



## COVID-19 REFLECTIONS

*A North Carolina Story*

—LEA E. WILLIAMS

What a year 2020 was! The coronavirus pandemic upended everything. In addition to the pandemic, widespread street demonstrations protested systemic racism and pervasive police violence against Blacks. To document this history-making year, the State Archives of North Carolina and the North Carolina Museum of History partnered to launch a rapid response collection called *Your Story is North Carolina's Story*. The story project cast a wide net to gather first-person accounts through journal writings, photographs, objets d'art, oral reminiscences, yard signs, and other artifacts that reflect the zeitgeist of the times.

As an independent scholar, author, and retired educator living in Greensboro, North Carolina, I contributed monthly to the story collection from April through the end of the year and titled the submissions “My Coronavirus World: A Diary.”

Scribing started in the panicky early days of the pandemic when the hunt for everyday household items like paper towels and toilet paper took extra time and energy to find. As the virus worsened, my writing provided a release valve to deescalate uncertainties, fears, and negative emotions. Interestingly, my thoughts and feelings progressed over time going from blithely self-absorbed to intense and existential.

In nine submissions, I covered a diverse range of topics from



the unexpected kindness of strangers to the almost universal outpouring of grief and anger over the killing of George Floyd. In July, a candidly blunt and personal poem on the meaning of America's Independence Day spilled out of me. The longest piece I penned celebrated the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the 19th Amendment in August 1920, granting women the right to vote. It included a photo gallery highlighting African American suffragists whose contributions have long been hidden in the storytelling of history. Like so many school districts, officials in the Guilford County Public Schools system faced the difficult task of deciding when in the fall to reopen schools for in-person instruction. There were a multiplicity of factors to be considered. By October, the vitriolic campaign rhetoric of candidates running for national, state, and local offices inspired a prayer for peace, justice, and reconciliation. On election day, the stress of the drawn-out vote counting occupied my mind and moved my pen across the paper. The serious side of that piece ended with a tongue-in-cheek modern-day version of a literacy test, designed specifically for Greensboro voters. At year's end, I reviewed the grim toll COVID-19 had taken worldwide while emphasizing the bleak death rate for African Americans in North Carolina. Then, in an olive-branch moment, owing to the start of statewide distribution of coronavirus vaccines, I ended my final submission by expressing hope for a better 2021.

**"MY CORONAVIRUS WORLD: A DIARY #1", APRIL 2, 2020**

In a few weeks, the world has been turned upside down and inside out as the deadly coronavirus has woven a path of destruction around the world. The pandemic quickly required social distancing and stay-at-home mandates. Close on the heels came shuttered stores, reduced economic productivity, and record shattering



employee layoff. What to make of this scary and vastly changed world?

For me, this new world has been jolting. Initially, adrenalin-filled, admittedly selfish thoughts surfaced: “What do I need to do to be prepared?” The subjective “I” gives it away. After quickly surveying my household supplies, I decided that extra hand sanitizer was needed, and it certainly wouldn’t hurt to have a few extra rolls of toilet paper. Food wasn’t a worry because peanut butter and jelly, favorite emergency staples, were in the pantry.

However, a stark reality set in on a hurried shopping trip. Suddenly, there were empty shelves in the supermarkets and at the dollar stores. Even online sites were out of stock. Not too terribly long ago, products in every conceivable scent, texture, and size had been readily available. The lack of basic staples set off a low-grade, gnawing anxiety. But, surely in a couple of days there would be more. Well, not so much.

Experiencing scarcity was more than a little strange and unsettling. Finally, I settled down and realized that creative ingenuity would see me through. In that calmness, I welcomed the chance to do some quiet, introspective thinking. What did I discover?

Foremost, I have come to grasp anew the importance of human connectedness, whether through the old fashion medium of phone calls, or the newer forms of communicating face to face through Zoom and WhatsApp. Another treasured gift has been the caring presence of a close-by sister, along with distant friends and family reaching out. Especially comforting have been the congregants from my faith community checking in to make sure all is well. Solace has also come, unexpectedly, from the concerns and warm greetings of neighbors and even perfect strangers.

Could a kinder, gentler world, starting with me, be the silver



lining that's beneath the Coronavirus cloud? Maybe, hopefully.

“MY CORONAVIRUS WORLD: A DIARY #2”, MAY 9, 2020

The last few days have been remarkable. On Wednesday, May 6, my sister Natalyn and I participated in a Zoom meeting with our circle at church. The meeting opened with us telling about what had happened in the past few weeks and how we were coping with the social isolation. Natalyn mentioned that she had been looking for yeast to do some baking. Nary a packet was to be found in five different attempts.

A day later, I was out for a walk on what was a beautiful, sunny morning. The wonders of nature in springtime were fully on display. I glimpsed the last remaining azalea blossoms, sheltered under shade in some lucky person's yard; deep purple bougainvillea vining around a curbside mailbox post at another house, and tender green leaves shooting out of the stumps of carefully pruned crape myrtles on numerous lawns. Nature was in glorious bloom completely unfazed by the coronavirus.

As I walked, energetically, and enjoyed listening to *The Mirror and the Light*, the last in Hilary Mantel's trilogy of Thomas Cromwell, I got a call from Pam, a circle member. She remembered that Natalyn had been searching for yeast. Shopping right then at Aldi, Pam had spied some yeast packets and called to ask which form Natalyn preferred—the active dry or rapid rising.

I called to find out, then sent Pam a text. The next day we picked up the scarce commodity at Pam's home. Soon Natalyn was happily baking rolls. We surprised Pam with a dozen, and she was delighted.

What a wonderful anecdote of one good deed sparking another. As good as that was, the story didn't end there.

After delivering the freshly baked rolls, my sister and I went on to Aldi to grocery shop. As we were checking out, a kindly looking



middle-aged man, standing by the cashier, said, “Excuse me, but can I bless you today?” Being cautious, I skeptically inquired “How?” My thoughts immediately ran to being anointed with a Bible verse or, perhaps, being proselytized with some religious talk. I didn’t have time for the first and no inclination for the latter. But, to my relief, that was not the blessing he intended. With a warm smile, the stranger responded that he wanted to pay for our groceries. To say that I was dumbfounded doesn’t begin to capture my astonishment. What an unbelievably kind gesture (close to a \$50 blessing).

The wisdom of old tells us not to forget to show kindness to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Extraordinary circumstances, like the global pandemic, can bring out the best in humanity, resulting in cascading, overflowing acts of kindness and generosity.

### “MY CORONAVIRUS WORLD: A DIARY #3”, JUNE 9, 2020

Typically, June is my favorite month of the year. It’s a pleasant transition to summer, so I consciously try to enjoy every single day. I suppose it’s a case of opposites attracting. As it happens, my birthday is in December and . . . on the winter solstice. That should be a reason to like the season, but I actually find wintertime, with fewer daylight hours, far too cold and bone-chilling. In the summer I thaw out and really enjoy myself.

Yet, this June has been painfully difficult, not only due to the coronavirus pandemic, but because of the escalating number of senseless black deaths at the hands of white police officers. Topping the list is the brutal murder of George Floyd on Memorial Day (May 25). Floyd died of asphyxiation when Derek Chauvin, a white police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, pinned him to the ground in an illegal neck chokehold. Chauvin held Floyd down for eight minutes and 46 seconds as the life drained out of his body. A video captured



the scene. It soon surfaced that Chauvin had at least 17 complaints lodged against him for using excessive force without any serious disciplinary action being taken.

America has been convulsed by Floyd's death. Pent-up, smoldering frustrations touched off protests and demonstrations on city streets across the country and even abroad. Unified voices cry out for an end to racism, especially in policing. It's clear that a reckoning must move beyond the usual apologies and expressions of sorrow. Too many years of police brutality have muted blacks to mere promises of change.

Skepticism aside, Floyd's death may be the tipping point for white Americans finally confronting the rampant, persistent racism endemic in many police department. Previously, the blue wall of silence has surrounded offending officers, making official action nonexistent or ponderously slow. There've been few arrests and even fewer convictions. Qualified immunity further shields rogue officers, preventing victims from winning civil suits.

Thankfully, Minneapolis Police Chief Medaria Arradondo bucked past precedents when he fired Chauvin the day after Floyd's death. Within five days, the state's attorney general, Keith Ellison, charged Chauvin with murder in the third degree, and later raised it to second-degree murder. Then on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, Ellison charged three other officers with aiding and abetting second-degree murder and manslaughter. Those three had stood by and watched without intervening as Chauvin choked the life out of Floyd.

There's even another ray of hope. Seven Minneapolis police officers quit their jobs over the Floyd killing. Even more courageously, a group of 14 officers issued a public letter condemning Chauvin's actions. Writing that letter was certainly not easy, but it demonstrated a level of moral authority and ethical



integrity that should be the norm, but, unfortunately, isn't. I applaud the officers because they risk incurring the resentment of fellow officers and suffering the displeasure of their police union. Nationwide, police unions have a history of consistently and unapologetically backing officers in the face of blatant abuses. Unions routinely ignore violations of written policies, such as the use of chokeholds and other life-threatening measures to restrain individuals.

Sadly, Floyd is a tragic victim in a long list of African American deaths at the hands of white police officers with racism's fingerprints all over them. For example, Trayvon Benjamin Martin (age 17, 2012) in Sanford, Florida; Michael Brown (age 18, 2014) in Ferguson, Missouri; Eric Garner (age 43, 2014) in New York City, and Marcus Smith (age 38, 2018) in Greensboro, North Carolina.

In Baltimore in 2015, Freddie Gray (age 25) died from a spinal cord injury suffered while being transported unsecured in a police van. In that same year, neglectful guards failed to check on Sandra Bland (age 28), as required by protocol, while she was in a Waller County, Texas, jail. Guards later found Bland hanged in her cell and ruled it a suicide. Bland had been arrested after an altercation when police stopped her for not signaling a turn. Would a white person have been arrested for the same minor traffic violation? Hardly.

This year, in a case of white vigilantism in Glynn County, Georgia, a white father, Gregory McMichael, who is an ex-cop, and his son, Travis McMichael, chased after Ahmaud Arbery (age 25) in their pick-up truck and gunned him down. His offence? The father-son vigilante duo claimed that Arbery, who was out jogging, looked like a man suspected in several break ins in their neighborhood. The time lapse between the killing of Arbery and the arrest of the father and son strains credulity. Arbery was killed on February 23, his



assailants weren't arrested until May 7. Would a black father and son have remained free after killing a white man? Hardly.

In March, Breonna Taylor (age 26) died in Louisville, Kentucky, when police kicked in her apartment door and shot her eight times. Tragically, it was a botched raid at the wrong address. On June 12, Atlanta police fatally shot Rayshard Brooks (age 27) twice in the back in an overzealous attempt to take him into custody.

If America is truly "the land of the free," shouldn't blacks be allowed to jog in a neighborhood, shelter at home, and drive on a public street or highway without fear of harassment and even death? Instead, blacks are viewed suspiciously while doing the activities of daily life like jogging, walking, or driving. This is a mark of the deep racism, biases, and stereotyping that lurk in the cracks and crevices of American society. How much longer must blacks endure this racism! White America, please decide, but know that we will keep the pressure on.

"MY CORONAVIRUS WORLD: A DIARY #4", 4TH OF JULY  
2020

On this July 4th, I, like Langston Hughes, sing America.

I am the darker sister.

Called Mammy, Auntie, Vamp, Girl, Slut.

Raped by plantation masters.

Bossed by overseers in the fields.

Seduced by Founding Fathers.

Atrocities whispered and blind eyes turned away

By southern mistresses.

Genteel courtesies and polite silences forbade the truth.

Truths laid dormant for ages,





Buried, unacknowledged, and unspoken.

We fight to be seen in the splendor of our Black beauty.  
Exquisitely coifed hair woven in endless patterns of grace,  
Full, desirable lips, now imitated artificially by our white sisters,  
Broad, flared nostrils breathed with ease in the hot, sultry air of  
our ancestral homeland.

Skin glazed in manifold shades and multivariate hues  
From silky, sun-kissed blue-black, once despised, scorned, and  
bleached,

To chocolate, coffee, sepia browns,  
And light-bright, once highly desired, jealously coveted, and  
longed for.

Oh, Black women, claim your beauty!

I, too, sing America.

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*"I, Too, Sing America,"* Langston Hughes, 1926. Permission granted by  
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I, Too, Sing America

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.



Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen,"  
Then.

Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

"MY CORONAVIRUS WORLD: A DIARY #5", AUGUST 2020

### *A Suffrage Celebration*

On the morning of August 26, 100 years after the formal adoption of the 19th Amendment, I watched the unveiling of the wonderful Monumental Women statue prominently placed along Literary Walk in New York City's Central Park. While the park is home to several statues of fictional girls and women, Monumental Women is, incredibly, the only one dedicated to real women, making it a groundbreaking installation.

The 14-foot bronze statue depicts three stalwart leaders of the suffragist movement engrossed in deep conversation. Sojourner Truth (left) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (right) are seated at a table while Susan B. Anthony (center) stands looking on. These suffragists represent an army of women, known and unknown, who, for over seven decades after the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, fought for the right to vote.



I was pleased to learn that Meredith Bergmann, the sculptor who designed this imposing monument, added Sojourner Truth, a Black woman, after submission of her first design. Initially, she had proposed a two-person statue that featured Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Thankfully, she listened to voices raised in concern about the omission of women of color. The inclusion of Sojourner Truth addressed those concerns while visibly acknowledging the substantive role Black women played in the movement.

Had Bergmann not dealt with that issue, the absence of a woman of color would have repeated the whitewashing of history that happened in the early days of the suffrage movement. Back then, the white suffragists leaders marginalized Black women, denying them membership in the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA),



the main suffragist organization that Anthony and Stanton founded in 1869. Undeterred by their exclusion, Black women established their own organization, the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), in the same year.

How I wish I could travel back in time to talk with Black suffragists like Mary Eliza Church Terrell (1863-1954) and Ida Bell Wells-Barnett (1862-1931). These sisters in the movement embodied the 19<sup>th</sup> century ideal of dignified femininity at a time when Black women were being slanderously characterized as prostitutes, thieves, and liars. In everyday life they were generally denied the genteel protection that shielded white women no matter what their class. Thus, middle- and upper-class Black women developed a steely courage and strong-willed determination that challenged the prevailing stereotypes.

Mary Church Terrell, the daughter of former slaves, graduated with undergraduate and graduate degrees from Oberlin College, becoming one of the first African American women to earn a college degree. Her learned discourse, stylish grace, and elegant deportment rivalled that of the prominent white suffragists. Along with Harriet Tubman, Ida Bell Wells-Barnett, and Frances Ellen Walker Harper (see the Photo Gallery at the end), Terrell co-founded the NACW and served as the organization's first president. With the motto, "Lifting as We Climb," NACW had a social uplift agenda and raised funds for kindergartens and recreational programs for youngsters, childcare for mothers, and job training for women. Terrell spoke out frequently about the exclusion of Black women from NWSA.

I would've given anything to have heard Terrell's 1904 address to the International Congress of Women held in Berlin, Germany. In an oratorical tour de force, she delivered her speech in three languages, French, German, and English. The appreciative



international audience rewarded her with a standing ovation. In later life Terrell became the first Black woman admitted to the Washington chapter of the all-white American Association of University Women. Determined once again not to accept racial discrimination, in 1950 she sued a whites-only restaurant that refused to serve her, laying the groundwork for a court order that eventually ruled the practice unconstitutional.

Born into slavery, Ida Bell Wells-Barnett acquired a college education and became a newspaper publisher and courageous journalist. She and Terrell shared a friendship with Thomas Moss, who along with two business partners, was lynched in Memphis, Tennessee in 1892. Wells-Barnett wrote an exposé about the lynching. Thus, began her four decades-long anti-lynching campaign. Angered by her campaign, local whites destroyed her Memphis newspaper office and issued death threats. Yielding to the very real danger from angry whites, Wells relocated to Chicago in 1894 and continued her campaign.

Wells-Barnett was politically active in other organizations. In 1909 she attended the meeting of the Niagara Movement, which led to the founding of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Her friend Mary Church Terrell was also a charter member.

Still active at the age of 68, Wells-Barnett founded the Alpha Suffrage Club, the first Black suffrage organization in Chicago. At a 1913 national suffrage march in Washington, D.C., Wells once again showed true grit when she refused to walk at the back of the line as requested by Alice Paul (1885-1977), a white suffragist. Wells said, "Either I go with you or not at all." She continued, courageously, "I am not taking this stand because I personally wish for recognition. I am doing it for the future benefit of my whole race."



By their deeds as suffragists and passion for social causes, Mary Eliza Church Terrell and Ida Bell Wells-Barnett certainly benefit the whole race. What better way for me to celebrate passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment than by lifting up these iconic and luminous Black suffragists.



Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825-1911)



Mary Eliza Church Terrell (1863-1954)



Harriet Tubman (ca. 1820-1913)



Ida Bell Wells-Barnett (1862-1931)



“MY CORONAVIRUS WORLD: A DIARY #6”, SEPTEMBER 2020

*School Daze, School Daze, Good Ole Golden Rule Daze*

My! How this unyielding coronavirus has changed the school days of yore for which I’m feeling nostalgic. As a teacher for many years in elementary school to college classrooms, I’m very concerned about the loss of in-school instruction, especially for those students of color who were below grade level in the basic subjects like reading, writing, and arithmetic before the pandemic hit. Even if absent from the classroom for a relatively short period of time, the most academically vulnerable youngsters are bound to fall farther and farther behind.

Our Guilford County Schools (GCS) serve nearly 73,000 students at 126 sites, which makes it the third-largest district in North Carolina. In mid-March, when the virus forced the schools to close, classes went online. Since then, the system has grappled with the challenges of virtual teaching and, specifically, how to support students who lack internet access at home. The principal at one elementary school told me that less than half of his students were participating in the virtual classes on any given day. In August, when the fall academic year began, teaching online continued. In-person classes with limited hours were to resume in late October. Even if classes restart then, students will have lost almost a year of in-class instruction. This is lamentable, while at the same time understandably necessary given the significant health treats the coronavirus poses for students, their teachers, and school staff.

While we await the full reopening of schools, it’s estimated that about 5,000 students are without electronic devices at home. To address that yawning gap between the haves and have nots, the system has ordered 79,000 laptops and tablets to loan out, but those





devices aren't expected until December. To immediately remedy the situation GCS has made several options available to students and their families. First, the system created Wi-Fi hot spots in school parking lots, then followed that with the opening of Saturday internet hubs at 64 elementary, middle, high, and specialty schools. Next, the system started 13 on-site learning centers where students will have high-speed internet access and can complete their virtual classroom assignments.

But, despite these herculean efforts, there are still hurdles for at-risk students and their parents. For one, students must bring their own devices to the internet hubs, and another is the requirement to register online to attend one of the learning centers. Registration could be an obstacle for students without electronic devices and lacking Wi-Fi.

Reportedly, only a few students (51) showed up on the first weekend that the Saturday internet hubs debuted. I hope more will show up as word spreads. Conceivably, transportation to the sites could be a problem. Another possible snag is the requirement that parents accompany their kindergarten through fifth grade children and remain at the hubs with them. This could be tough for single parents who have other young children at home or who work on weekends. Before the virus struck, the Greensboro Public Library had computers available for public use at its eight locations, but the library closed at the same time the schools did. In late June when it allowed patrons back inside to Grab and Go, computer usage was off limits.

Notwithstanding these very real challenges, there's a glimmer of hope that has eased my pessimism somewhat. Owing to the scientific evidence that younger children are less likely to be infected with the virus and to spread it to others, Governor Roy Cooper recently announced that on October 5 public school districts throughout the



State have the option, with proper safety precautions and moderate social distancing, to restart in-person instruction. Schools have the choice to combine in-class instruction with remote teaching. With that leeway, GCS Superintendent Sharon Contreras and the Guilford County Board of Education have settled on a phased plan. On September 29, pre-K children will begin daily instruction on a voluntary basis. Kindergartners will follow on October 5, also strictly voluntary. Other elementary and middle school students would begin attending on certain days starting October 20. High school students will begin on a staggered schedule on January 20 at the earliest.

Not surprisingly, the Guilford County Association of Educators (GCAE) has weighed in calling for safeguards beyond those proposed by the superintendent. GCAE has requested that N95 respirator masks be made available to staff, that buildings be well-ventilated, and that information on COVID-19 case numbers in schools and in the communities surrounding schools be regularly shared online. In advance, GCAE wants test positivity rates in the county to be 3% or less for 14 days. Contreras has proposed a two-week positivity rate of less than 5%. These differences will have to be negotiated by all parties as they track the fluctuating trajectory of the virus.

In my mind there are other concerns that could slow the reopening. I imagine that some parents, being extra cautious and guarded, will wait for an effective and safe vaccine before allowing their children to return to schools. There is also the vexed question of whether parents will get their children inoculated when a vaccine becomes available. In recent years, a growing anti-vaccine movement has resulted in rising numbers of parents refusing to immunize their children because of possible adverse physical effects. They have spurned existing vaccines proven to be effective against



such common childhood diseases as measles, mumps, and rubella. Will parents trust a newly developed COVID-19 vaccine that is being rushed to market at warp speed?

My best guess? I'm hoping that by spring 2021 we'll have a highly effective clinically tested vaccine, approved by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It'll take large numbers of vaccinated people to get the herd immunity going to slow the spread of COVID-19. It's then, and only then, that we can expect the good ole golden rule daze to return.

“MY CORONAVIRUS WORLD: A DIARY #7”, OCTOBER 2020

***Shalom, We Pray!***

O, God of Hosts, we confess that our nation is awash in enmity toward the other, beset by violence daily, and scarred by oppression toward the least among us. We come to you earnestly praying for Peace, for Justice, for Reconciliation.

Remove the scales from our eyes so that we can clearly see the wounded around us. Break the spear of satisfied complacency that keeps us from tackling the bitter suffering that afflicts humankind.

Shalom, we pray!

Help us to shine light where the forces of darkness lurk, where chaos and destruction reign. Suffer us to intrude in the corridors of power where reason is crumbling under the weight of false claims, twisted facts, ignored truths, and warped creeds. Arm us to mend these broken places.

We come seeking Peace in a deeply divided world that separates us one from another and cleaves us from a right relationship with you. We come thirsting for Justice on behalf of those casually



wronged and indifferently treated. We come yearning for Reconciliation.

Shalom, we pray!

As ruler of the universe, you are our refuge and strength. Keep us from despairing as we traverse these tense and troubled times overwhelmed by the COVID-19 pandemic and concussed with racial animus. Fill our pained hearts and distracted minds to overflowing with your calm spirit. Then move us to use our time fruitfully, our gifts unselfishly, and our talents lavishly to bring about Peace, Justice, and Reconciliation.

We offer this heartfelt prayer in the name of the One who is, the One who was, and the One who is to come.

Shalom, we pray!

“MY CORONAVIRUS WORLD: A DIARY #8”, NOVEMBER 2020





Whew! Election day 2020 is finally over, ending an exhausting political season. Attempts at voter suppression, claims of voter fraud, protests over police brutality, arguments about “defunding” the police, looting of businesses, and antebellum-style vigilante violence. These less-than-flattering images of American democracy have fed 24-hour news cycles, jammed social media postings, and reverberated around the globe. Not democracy’s finest hour.

So, on election day I awoke mentally weary. Too many solicitation letters and slick brochures had littered my mailbox. Further depressing my mood were the repetitive campaign speeches and embarrassing televised debates in which candidates wiggled out of incisive questioning to deliver well-rehearsed talking points. This political pandemonium, along with the spiking coronavirus numbers (12-million-plus cases and over a quarter million deaths), had laid waste to my peace of mind.

It’s amazing that despite this toxic environment--maybe because of it--we had the highest voter turnout in over a century. In North Carolina 71.2% of eligible voters cast ballots, breaking a 40-year record set in 2008 (65.5%), the last time a Democrat presidential candidate, Barack Obama, carried the state.

My hope, unrealistically, was for an indisputable winner in the presidential race on election night, but that wasn’t to be. It took several days and recounts in a few battleground states to confirm that Democrat Joe Biden had won. Biden garnered 306 electoral votes from 25 states and the District of Columbia, along with 79.8 million popular votes (51.1%). The Republican incumbent won 232 electoral votes and 73.7 million popular votes (47.2%). So far, the president has refused to concede the election, thus entrapping the country, as anticipated, in a disorderly, fractious transition of power.



Yet, notwithstanding the drama and angst of politics, there's also been a joyous counterpoint. Since September, I've participated in a racial reconciliation program, called Truthful Talk. It's a revealing four-part series of frank, open discussions about African American history from 1619 to the present, talking about uncomfortable truths in searching, respectful dialogues. Truthful Talk was created by a working group at St. Matthews United Methodist Church, a majority African American congregation, in partnership with my predominately white faith community at West Market Street United Methodist Church (WMC).

I was pleased when Jill Alventosa-Brown, the associate pastor at WMC, agreed to co-facilitate one of the talks with me. Our two-hour session on November 21<sup>st</sup> spanned the Jim Crow era to the 1960s civil rights movement, roughly the end of the Civil War in 1865 to the launch of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955. Among other topics, we covered the use of literacy tests, poll taxes, and outright intimidation to block southern Blacks from access to the ballot box. This obstructionism didn't change until passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The landmark voting act exponentially multiplied the number of Black voters. That upsurge has disconcerted Republican legislators because many of those votes have gone to Democrat candidates. Thus, a century and a half after Reconstruction, disenfranchising people of color, not just in the South, is high on the legislative agenda of conservative lawmakers. How does voter suppression in the 21<sup>st</sup> century look? Requiring photo IDs on the pretext of thwarting voter fraud, although illegal voting nationwide is almost nonexistent, is a new Jim Crow law. In fact, in 2019 U.S. District Judge Loretta Biggs nixed North Carolina's 2018 voter identification law, writing in her decision that "*North Carolina has a sordid*



*history of racial discrimination and voter suppression stretching back to the time of slavery, through the era of Jim Crow, and, crucially, continuing up to the present day.*” While hoping the courts will keep on blocking these unjust laws, I’m equally sure that voter suppression tactics, in one form or another, will persist.

Back to Truthful Talk. Researching 19th century voter literacy tests got me musing about a modern-day version for Guilford County voters. Initially, I thought about making it tongue-in-cheek. That quickly morphed into a serious test, asking questions about how our government works, questions that a well-informed voter should be able to answer correctly. See what I came up with and even take the test yourself. Answers are at the end, and only you’ll know how you did.



### **Guilford County Voter Literacy Test**

Instructions: This test is given to anyone wishing to vote in Guilford County elections. Select the correct answers from the multiple choices. Do not leave any question unanswered. Be careful as one wrong answer denotes failure of the test. You have 10 minutes to complete the test.

1. The City of Greensboro is governed by the:  
☐ *Mayor;*  
☐ *City Manager;*  
☐ *Mayor and City Council members;*  
☐ *Mayor, City Council members, and City Manager.*
  
2. The Greensboro Mayor and eight City Council members each serves a:  
☐ *2-year term;*  
☐ *3-year term;*  
☐ *4-year term.*
  
3. The Greensboro City Council regularly meets:  
☐ *weekly;*  
☐ *once monthly;*  
☐ *twice monthly.*





4. The nine-member Guilford County Board of Commissioners meets:  
\_\_\_ *weekly*;  
\_\_\_ *once monthly*;  
\_\_\_ *twice monthly*.
5. The Board of Commissioners approves and/or amends the Greensboro City budget:  
\_\_\_ *Yes*;  
\_\_\_ *No*
6. The nine-member Board of Commissioners each serves a:  
\_\_\_ *2-year term*;  
\_\_\_ *3-year term*;  
\_\_\_ *4-year term*.
7. What are the three North Carolina State branches of government:  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_, and  
\_\_\_\_\_.
8. Since 1789, how many amendments have been added to the U.S. Constitution?  
\_\_\_ *10*;  
\_\_\_ *25*;  
\_\_\_ *27*;  
\_\_\_ *None*



9. To serve as president, one must be (check all that apply):
- ☐ *a U.S. citizen (natural-born or naturalized);*
  - ☐ *at least 35 years old;*
  - ☐ *a resident in the United States for at least 14 years.*
10. A person would be disqualified from holding the office of the president under which of the following conditions (check all that apply):
- ☐ *upon conviction in an impeachment case;*
  - ☐ *one, or more, parent is foreign born;*
  - ☐ *running for a third term;*
  - ☐ *has been convicted of a state or federal crime.*



### **Answers: Guilford County Voter Literacy Test**

1. The City of Greensboro is governed by the:  
☐ *Mayor;*  
☐ *City Manager;*  
☒ *Mayor and City Council members;*  
☒ *Mayor, City Council members, and City Manager.*
  
2. The Greensboro Mayor and eight City Council members each serves a:  
☐ *2-year term;*  
☐ *3-year term;*  
☒ *4-year term.*
  
3. The Greensboro City Council regularly meets:  
☐ *weekly;*  
☐ *once monthly;*  
☒ *twice monthly.*
  
4. The nine-member Guilford County Board of Commissioners meets:  
☐ *weekly;*  
☐ *once monthly;*  
☒ *twice monthly.*



5. The Board of Commissioners approves and/or amends the Greensboro City budget:  
\_\_\_ *Yes*;  
\_X\_ *No*
6. The nine-member Board of Commissioners each serves a:  
\_\_\_ *2-year term*;  
\_\_\_ *3-year term*;  
\_X\_ *4-year term*.
7. What are the three North Carolina State branches of government:  
\_\_\_ *executive* \_\_\_;  
\_\_\_ *judicial* \_\_\_, and  
\_\_\_ *legislative* \_\_\_.
8. Since 1789, how many amendments have been added to the U.S. Constitution?  
\_\_\_ *10*;  
\_\_\_ *25*;  
\_X\_ *27*;  
\_\_\_ *None*
9. To serve as president, one must be (check all that apply):  
\_\_\_ *a U.S. citizen (natural-born or naturalized) [A naturalized citizen is not eligible to serve.];*  
\_X\_ *at least 35 years old*;  
\_X\_ *a resident in the United States for at least 14 years*.



10. A person would be disqualified from holding the office of the president under which of the following conditions (check all that apply):

☒ *upon conviction in an impeachment case;*

☐ *one, or more, parent is foreign born;*

☒ *running for a third term;*

☐ *has been convicted of a state or federal crime.*



## “MY CORONAVIRUS WORLD: A DIARY #9”, DECEMBER 2020

### *Auld Lang Syne: Farewell and Good-bye 2020*

The twelfth month of 2020 has finally arrived. The last 31 days in a year that started off as ordinary but will long be remembered as unprecedented. Who knew!

Quite early in the year, we began hearing more and more about a mysterious respiratory illness that had invaded a place called Wuhan, a populous city in Central China, killing some 300 plus. While devastating for the families who lost loved ones, it wasn't overly alarming for the rest of us, if the relatively low number of reported deaths could be trusted. But rapidly the illness, identified as a coronavirus and christened COVID-19, spread across China on its unstoppable march around the globe. In March, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic and by mid-December we had 73.4 million cases worldwide with 1.63 million deaths. In the U.S., there were over 16.7 million cases, claiming the lives of more than 300,000. That's an average of about 2,400 deaths a day. And the numbers are growing exponentially. Suddenly, an ordinary year turned extraordinary.

The state of North Carolina reported its first positive COVID-19 case on March 3rd, and Guilford County's first case came less than three weeks after that (March 19th). Governor Roy Cooper issued stay-at-home orders, recommended face masking, and encouraged frequent hand washing. Yet, by mid-December, the state had more than 446,000 cases with close to 6,000 deaths. This month Guilford County recorded the third highest number of cases (20,629) and deaths (276) among the state's 100 counties.

As an African American, I'm particularly concerned because the data show that Blacks are more adversely affected by the coronavirus



and are dying at higher rates. For example, African Americans, who comprise 21% of the state's population, made up a third (35%) of COVID-19 deaths. Nationally the death rate for Blacks is more than 2.7 times that for whites. I'm thankful that several life-saving vaccines are on the way.

Fighting against the virus at warp speed, by the end of March the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services had started allocating large sums of money for vaccine research and development. In an astonishing feat, three promising vaccines were quickly developed, tested, and manufactured by Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, and AstraZeneca. In a scant nine months, a limited supply of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine arrived in North Carolina, having emergency approval by the Food and Drug Administration. Faye Williams, a 65-year-old African American nurse, who came out of retirement to work at the Duke University Hospital, received the first dose. She hoped that by getting vaccinated first it would encourage other African Americans, who might have doubts about the safety of the drug, to get inoculated.

With vaccines becoming widely available, have we turned the corner on COVID-19? I'm hoping so. You see, December is my birth month and the 21st my birthday, which is also the date of the winter solstice. This year the solstice is extra special because of a rare astronomical phenomenon that will illuminate the night sky. Known as the Bethlehem or Christmas star, it's making an appearance for the first time in nearly 800 years. What exactly is happening? Well, the two largest planets in our solar system, Jupiter and Saturn, will appear to be close together, thus creating a shining star in the firmament. These planets will actually be a whopping 400 million miles apart. It's our line of sight from Earth that gives the impression that they're close.



With the magnificent Bethlehem star in the night sky, the magic of Christmas a few days away, and the grim reaper of a year winding down, maybe it's time to exhale and celebrate. Personally, I'm wishing for healthy holidays and a blessed 2021!

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Lea E. Williams, author, scholar, and teacher began her career teaching sixth grade in Milwaukee, then moved into higher education administration at the United Negro College Fund Headquarters in New York City. Relocating to Greensboro, North Carolina, as an administrator at Bennett College, Williams organized and directed the National African American Women's Leadership Institute, a leadership program for women focused on community service. After retiring as a senior administrator from North Carolina A&T State University, she taught English to Speakers of Other Languages at Guilford Technical Community College.

Williams is the author of three books and dozens of articles on education. *Servants of the People: The 1960s Legacy of African American Leadership* (1996 & 2009) profiles individuals who were prominent in the 1960s civil rights movement. Her newest book, *We Who Believe in Freedom: The Life and Times of Ella Baker* (2017 &





2019), is a juvenile biography for middle school and high school students. Competitively selected, *We Who Believe in Freedom* is the second in a series, True Tales for Young Readers, published by the North Carolina Office of Archives and History. In 2019, the Baker biography received a Making Digital Progress award from the *Library Journal*.

In community service, Dr. Williams has served as president of the Friends of the Greensboro Public Library, and on the boards of numerous nonprofit organizations, including the Community Foundation of Greater Greensboro, Greensboro Community TV, and Greensboro History Museum.