

# Amelia Boynton Robinson: Her Love Of Freedom Is 'A Higher Power'

by Marianna Wertz

*In celebration of the 90th birthday of this living heroine of the civil rights movement, and recipient of the Martin Luther King Freedom Medal, a presentation/slide show on her life was offered to the ICLC/Schiller conference by her longtime friend and editor of her autobiography.*

Ten years ago, in July 1991, I was honored to work with Amelia Boynton Robinson to publish an updated edition of her 1979 autobiography, *Bridge Across Jordan*—which, unfortunately, is out of print today. We've been close friends ever since. In my Editor's Introduction, I wrote the following words, which still ring true.

"Editing this second edition has brought me countless happy hours in association with Amelia Robinson, who must be counted among the true pearls of our nation. She is a living heroine and the embodiment of what Dr. King identified as *agapē*."

*Agapē* is the Greek word for love, translated as "charity" in St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

In Amelia's introduction to *Bridge Across Jordan*, she dedicated that St. Paul passage on *agapē* to Lyndon LaRouche, whom she called "the epitome of *agapē*." Lyn was in prison when this book was published. She compared the trials and crosses, which she and her first husband, Samuel William Boynton, had to bear in the civil rights movement, to LaRouche's punishment for "trying to save the world from collapse, which will surely happen if injustice and hate are not stamped out."

In Helga Zepp-LaRouche's foreword to *Bridge Across Jordan*, she wrote, "If some day in the not too distant future, the true history of the United States were to be written, then the name of Amelia Boynton Robinson should take a prominent place therein. When the memory shall have vanished, of all the mediocre and corrupt politicians, who in their time were so much played up by the media when America found itself in decline, then Amelia will be known and loved by future generations. It will be said of her that she was one of those extraordinary individuals who saved the honor of the United States, by fearless resistance to the tyranny that was trampling on human rights."

In the Spring of 1990, in the heat of their joint political battle, Amelia and Helga mutually adopted each other, as

mother and daughter. Helga wrote, "We both feel an immense gratitude that we have found each other."

## A Warrior Angel

I hope you will also see why, after celebrating her 90th birthday on Aug. 18, Amelia embodies the words of that old Negro Spiritual, "I'm so busy serving my master, I ain't got time to die."

Or, as Amelia herself says, "It's better to wear out than to rust out."

George Platts, Amelia's father, was born in 1866, just after the Civil War, in Brunson, South Carolina. He descended from Africans and Native Americans, with some German (thus the name Platts) thrown in for good measure. Her



*Ready to put her life on the line for a principle: Amelia Boynton Robinson, unconscious, is held by another marcher on the Edmund Pettus Bridge into Montgomery, Alabama on "Bloody Sunday," March 7, 1965. A leader of the march, she had been run over, tear-gassed, and clubbed by mounted state police. The apparent defeat, was only apparent.*



*A victory for the nation. Mrs. Robinson shakes hands with President Lyndon Johnson at the White House in the Fall of 1965. Johnson had just signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the direct result of the Alabama and Mississippi struggles.*

mother, Anna Eliza Hicks Platts, was born in 1874 in Beaufort, South Carolina. She too descended from Africans, Native Americans (in this case Cherokees), and Germans (her father's name was Anthony Eikerenkötter Hicks). So, you can see why, when asked to fill out a form as to her "race," Amelia always proudly and defiantly writes, "human."

Her great-grandfather, Bart Hicks, came to America from Africa as a free man, and a professional builder. You can still see blocks of his strong, towering buildings, over 125 years old, standing today in Beaufort, S.C. His son, her grandfather, Anthony Hicks, had a half-brother who was a slave and bought his freedom, named Robert Hicks Smalls. Robert Smalls, Amelia's great-uncle, became one of the first African-American members of the U.S. Congress, elected during Reconstruction. Robert Smalls is the real-life role model for Joshua Terrell, the hero in Amelia's celebrated play, *Through the Years*.

Amelia was born in Savannah, Georgia, in 1911, one of seven children. . . . Amelia today is the last surviving member of her immediate family, though there are hundreds of children, nieces, nephews, and grandchildren, at least one of whom is with us here today.

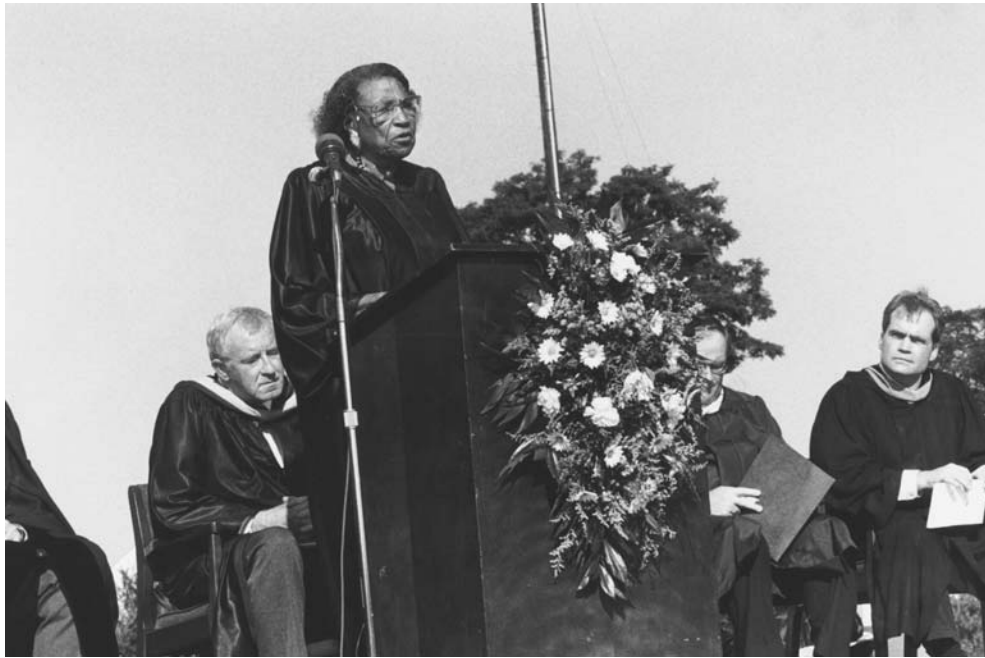
### Tuskegee Institute

The institution that was central to Amelia's intellectual development, and in whose backyard she lives today, is Tuskegee Institute, which opened its doors in Alabama on July 4, 1881. Founded by Booker T. Washington (1865-1915), Tuskegee Institute is also a keystone institution in the history of African-Americans.

The inscription on the front pedestal of the Booker T. Washington monument, shown here, unveiled on April 5,



*"A voteless people is a hopeless people." The first black woman ever to seek a Congressional seat in Alabama, Amelia Boynton ran in 1964 to try to increase the black voter registration level in her District, which was only 5%. She won 10% of the vote.*



*Mrs. Robison gives the 2001 commencement address to the graduating class of Loudoun Valley High School in Virginia.*

1922 at Tuskegee Institute, expresses well what this institution stood for: “He lifted the veil of ignorance from his people and pointed the way to progress through education and industry.” One of Booker T. Washington’s mottoes, which heavily influenced Dr. Martin Luther King and his movement, was, “Cast down your bucket where you are, in making friends of all races by whom we are surrounded.”

George Washington Carver (1864-1943), rightly known as “The Black Leonardo,” was brought to Tuskegee Institute by Booker T. Washington, to teach. An agricultural chemist, Carver is world-renowned for his discoveries of new uses for the peanut, sweet potato, and soybean. His peanut oil was a crucial contribution to the World War II effort, used by Henry Ford in his factories as a lubricant. Here you see him at his laboratory at Tuskegee Institute. Amelia wrote of him, “One could never fully appreciate Dr. George Washington Carver . . . unless one had the opportunity to know him personally. In walking and talking with him, as we did, we would see the light of hope for the world and feel the closeness of communication with God. His life stood out as one of forgetting self and wanting to give service, particularly to the poor.”

Both Amelia and her first husband, Bill Boynton, studied under Dr. Carver. They asked Dr. Carver to be the godfather of their son, whom they named Bruce Carver Boynton.

Bruce Carver Boynton, Amelia’s son, launched the first test case leading to the Supreme Court ruling that outlawed segregation in interstate travel, and today is a prominent civil rights attorney in Selma. Bruce’s daughter, Amelia’s granddaughter, is named Carver Boynton. Alice Boynton, Amelia’s daughter-in-law, was also a stalwart in the civil rights struggle, until her recent death.

### **Laying the Foundation for Voting Rights Act**

Amelia met Samuel William Boynton when they were both working in rural Dallas County, Alabama in 1930. Amelia was teaching home economics to the rural poor, and Bill Boynton was the county extension agent. They married six years later, and continued their joint work to bring education, a higher standard of living, and voting rights to the African-American poor, most of whom worked as sharecroppers on large white-owned plantations.

The battle for voting rights in Alabama started long before Martin Luther King arrived. Bill Boynton was president for registration and voting, of the Fourth Congressional District. The Alabama Lawyers Association created the S.W. Boynton Lay Justice Award to commemorate what they called his “lifelong commitment to uplifting the quality of life for blacks in the Selma area.” Mr. Boynton, they wrote, “laid the historical foundation for the Voting Rights Act.” Amelia Boynton Robinson has been a registered voter since 1934.

In the 1930s, Amelia wrote her play, “Through the Years,” to raise money for a community center that would be open to blacks in racially segregated Selma. She and others travelled to Washington, D.C. in the Great Depression, to contact the Works Progress Administration and other funding sources. After these efforts were stopped by white citizens, she conceived of this play—a dramatic rendition of the birth of the African-American spiritual, told through the life of a freed slave—to raise the needed money. Its first performance to a large group, in 1936, was at the Hudson High School in Selma. The Schiller Institute has performed this play in many cities in recent years. The latest, with the youngest cast, was performed in Leesburg, Virginia in late July this year.



*In a scene repeated all over the world, Amelia Robinson signs copies of her autobiography for inspired students and teachers at an elementary school in Virginia, who have just been touched directly by their nation's most vital history.*

In 1963, Bill Boynton succumbed to a series of strokes, brought on by the years of physical and mental harassment which he and Amelia endured. The first successful mass meeting for voting rights in Selma evolved in the wake of Bill Boynton's death, and as a tribute to his lifelong commitment to uplifting the quality of life for blacks in Dallas County.

By 1964, Amelia was helping to stage mass meetings for voting rights. She began receiving anonymous, threatening phone calls. She was greeted on the street with sneers and jeers. It only made her more determined to fight for what she knew was right, secure in her feeling that God had groomed her for this struggle.

On Feb. 29, 1964, Amelia entered the race for the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Congress. Here you see some of the press coverage. Only 5% of blacks in her district were registered voters, and she thought this race would help get more African-Americans to register. She was the first black woman ever to seek a seat in Congress from Alabama, and also the first woman, white or black, to run on the Democratic ticket in the state. With her motto, "A voteless people is a hopeless people," she won 10% of the vote.

### **King and Bloody Sunday**

Amelia first met Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott King in June 1954, when her sister-in-law, a member of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, in Montgomery, Alabama, invited Amelia to meet their new pastor and his wife. It was at this church where the first meeting of the Birmingham civil rights movement leaders was held, on Dec. 2, 1955, just after Rosa Parks refused to give her bus seat to a white man. The church was bombed on Jan. 30, 1956.

In December 1964, with voting rights abuses in Selma escalating into jailings, beatings, and murder, Amelia and other leading black citizens of Dallas County, laid plans for a mammoth mass meeting, to be held in Selma in January, with Dr. Martin Luther King as the main speaker. Amelia invited Dr. King to make his headquarters at her home, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference moved into her office. On Jan. 18, 1965, several hundred people, mostly African Americans, left Brown's Chapel AME Church on Sylvan Street in Selma, led by Dr. King, and began the most famous chapter of the American civil rights movement.

On Bloody Sunday, March 7, 1965, Amelia Boynton helped lead the famous first march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The march was broken up when horse-mounted Alabama State troopers, wielding tear gas and clubs, charged into the marchers.

Amelia was gassed and beaten. The wire photo of her left for dead on Edmund Pettus Bridge, which went around the world on the news that night, helped spark the outpouring of support for the civil rights movement, which culminated in the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. One of the little-known casualties of that day is that the gas, which seared Amelia's lungs, permanently damaged her lovely soprano singing voice.

The Voting Rights Act was signed into law in 1965. Amelia travelled to Washington, D.C. to meet with President Lyndon Baines Johnson, after he signed it into law.

Jumping ahead 35 years, Amelia spoke at a press conference at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C., on March 14, 2000. She and other international observers of the March 11, 2000 Michigan Democratic Presidential Caucus,

released their findings, documenting how the Voting Rights Act, for which she and others shed so much blood, was being ripped to shreds by the Gore Democrats, to stop Lyndon LaRouche's 2001 Presidential campaign.

### Joining Forces with LaRouche

Amelia first met the LaRouche movement in 1983, attending a meeting in Washington, D.C., where she ran into LaRouche's Eastern States coordinator, Dennis Speed, who, more or less promptly, recruited her. She told Dennis that Lyndon LaRouche's ideas reminded her of what Dr. King was trying to achieve in the civil rights movement.

A year later, in 1984, the Schiller Institute was born, and Amelia became first, a board member, then later, its vice-chairwoman. Later in 1984, Amelia, joined by LaRouche's Midwest coordinator, Sheila Jones, and Hulan Jack, the former Borough President of Manhattan and a Schiller Institute board member until his death, went on a fact-finding mission and tour of West Berlin on behalf of the Schiller Institute. This was one year after Lyndon LaRouche had warned the Soviet Union that, if they did not accept his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) proposal, as announced by President Reagan in 1983, the Soviet system would collapse. Amelia and her delegation called for the reunification of the two Germanys and the toppling of the Berlin Wall, which, as LaRouche had forecast, occurred five years later.

She returned to a reunited Germany in the Spring of 1990,

meeting with thousands of citizens of both the former East and West. She began her tour in the week before East Germany voted in a new, non-communist government, and was there to celebrate the reunification.

In 1992, Amelia went to the embattled country of Croatia, where she met with members of the Croatian Mothers for Peace, and extended the Schiller Institute's support for their fight for justice and sovereignty.

Over the past decade, Amelia has participated in hundreds of Schiller Institute events around the world, inspiring them by her presence. Of special importance is her influence on school-age children. She has addressed thousands of children in recent years, inspiring them with her own life's work, to learn the truth about this nation's history and to act for the good in the world. She is always greeted by these children as the embodiment of living history.

Her trip in the Spring of this year, to Sweden, Denmark, Germany, and Italy, brought hundreds of Europeans to join in LaRouche's fight for a New Bretton Woods system and the Eurasian Land-Bridge. A little closer to home, here she is, giving the commencement address before 3,000 students, teachers, and parents at the Loudoun Valley High School, 40 miles from here, in June of this year.

I only hope that all of you will have the opportunity to get to know her as I have. Your life will be immeasurably enriched by the experience, as the world is enriched by the sublime and world-historical life of this remarkable woman.

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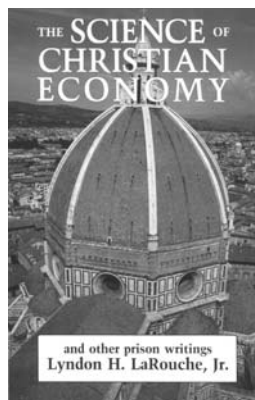
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