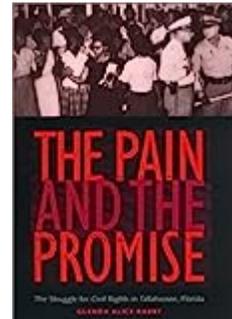




**Glenda Alice Rabby.** *The Pain and the Promise: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Tallahassee, Florida.* Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1999. xii + 330 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2051-9.



**Reviewed by** Christopher Caplinger (Georgia Southern University)

**Published on** H-Urban (March, 2001)

## The Making of a Black Civil Rights Movement

### The Making of a Black Civil Rights Movement

Tallahassee, Florida, does not belong to the pantheon of southern cities that come to mind when we think of the major arenas of the black civil rights movement, and Glenda Alice Rabby's work on the Florida state capital will not likely change this perception. Rabby does not maintain, as Glenn Eskew did for Birmingham [1], that the campaign to end segregation in Tallahassee shaped the national movement in a substantial way. She also does not argue that the civil rights movement in Tallahassee was representative of any larger pattern throughout the urban South. What she does provide is a detailed description of how residents in one small southern city fought for and against the black civil rights movement during the 1950s and 1960s. The story is an engaging one, although it ultimately leaves the reader wanting more.

The personalities that shaped the civil rights movement in Tallahassee are at the core of the story of *The Pain and the Promise*. Although she is not explicit about it, Rabby's larger argument seems to be that the success or failure of a civil rights movement in a local community is primarily due to the personalities of those who

lead and fight against it. Students of civil rights movements in other cities will find familiar characters in Tallahassee, such as C. K. Steele, a minister who rallied black opposition to segregation on the Cities Transit bus system and became the first vice president of Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and Patricia Stephens Due, a student at Florida A & M University (FAMU) and CORE activist who inspired many in the movement. Rabby also provides detailed depictions of powerful whites, such as Malcolm Johnson, editor of the conservative *Tallahassee Democrat*, and progressive governor LeRoy Collins.

Although it makes for interesting reading, a narrow focus on narrative and personality creates problems for what essentially is a community study. Rabby's work contains surprisingly little detail about Tallahassee itself. The book contains no maps at all, an omission that makes it difficult to fully appreciate the context in which Rabby's story takes place. Rabby seems to assume that her readers are familiar with Tallahassee and its institutions. Those of us who are not are left to guess the relative locations of the central venues of her story such as

Florida State University, FAMU, and Woolworth's. During her treatment of the 1956 bus boycotts, we learn that the FAMU and Frenchtown bus routes were patronized predominantly by African Americans, but Rabby does not explain where the routes went. In fact, the reader can only determine that Frenchtown is a black neighborhood through inference roughly 100 pages later. The book is also lean on important descriptive statistics. The author provides data on the city population and the racial composition of city, but never systematically. She often literally relegates population figures to parenthetical remarks (pp. 2, 165), and thus obscures the changes over time in these figures.

Another example of how Rabby divorces narrative from a social investigation of the community is the lack of any sustained treatment of Tallahassee's racial geography. Residential segregation was (and is) inextricably linked to the larger problems that the black civil rights movement sought to address, but Rabby treats it only in passing. For instance, she states that the 1956 bus boycott was a particular burden for black domestic workers who had to walk significant distances to their places of employment, but she does not explain this as a product of residential segregation. Through citations of newspaper sources recounting voting patterns for the election of 1964, Rabby does provide a rough indication of residential patterns in Tallahassee. During this election, blacks accounted for nearly half of the voters in Precinct A ("the northwestern quadrant of the city") and more than half in Precinct D ("the southwest quadrant of the city"). In contrast, Precincts B and C, which constituted the east-

ern part of the city, had "few Negro registrants" (p. 170). Although voting registrations are not a proxy for residential patterns, especially in this era, this was Rabby's most concrete statement about where whites and blacks lived in Tallahassee. Residential segregation is central to much of the civil rights story; it provides the context for understanding the segregation and exclusion of African Americans in other aspects of life in the city. By not treating it more directly, Rabby leaves a great deal of the story untold.

Subtitled *The Struggle for Civil Rights in Tallahassee, Florida*, the book's scope is more narrow than the title would lead one to believe, covering only the black civil rights movement from 1954 until about 1970 in detail. As I read the book during the presidential election imbroglio in Florida and heard the name of C.K. Steele invoked on more than one occasion by African-American leaders in Tallahassee, it was difficult to believe that the struggle had lain dormant for so long. Nonetheless, Rabby provides an engaging account of rapid change in a small but important state capital in the South that should be read and appreciated by many.

Notes:

[1] Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

Copyright (c) 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

**Citation:** Christopher Caplinger. Review of Rabby, Glenda Alice, *The Pain and the Promise: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Tallahassee, Florida*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. March, 2001.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5005>

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).