratic citizens, free human beings who would rather die than live as slaves. Carter absorbed her modernist outlook, emerging as one of Houston's foremost civic leaders. He led the way in reshaping the civic culture that prepared the southern metropolis for the Civil and Voting Rights Acts of the 1960s and the mass black self-investiture in U.S. citizenship known as the Second Reconstruction.¹

Wesley's story has its origin in his grandparent's exodus from slave plantation life. Located about forty miles north of Houston, Montgomery County had slightly more blacks than whites in the 1860 census. Postwar Reconstruction-era politics gave Republican black and white men dominance over the elected offices of the Black

Belt county. By the early 1870s, however, white supremacists deployed tactics ranging from sporadic acts of violence, threatened harm, literacy tests, and the White Primary to effectively strip blacks of the vote and of virtually any efficacy in the political arena. The White Primary barred blacks from voting in the Democratic Party primaries as a means of establishing blacks as a separate and inferior race.²

The White Democratic Primary became the issue on which a young Carter Wesley would cut his political teeth. The same practices that spurred his grandparents' migration from Montgomery County to Houston propelled him fifty years later to challenge the White Primary as an unconstitutional, racist policy. The intergenerational tradition of struggle within the Wesley family, then, went from egress to education to direct political action by way of litigation and public agitation.³

By voting with their feet and moving to Houston, the Greens taught their daughter Mabel an important lesson about the necessity to resist the dehumanization of slavery. She took up education as a weapon of struggle and became one of the earliest students enrolled at the Gregory Institute in Houston's Freedmen's Town. At eighteen, she began building a record of achievement teaching at several educational institutions for blacks including Oats Prairie School, the Chaneyville School, and the First Ward School.

She so impressed school district officials that in 1917 they named her principal of the newly opened Crawford Elementary

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School. Without a college degree, she became the first African American woman to assume a leadership position that customarily went to men. Throughout this time she continued her post-secondary education by attending school at Prairie View A&M University, the sole state-supported college restricted by Texas law to blacks only. Studying in the summer months, she earned her baccalaureate degree in 1930.⁴

Carter Wesley's schooling proceeded more directly than his mother's. Shortly after graduating high school in 1911, he moved to Nashville to attend Fisk University, which held claim to a reputation as a leading private university for African Americans. He excelled at Fisk, and in 1917, was awarded a B. A. degree, magna cum laude. Wesley sought an understanding of himself and of his future as a person of African descent in a European-American-dominated world. His chief influence was Fisk's greatest alumnus, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois. After graduating from Fisk some four decades before Wesley arrived there, Du Bois had become the most widely known and respected African American man of letters. His classic book *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903) and his editorship of *Crisis*, the monthly magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), put him at the pinnacle of renown by the time Wesley matriculated at Fisk. As a young man, Wesley could read the April 1915 issue of the *Crisis*, Du Bois' essay on "The Immediate Program of the American Negro," and consider the future course of his life. Du Bois spoke for his generation when he wrote that "the American Negro demands equality—political equality, industrial equality and social equality; and he is never going to rest satisfied with anything less."⁵

Second only in importance to Du Bois in Wesley's emerging political consciousness was the lawyer turned poet, scholar, and writer, James Weldon Johnson. Wesley admired him and joined the NAACP when Johnson was the national secretary. Johnson's novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*

(1912), stoked Wesley's desire to become a race man, with all the masculine implications of the term, who opposed racial injustice and worked to improve the conditions of African Americans through civic activism. The malevolent winds of war in Europe and racial violence in the United States, however, interrupted Wesley's plans even as they steeled his youthful idealism into a lifelong crusade.⁶

In June 1917, Wesley enrolled at a

of Camp Logan, encountered a Houston police officer mercilessly beating a black woman. When the soldier questioned what was the matter, the officer stopped beating her and billy-clubbed him before arresting and taking him to jail. At the police station, officials quickly released the soldier, but not before a black corporal, unaware of the soldier's release, went to check on his comrade only to be chased, shot at, pummeled, and locked up.

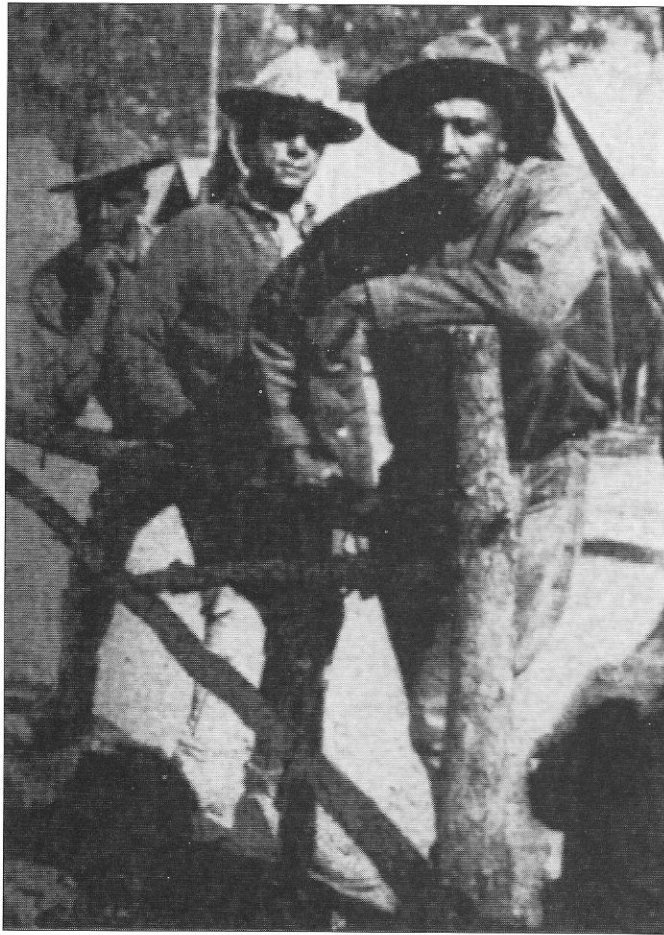
When the news of the second incident reached Camp Logan, over a hundred soldiers took ammunition and weapons and marched into the city to "punish" the hated Houston police force. The death toll in the fighting claimed five policemen, two white soldiers, nine white or Latino civilians, and four of the black mutineers. At Fort Des Moines Wesley wondered about the fate of the soldiers who had revolted. Could they get fair trials? Would the long train of racist abuses that blacks, civilians, and soldiers alike had endured in what the Chamber of Commerce dubbed "Heavenly Houston," be taken into consideration at the sentencing of those court-martialed? In the fate of uniformed black men in his birthplace Wesley assayed the nature of the very American democracy he was training to defend.⁷

In November 1917, the army assigned Wesley to the 92nd Division at Camp Funston, Kansas, and on December 22, he and the world learned the court's decision. Out of sixty-three persons charged both with mutiny in

a time of war and premeditated murder, thirteen men received the death penalty and hung until dead that day at Fort Sam Houston near San Antonio. Five men received their freedom, while the majority got a sentence of life at hard labor.

In the aftermath of the mutiny, Wesley not only felt concern for the legal predicament of the soldiers, but he also worried about the welfare of his family and friends in a city where already poor relations between the races had worsened. Despite the fact that Houston's civilian black community took no part in the day of fighting, the Houston police adopted a policy of collective punishment.

Somehow, Wesley had to overcome his



Black soldiers at Camp Logan.

black officers' training camp located at Fort Des Moines, Iowa. After completing the program he received his commission as a first lieutenant, making him one of the first black junior officers since Colonel Charles Young led black troops of the 10th Cavalry into combat during "Black Jack" Pershing's Punitive Expedition in Mexico.

As Wesley trained to be a military officer, an event occurred in his hometown that tested his faith in Du Bois' "close ranks" appeal that wartime service marked the pathway to equal rights and justice in the U.S.A. and abroad. On August 23, 1917, a black soldier of the 3rd Battalion, 24th Infantry Regiment, stationed on the outskirts of the city to guard the construction

Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library

worries and get on with the bloody business in Europe. Serving in the 372nd Infantry Regiment under the command of the French Army, he fought in the Argonne and the Verdun region in World War I. After transfer to the 370th, Wesley took part in the battle of Oise-Aisne on September 27, 1918. When his captain received a severe combat wound, Wesley assumed command. The armistice that ended the war denied Wesley a chance at a significant combat command role and, in February of 1919, he returned to the U.S. That fall he enrolled at Northwestern University's law school in Illinois.⁸

Wesley's choice to join the legal profession, instead of following in his mother's schoolteacher footsteps, reflected Wesley's point of view that his people needed men and women educated in the law to fight for human and civil rights. He had for role models few African American lawyers and almost none in high-status, high-paying, influential positions. White politicians, lawyers, and judges combined to restrict the legal practice of African American attorneys to an all-black clientele, mostly in family and other civil law matters.

Materialist dreams of wealth, however, are unlikely sources for Wesley's decision to pursue a law degree. Wesley's mother had been enslaved and had committed herself to the promotion of learning among the children of Houston. Her son, however, was a pragmatic man of action in the grips of an ideology of black power. In the 1920s, the law offered a talented and risk-taking person a cutting edge lifestyle. It guaranteed a dynamic, exciting life spent helping people resolve their conflicts in an orderly way, or it meant nothing at all. Wesley, truly a man of the modern age, wanted to be in the center of things, leading society toward progressive change. He expressed an interest, not only for a seizure of personal status, but of power, especially of power vested in a historically constructed black identity.⁹

After Wesley's graduation from law school he moved to Oklahoma. Why he moved there raises interesting questions about his enactment of the race man narrative. Did he and Jasper "Jack" Alston Atkins, Wesley's friend from his Fisk University days who earned his law degree at Yale, start their practice of the law in

Oklahoma from a desire to build black power? Atkins started his practice in Tulsa, a city that underwent a terrible race riot in 1921, one of the worst in U.S. history. Pooling their talent and resources in the face of intense racist terror and violence, Wesley migrated to nearby Muskogee and got Atkins to join him in setting up a law firm together. Their practice rapidly accrued financial success representing Creek freedmen who owned land containing crude oil. Local whites, acting as so-called guardians, had been taking the profits from these lands.

Wesley prospered, but personal as well

entrepreneur in the construction business, brokered land deals through the Safety Loan and Brokerage Company, and made a sizable capital investment in Clifton F. Richardson's *The Informer*, a black community newspaper. In 1931, his law firm with Atkins added a third partner, James Madison Nabrit, Jr., a Northwestern University School of Law honors graduate. Like Wesley and Atkins, Nabrit shared solid legal training and a commitment to public interest litigation. This new Houston law firm had 15% of the black lawyers in Texas, since in 1930 there were only twenty black lawyers in the entire state. The field was wide open to make a mark.

Wesley, the native Houstonian in the firm, quickly became a major player in black Houston's social, political, and economic renaissance. Before their arrival, Francis Scott Key Whittaker had the main black law office in the city. A Harvard University law school graduate, Whittaker opened his office in 1923. When Wesley and Nabrit entered the black struggle in Texas for full voting rights, other lawyers—both black and white—had unsuccessfully litigated numerous lawsuits from Beaumont to El Paso. Wesley, however, was egotistical enough to believe that he could bring a case before the United States Supreme Court and change history.

The NAACP, however, from its headquarters in New York, considered itself the pioneer and leader of the constitutional law fight for the rights of African Americans. Although Texas activists and the NAACP national office shared common goals of wanting to defeat white supremacist laws and practices in the courts, the leadership issue became a thorny

and recurring problem. Wesley and his partners did not flinch from head-on collisions with the NAACP legal team. They particularly objected to the NAACP's reliance on white lawyers in the early years of the legal campaign, when capable black lawyers like themselves were available. Partly as a result of their objections, the NAACP's national office would come around to hiring the Dean of Howard University's law school, Charles Hamilton Houston, an African American graduate of Harvard University, to direct its legal campaign. From that step toward embracing diversity and supporting a greater

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HOUSTON 1, TEXAS, SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23

Cashes Two Man Arrested For Attempting Third Forgery

Heman M. Sweatt Our "Man Of Texas"

College Of Pacific Official Denies Race Gridster Was Left Behind

Asphyxiation Victim Buried In Kilgore

HEMAN SWEATT

Among Wesley's many undertakings, his involvement in *The Informer* made him one of the most influential black civic leaders in Texas.

as business factors pushed and lured him out of Oklahoma in 1927. Dodging complaints that he and Atkins had overcharged their Afro-Native American clients to amass personal fortunes, Wesley began planning a return to Houston to make a fresh start, career-wise.¹⁰ He entered Oklahoma when people of color were at a nadir and brought quality legal expertise. Wesley, the race man, may have left the Sooner State a rich man, but he had not yet come into his own as a leader.

In Houston, Wesley entered a very different business, political, and social environment. He launched his career as an

African American presence at the bar, Charles Houston's own student, Thurgood Marshall became the NAACP's chief counsel and, in later years, the first African American U.S. Supreme Court justice.

The conflict between Wesley and the NAACP extended to the area of legal tactics and strategies in the fight against the whites-only primary elections, but ultimately unity prevailed. After almost a quarter century of lawsuits, black Texans finally won the battle in 1944 with the *Smith v. Allwright* decision. In this case named for Lonnie Smith, a black dentist in Houston, Wesley and Marshall worked together to get the Supreme Court to rule that blacks could not be barred from voting in the Democratic Party Primary in Texas or in any of a number of states where white party officials practiced such exclusion. It was in Wesley's office that he and Marshall prepared the brief that convinced the Court to strike a blow for the voting rights of African Americans. Wesley worked with Marshall on the lawsuit as a consultant and as a political and financial backer.

Nearly a decade before the *Smith* ruling, Wesley reduced his practice of law to become more involved with *The Informer*, stepping on the back of Clifton Richardson to become the main owner with editorial control of the paper. He started as the paper's auditor in 1929, moved the next year to become vice president, followed by general manager and treasurer before the end of 1932. After an acrimonious feud over the journalistic and financial policies at *The Informer*, Wesley bought out Richardson's interest in the paper.

In 1933, another aspect of Wesley's life changed. He married Doris Wooten and soon had two newborn infants in his household. Wooten had been his partner in running the newspaper after 1932. Thus, when Atkins left Houston in 1936 to join the faculty of Howard University's law school, Wesley had become more a publisher than a lawyer.

Whether liking him or not, black Houstonians came to recognize Wesley as a civic leader. Lorenzo Greene, a traveling salesman of Carter G. Woodson's books and publications, provides a firsthand account of Wesley's public stature. During his pass

through Houston in 1930, Greene recorded in his travel diary notes on his meeting Carter Wesley. He stated that he was deeply impressed that a man in his thirties was so business-minded, successful, and prominent. Marveling over what a "progressive young man" Wesley was, he stated that the publisher "made a fine publicity man for me" by telling others about him. In trying to sell his books, he observed that Wesley "finally succumbed when I appealed to his ego. [I] told him that his name listed [among the purchasers] would induce others to do likewise." Greene's comments about Wesley suggest a pompous streak, but also acknowledge him as a recognized leader.¹¹

Wesley's civic activities were wide ranging. His paper and the publicity it generated placed him in a prominent position in Houston's black community. He took part in campaigns as diverse as getting blacks to pay their poll taxes and to vote, opposition to capital punishment and racial injustice in the courts or at the hands of the police, lawsuits against Jim Crow laws and racial segregation, trade union organization, and raising funds for the city's junior and, later, senior college for African Americans. His own organizing and capacity-building work included a local council of black organizations, a statewide group called the Texas Council on Negro Organizations, the NAACP at the local, state, regional, and

national levels, plus other regional and national associations concerning newspaper publishing, advertising, educational equalization, and interracial alliance-building.

John Gunther, a best-selling author of travelogues from around the world and across the United States, took notice of Wesley in his 1949 book *Inside U. S. A.* In a passage commenting on the "Negro issue" in Texas, he wrote:

The most interesting Negro in Texas...is probably a moderate named Carter Wesley, the publisher of a string of newspapers including the *Houston Defender and Informer*, the *Fort Worth Mind*, the *Dallas Express*, the oldest Negro paper in the state. All told Wesley's papers have a circulation of about sixty thousand; they are intelligently edited and vigorously outspoken on most issues. Wesley is now fifty-three.¹²

The height of Wesley's influence and success as a newspaper publisher and civic leader came in the period following the *Smith* victory and the end of the Second World War. Besides the cities Gunther noted, Wesley also published papers or local editions in San Antonio and San Diego, California, and as far to the east as New Orleans, Louisiana, Mobile, Alabama, and Memphis, Tennessee. Moreover, in 1945

Wesley's paper was the largest black-owned business in Houston in terms of the number of people it employed, its gross income, and property. At the national level, Wesley was a founder of Associated Publishers, Inc., a black advertising business; a recognized leader in the National Newspaper Publishers Association; and among an elite group of black newspaper editors who met during the war with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the White House. In 1948 the U.S. government sent him and ten other black publishers to Germany to investigate the racial discrimination claims of black servicemen. Closer to home, however, Wesley's major campaign was for African American access and equity in education.

The "all-out war for

THE INFORMER, Saturday, October 10, 1953



democracy" in education, as he and other blacks described their struggle, was multifaceted and complex. In a word, Wesley wanted the state to equalize the educational opportunities and resources it afforded to whites with that afforded to blacks. In principle and in the long run, he supported integration of the races, but in practice he demanded immediate improvements to and increased resources for the schools the state restricted to black students only. In 1945, at the postsecondary level, that meant the college at Prairie View.

Two contradictions arose in working exclusively for an increase in state funding for Prairie View. First, the state constitution for more than seven decades had promised the creation of a second university for blacks that would be equivalent to the University of Texas at Austin. The state never acted to fulfill its constitutional mandate and black Texans never forgot the original promise. Secondly, a limited campaign to get state legislators in Austin to improve Prairie View consistently met with failure. The state refused to heed pleas for funding increases regardless of whether they came from blacks or from white State Department of Education officials. The legislature concerned itself with the improvement of white institutions of higher education and cared nothing at all about the needs of the state's disenfranchised black minority.

In response to this state of affairs, Wesley advocated a two-pronged strategy. He supported a direct assault on segregation while at the same time pleading, demanding, and taking whatever financial gestures could be wrung out of the lily-white state legislature for the benefit of Prairie View or towards the creation of the long-promised black UT. He recognized that the direct assault on the whites-only admissions policy could push whites toward finally appropriating the finances to upgrade black schools. Along the first line of attack, Wesley put his money where his mouth was and helped raise thousands of dollars for an anti-segregation lawsuit. Through news articles and his columns, he influenced public opinion, especially in making the black community believe that it could force black bodies into white spaces.

Wesley also personally supported the man who would file the major test case against segregated higher education. Heman Sweatt, who qualified in every way for admission to UT's law school except that he was racially identified as a Negro, filed suit in 1946. While the suit worked its way to the Supreme Court, Wesley placed Sweatt on his payroll as an *Informers* employee. No one, besides men and women like Sweatt who braved white reaction by applying to universities whites banned them from, did more for the struggle to eradicate segregation in Texas education than Carter Wesley.

As he built his reputation as an enemy of segregation, Wesley was also one of the greatest backers of the Texas schools where the actual educating of African Americans took place. The state's black college at

Texans. He fought for black colleges in the pages of his newspapers, at the state capitol, and in courtrooms. Although intimately familiar with the relative inadequacy of resources and standing of many black colleges, he recognized that they provided higher education to the majority of African American undergraduates and would continue to do so throughout his lifetime and beyond. He foresaw that black schools would continue to be the only institutions available to most black students for however many years it would take to bury the Supreme Court's 1896 *Plessy* decision, which sanctioned racial discrimination across the United States on the basis that "separate but equal" treatment did not violate the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution's 14th amendment. Wesley refused to demonize black colleges and universities to win converts to the crusade to put black faces in white spaces.

Lulu Belle White, an educator turned activist and a friend of Wesley's through the many years of the fight against black exclusion from the Democratic Party primaries, took issue with the publisher's two-line strategy regarding black educational advancement. Consistent with the position Thurgood Marshall and the central leadership of the NAACP advocated in the late 1940s, White adopted the view that segregated black schools were no more than monuments to Jim Crow racism. Herself a graduate of Prairie View, she rejected the state's compromise measures of increased funding to black higher education that arose in response to Sweatt's lawsuit.

They amounted to gestures that were too little, too late. A militant race woman from her college days, the fight against fascism in Europe and Asia concomitant with the battle for human rights inside the U.S. propelled White to go beyond a service role in the black freedom struggle. She accepted a leadership position as the executive secretary of the NAACP's Houston branch. In 1943, she was the only woman in the South to hold such a full-time salaried position.

When the difference between Wesley and Marshall on political tactics crystallized, White put her "acid-tongue" behind the NAACP position and against Wesley.

★ BENEFIT DANCE ★

SWEATT TO COLLEGE

WEDNESDAY AUGUST 15TH—8 P. M. TIL 1 A. M.

MUSIC BY I. H. SMALLEY

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Lodger Greenway Inn
2414 Greenway BE 2048
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Green's Super Sandwich Shop
2407 Greenway BE 652
Golden Arches Grill
2414 Greenway BE 652
Tomb and Tavern BE 652
Coca-Cola Bottling

Courtesy The Informer

Wesley took an active role in Heman Sweatt's legal battle against segregation at the University of Texas law school.

Prairie View, the Houston College for Negroes (established as a municipal junior college in 1927), and the eleven black, private colleges across the state had no better friend than Wesley. His papers boosted the image of these institutions by recording and trumpeting their successes and victories, however big or small. He personally donated time and energy toward various projects, especially major fund-raising campaigns. Wesley was a relentless and incisive critic of the state and its white majority for hypocrisy, duplicity, inertia, and apathy toward the black institutions that did so much good work for the well-being of all

She lambasted him before members of the movement and in broader public discourse as clinging to the posture of yesterday's Negro, the stooping, eyes to the ground, hat in hand, Step N. Fetchit-type Negro. Wesley never had been such a man and his tremendous ego did not allow him to suffer such an ignominious characterization passively. He never accepted white men who disrespectfully honked their horns at black women as they walked in their neighborhoods. He did not accept their addressing black women without using the courtesy titles of "Miss" or "Mrs." as they customarily addressed other women. He never accepted whites calling an adult African American man "boy" or white soldiers in the U.S. military refusing to salute black officers who outranked them. So when Lulu B. White portrayed him as a "sell-out" to his race over a tactical dispute, he tagged back.

Wesley charged White and the NAACP generally with wanting to monopolize the battlefield for equal rights and justice. Most damningly, he claimed that they were fomenting division within the united front that leaders of black organizations in Texas had forged since the 1930s. Added to this, in the postwar period marked by anti-Red hysteria, Wesley wailed that White was a communist and sympathetic to Marxism-Leninism.

Marshall, as NAACP chief counsel, joined in the attack on Wesley and expanded the conflict into a national brouhaha for a period of several months. Ultimately the Wesley-White feud ended in defeat for White, and the rhetorical shoot-out between Wesley and Marshall resulted in a draw. In June of 1949, White resigned from her position with the Houston branch of the NAACP. Soon thereafter the NAACP national leadership focused its public statements more on the side of the benefits that would accrue to society from the elimination of segregation and refrained from wholesale condemnations of historically black colleges and universities.

For his part, Wesley never wavered in his full and overt support for Sweatt's right to attend UT and the fight against segregation. On July 2, 1949, shortly after White's resignation, he maintained in his

column, "The Ram's Horn" that: "Even if Sweatt enters the University of Texas, we will not want to get rid of Texas State University for Negroes...the Texas Constitution decrees separation provided it is equal, why shouldn't we make them carry out the Constitution and equalize Texas State University in toto with the University of Texas?" A year later, the Supreme Court ordered Texas to admit Sweatt into the UT law school. African Americans began entering UT in the summer of 1950, but only in graduate programs and professional schools. W. D. McClennan, a faculty member at Austin's Samuel Huston College, entered its doctoral program in mathematics and John Chase, who later became a major Houston-based architect, entered the architecture school.



The Informer provided a forum for writers and artists alike to challenge the racial status quo.

UT officials continued, however, to refuse black applicants to its undergraduate programs until the middle of the decade following the Court's landmark ruling in the *Brown* case. Even with that decision, which overturned *Plessy* and seemed to strike at the white supremacist doctrine of racial hierarchy it legitimized, the state of Texas did not mandate the elimination of race as a requirement of admission at all its state-supported institutions of higher learning until 1965.

Wesley was a pivotal figure in the social

revolution that brought on many changes in Texas and beyond. He acted behind the scenes to help blacks take school districts and other state universities and junior colleges to court either to equalize black institutions or to admit blacks into schools whites barred them from. He demanded educational equity while constantly declaring that legally enforced separation of the races was a crime against humanity.

In 1969, when Wesley passed on, Houston lost one of its most important civic leaders. He, more than anyone in the 8F crowd of white businessmen, spurred the desegregation of Houston. Critically, he challenged the rhetoric and reality of white racial hierarchy. Imaginatively, he popularized the vocabulary for speaking into being a new civic culture. His tocsin came not

from a trumpet but a ram's horn. Ultimately, the civil rights movement Wesley sounded into action modernized the southern system of racial hierarchy, helping save it from itself.

The movement pushed a racial state to demonstrate its obedience to the rule of law, to become less opaque, more rational and insidious. Wesley recognized and was deeply troubled by the potential for a civil rights movement focused on changing white spaces into public spaces open to African Americans. This might amount to a reform of racial caste arrangements in the U.S. rather than a transformation of it. His solution centered on black people sustaining a collective ethos of independence and self-reliance. He never backed down from his two-line approach despite attempts by his adversaries to malign him as a sell-out to his race and to marginalize

him as a civic leader. Perhaps Wesley is a minor player in the public memory of the twentieth-century South and Houston because historians continue to worry about defending the South and its tradition-laden past, or obsess over dreams of integration that scarcely ever result in tangible improvements in the lives of most African Americans. Perhaps a deeper remembering of Carter Wesley and what he stood for might foster the imagining of a freer Houston. ■