

Women of the Arkansas Delta

African American women's stories and experiences have long been marginalized in the history of the twentieth century Arkansas Delta. Their contributions to their communities however, were numerous and their lives reveal much about the critical uplift activism they performed in rural spaces. What follows below are examples of three such women: Maeleen Arrant, Ethel Dawson, and Annie Zachary Pike.

Born in Fordyce (Dallas County), in 1902, Maeleen Clay Arrant, a former Jeanes Supervising Industrial Teacher, was educated at the Dallas County training school. In 1939 she received an elementary education degree from Arkansas A.M. & N College in Pine Bluff (Jefferson County). In 1946, Arrant earned a master's degree in curriculum and instruction from the University of Minnesota. Early in her career, she taught at a special experimental school for African Americans established by the Southern Education Foundation. As a Jeanes Teacher, Arrant impressed the importance of safe and sanitary homes upon African Americans. She also stealthily engaged in political activism by telling black people, "you'd never be a citizen until you paid" taxes. Maeleen Arrant died in 2000 in Dallas, Texas.

Born on a farm in Lincoln County in 1907, Ethel Beatrice Ross attended high school and college at Arkansas A.M. & N. College from which she graduated in 1940 with a degree in home economics. She was a home demonstration agent in Gould in the 1940s and but began working for the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America (NCC) in 1946 which intensified her civil rights activism among rural African Americans.

Ross encouraged agrarian blacks to engage in political self-efficacy, despite and because of their impoverished circumstances. As she recalled, "We were always encouraging people to pay their poll taxes and vote." Dawson also utilized Christian doctrine to justify rural activism and to persuade African Americans to pursue other vocations as agriculture became increasingly mechanized. When she left the NCC in 1956, Dawson increased her civil rights activism by working with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) when they first arrived in Arkansas. She continued to labor for African Americans' political and economic access until her death in 1984.

Annie Zachary Pike, was born in 1931 to farmers in Big Creek, Arkansas in Phillips County. First educated at Trenton Elementary School, she graduated in 1948 from the Consolidated White River Academy, an African American coeducational boarding school in Monroe County and later earned a nursing degree from the Homer G. Phillips Hospital School of Nursing in St. Louis, Missouri. She married black plantation owner Grover Cleveland Zachary in 1952, and later assumed control over their farming operation when he became ill.

Also a community activist, in the 1960s, Zachary Pike became involved in the Arkansas Republican Party. As the Phillips County Republican Party coordinator, she helped Winthrop Rockefeller become Arkansas's first Republican governor since Reconstruction when he was elected in 1967. Deeply concerned about African Americans political involvement, Zachary Pike attended the 1972 Republican National Convention, the National Black Political Convention, and ran for the Arkansas State Senate. Annie Zachary Pike, who turned 90 in May 2021, resides in Marvell, Arkansas.

As Women of the Arkansas Delta, Maeleen Arrant, Ethel Dawson, and Annie Zachary Pike all engaged in individual and collective activism to challenge the pervasive issues affecting rural black communities. Their stories lift their voices from obscurity and in doing so, gift us with a much richer, deeply textured, and nuanced history of the Arkansas Delta.

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For more information see, *Better Living By Their Own Bootstraps: Black Women's Activism in Rural Arkansas, 1914-1965*, (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2021).
<https://www.uapress.com/product/better-living-by-their-own-bootstraps/>

Also by Cherisse Jones-Branch, editor: *Arkansas Women: Their Lives and Times*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2018).

