

BROWARD COUNTY'S

Women Pathfinders

A PICTURE ESSAY

by Helen Landers

A pathfinder is one who discovers a way through or into an unexplored region. Each of the Broward County women discussed here found a path that led them into unexplored areas in their communities. Demographically they were married, single, widowed, childless and with children. They were women of wealth and poverty, educated and without formal education, homemakers and professional women. A common characteristic woven through their stories and achievements is a sense of power that in spite of their circumstances allowed them to take chances and risks to reach a goal.

THE EARLY YEARS: BROWARD AND DADE COUNTIES

Contemporary documents relate the stories of two women in the early 1800s who made paths into literally unexplored regions. Shortly after Florida became a United States territory in 1824, Frankee Lewis, the widow of Surles Lewis, petitioned the

U.S. government for a grant of 640 acres under the Donation Act of 1824. To receive this grant Frankee Lewis had to prove habitation and cultivation of the property on or before February 22, 1819. The government confirmed her claim, and the land became known as the "Frankee Lewis Donation." In 1830 Mrs. Lewis sold her grant to Richard Fitzpatrick for

\$400.00, and moved to the Miami settlement, apparently to live with her son. When the Frankee Lewis Donation was surveyed in 1845, it was determined to include the square mile bounded by today's Davie Boulevard on the south, Broward Boulevard on the north, and Federal Highway on the west, extending eastward to the western portion of the

From south Florida's earliest settlers to today's leaders in government and business, women have played a vital role in nearly every aspect of Broward County's history. While the many contributions of women to our national history have often been overlooked as a result of a traditional emphasis on political and military history, women's impact on the local scene has been surprisingly well-documented. "Broward County's Women Pathfinders," taken from a presentation delivered by Helen Landers at the 1994 annual meeting of the Florida Historical Society in Fort Myers, examines the significance of selected women in a number of fields as they blazed trails for later generations to follow.

Helen Landers, a longtime resident of Fort Lauderdale, has served as Broward County Historian since 1990. A graduate of Florida State College for Women (now Florida State University) and Baylor University, she is the former owner/principal of Fern Hall School and remains active in a number of women's organizations, including the American Association of University Women, the Florida Women's Consortium, and the Broward County Women's History Coalition.

This engraving, titled "The Horrid Massacre of the Whites in Florida," was first published in the opening months of the Second Seminole War, soon after Fort Lauderdale's Cooley Massacre.



Survey of the Frankee Lewis Donation made in 1845 by George Mackay.

Las Olas islands. Present-day land owners in the Las Olas and Rio Vista areas of Fort Lauderdale trace their property to this land grant. Frankee Lewis, in pursuing and acquiring this land grant, provided economic stability for herself and her family, a difficult task on a remote and barely-populated frontier.

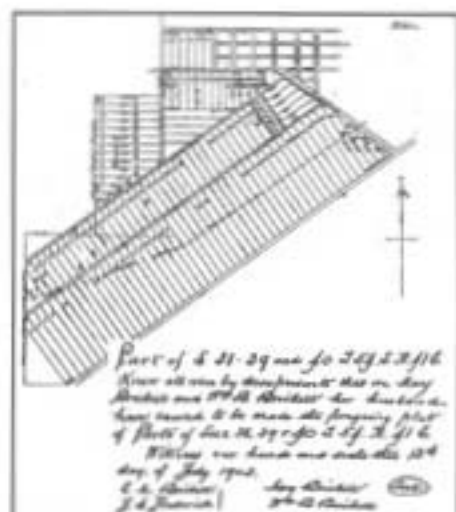
At the outset of 1836, the year a Seminole attack on the William Cooley homestead decimated the New River settlement, Mary R. Rigby, a widow with a grown son and two daughters, lived across the river from the Cooley family. Her daughter, Mary Elizabeth, the unofficial tutor for the New River families, alerted the settlers of the Indian attack on January 6. On May 2, 1836, when asked to submit three names to Governor Reubin Askew for the

Florida Regional Service Center in Fort Lauderdale, the Broward County Selection Committee, chaired by County Historian Dr. Cooper Kirk, included the name of Mary Elizabeth Rigby. Although the name of newspaper publisher Robert Hayes Gore was selected for the building, the fact that Mary Elizabeth Rigby's name was nominated demonstrates the significant path left by this young woman in 1836.

Even a brief overview of southeast Florida's nineteenth century history would be incomplete without mentioning Julia Tuttle and Mary Brickell, both businesswomen of the first rank. Julia, a widow with two children, and Mary, married to William and the mother of eight children, were friends with mutual business interests. Foremost among these interests were their efforts to promote



Julia Tuttle.



This 1903 plat from the Miami area, surveyed by Fort Lauderdale pioneer William C. Valentine, shows one of many south Florida properties platted by Mary Brickell.



Mary Brickell with her daughter (courtesy of Historical Association of Southern Florida).

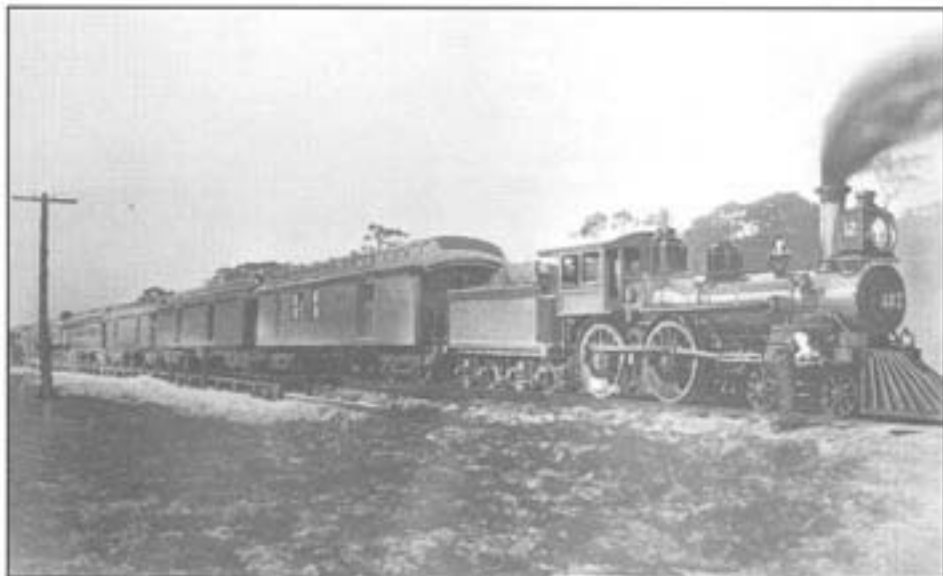
the transportation and economic development of the south Florida wilderness. According to legend, Julia Tuttle sent Henry Flagler orange blossoms after the Great Freeze of 1894-95 to indicate the agricultural possibilities of the southern peninsula and persuade him to bring his railroad to Miami. Although Julia may have indeed sent Flagler orange blossoms, contemporary evidence indicates that the railroad builder had decided to extend his line to Miami several years before the Great Freeze. Nevertheless, the economic incentives offered by Julia and Mary—sections of land along alternate sides of the track and right-of-way—dictated the path the railway took along the southeast coast. As a result of these land transfers on New River, Flagler agreed to plat the town of Fort Lauderdale, build a railroad station, and make the village a stop on the line. Though Flagler had indicated to Julia Tuttle that he was not interested in Fort Lauderdale's growth potential, he nevertheless promoted the town in advertising and publicity.

Though Julia Tuttle's land and wealth were anchored in Miami, and Mary Brickell's holdings covered both Miami and Fort Lauderdale, together these two women achieved their goal of assuring the railroad access through their properties. Their path was progress through transportation and development.

INTO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: WOMEN OF PURPOSE, AT WORK AND IN PUBLIC OFFICE

Ivy Julia Cromartie arrived one October morning in 1899 by train from Lemon City to become Fort Lauderdale's first school teacher. Pioneer builder Ed King met Ivy at the station and took her by pop-boat to his home on the banks of Tarpon River. As was the custom with young, unmarried teachers, that first year she boarded with King, his wife, Susan, and their children.

Susan King had the distinction of being a passenger on the first Florida East Coast Railway train



This Florida East Coast Railway train was the first to provide through service to what is today Broward County and on to Miami in 1896.



Fort Lauderdale's first school (above) and first teacher, Ivy Cromartie (courtesy of Fort Lauderdale Historical Society).



Fort Lauderdale's King-Cromartie House, home of Susan King and her family, was constructed in 1907. Ivy Cromartie lived with the King family in their earlier home when she arrived to teach school in 1899.

when it arrived in Fort Lauderdale on February 22, 1896. With Mrs. King were her four children. In later years she said, "It was the most hopeless place I've ever seen. But we had come to make it our home because of the stories that had reached us of what a wonderful county this was for truck growing...So we picked up and started south to pioneer."

With the arrival of Ivy Cromartie, regular schooling began for the nine children from six families located along New River. Later that year four additional children joined the school. With her children in school during the day, there was time for Susan King to turn her attention to community activity. Over the next few decades, she left her mark on many aspects of Fort Lauderdale. For example, she saw the need for a permanent burial ground, and on high ground near her home, she established Evergreen Cemetery. In addition, she developed a system for burying paupers at a cost of \$11.00 each. In 1916, she sold the cemetery to the City of Fort Lauderdale. Susan King became known as a proficient business woman and was often called "The Mother of Fort Lauderdale."

By the end of Ivy Cromartie's first school year, she had met and been courted by Frank Stranahan, operator of the ferry boat across New River and proprietor of the local trading post. The Kings acted as the chaperones as the couple took Sunday trips to Palm Beach. When school was out in the spring, Ivy Cromartie returned to her parents' Lemon City home, but came back to Fort Lauderdale in August and married Frank Stranahan.

After their honeymoon, the Stranahans made their home in Fort Lauderdale, where they operated the Stranahan Trading Post. Over the years Ivy was able to gain the confidence of the Seminole children who came to the trading post with their parents. Her motto was "patience and perseverance," and in time she was teaching the children kindergarten songs and — through brightly colored Bible cards — English. Education of Seminole children and



Susan King platted Evergreen Cemetery in November 1910.

the betterment of the Seminole people remained an important goal throughout her long life.

Largely as a result of Ivy Stranahan's considerable knowledge, tact, and understanding, Seminoles living along the lower east coast began moving to the Dania Reservation in June 1924. By the end of that year the U.S. flag was mounted on a tall

pole in front of the reservation's Administration Building. Because there was no Indian school, those children desiring formal education were initially sent to the Cherokee Indian School in North Carolina. When parents appealed to their "white friends" to allow attendance at the "white schools," Mrs. Stranahan, quietly working with county leaders, arranged for the integration of Indian children into the public schools.

In 1911 Ivy became a charter



At left Ivy Stranahan poses with Seminole leader Joe Dan Osceola (courtesy of Fort Lauderdale Historical Society), at right is the Fort Lauderdale Woman's Club as it appeared in the late 1930s.



member of the Fort Lauderdale Woman's Club. She served as president for three terms, 1913 to 1916. When the Fort Lauderdale Suffrage League was founded in 1915, Ivy took a leading role in its affairs which led to her election to the presidency of the Florida Equal Suffrage Association in 1917. In the association Ivy was joined by such prominent women as Mary Elizabeth Bryan, wife of presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan, May Mann Jennings, wife of former Florida Governor William Sherman Jennings, and Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, later famous for her efforts to preserve the Everglades. These women spent much of their time lobbying in Tallahassee for various local suffrage bills. As soon as the Nineteenth Amendment passed Congress in June 1919, these women travelled to Tallahassee to lobby for Florida ratification. The legislature adjourned a day after they arrived, without having taken action on the suffrage amendment, but the amendment received the required ratification of three-fourths of the states on August 26, 1920. Locally, many women felt that once they had achieved the ballot box all other rights would follow. Ivy Stranahan's path towards social reform continued with her work through the Woman's Club and her concerns for the Seminole Indians.



Edith Lewis (left, courtesy of Fort Lauderdale Historical Society) and the William C. Morris Post 36 American Legion building, Fort Lauderdale.

WOMEN AT WORK: SYLVIA HILL ALDRIDGE AND EDITH WASHBURN LEWIS

Edith Lewis and Sylvia Alridge were two women whose lives were filled with similar interests, but whose paths seldom if ever crossed. They both came to Fort Lauderdale during the settlement years — Sylvia in 1904 and Edith in 1913. Edith Washburn was born March 28, 1889, in Salina, Kansas. After graduation from high school, she received a diploma from Teacher's Institute. She taught school until she married, moving in 1913 to Fort Lauderdale with her husband. Sylvia Hill was born November 19, 1884 near Booker,

Florida, north of Gainesville. The Hill family owned 1,800 acres that had been given to their forebears when they were freed from slavery after the Civil War. In 1904 Sylvia married Anderson Alridge and they moved south to Fort Lauderdale.

Edith Lewis became a prominent business and professional woman known for public service, while Sylvia Alridge was a business woman who became an advocate for the employment of black women and the social and economic improvement of the black community. Both women were childless.

In Fort Lauderdale Edith Lewis began her working career as head of



This sign at the entrance to Croissant Park in the 1920s was one of many in and around Fort Lauderdale painted by the Lewis Sign Company.





At left is Sylvia Alridge, and right her home on Northwest Second Street in Fort Lauderdale.



the Women's Department at the H.G. Wheeler Department Store. After five years in that position she left to work alongside her husband in the "Lewis Sign Company." Her interests and concerns included the American Legion Auxiliary, working with the Girl's Auxiliary for Poppy Day events and raising money for scholarships. Edith organized and was a charter member of Fort Lauderdale's first Business and Professional Women's Club, serving two terms as president. In that capacity, she spearheaded a program to recognize the most outstanding girls in the high schools. In 1945 she was employed at the Broward County Credit Bureau, retiring in 1970. During that time, she organized the Credit Women's Breakfast Club.

During those same years Sylvia Alridge, known as a lady of love and charity, began her working career as a domestic servant. She found that there were many positions available, but that many women did not know how to go about getting work or perhaps were afraid of dealing with white people. This led Sylvia to her primary business and public service, Sylvia's Employment Agency. It was Fort Lauderdale's first such business and for many years was the only agency for domestic help. In the late 1940s, she started Sylvia's Victory Cabs to provide transportation to work for her clients. Reinvesting her profits, she purchased buildings, which she refurbished into rentals for

her clients. Sylvia made a good living, but she could have become much wealthier had she not been generous to the point of being a soft touch. In 1939 Sylvia took in an abandoned thirteen-month-old baby. The boy, Reuben, was her pride and joy. He

graduated from Dillard High School and Howard University. Sylvia Alridge is still remembered as an activist. When something needed doing, her favorite expression was, "Baby, I'll get right to it."

These two women did "get right to it."

COMMISSIONERS THANK COLORED CITIZENS

The county commissioners of Broward county desire to thank the colored citizens of this county who assisted in planning and preparing the barbecue given to help raise money for colored soldiers and sailors at the South Park Hotel, August 22, 1919.

To E. C. Williams, general manager; to Prof. W. M. Moore, Dr. H. H. Lewis, W. M. Powell, moderator, and to the following who an active part in making the barbecue a great success: L. J. Williams, G. W. Smith, Joe Martin, T. D. Ford, W. H. Smith, J. W. Williams, Bob and Charlie, Mrs. Alice King, Mrs. Frank Bond, Mrs. Tom S. A. Fisher, Mrs. Clara Williams, Mrs. Lottie Jones, Mrs. Clara Martin, Mrs. Ella Williams and others.

We desire to thank the Red Cross societies of Fort Lauderdale and Jacksonville for their generous contributions, also Mr. and Mrs. S. M. Goode of Jacksonville for the beautiful and carefully prepared basket of good things. This basket received the compliments of all present. After the barbecue a carefully prepared entertainment was given at the hall in red and blue and an excellent program rendered. Refreshments were served to all present. To all who assisted in making the affair a success we extend our appreciation and thanks.

Respectfully yours,
A. B. LOWE, Chairman.

August 29, 1919 Fort Lauderdale Herald article on the Broward County Commission congratulating "Silvia Alrige" and other black citizens for hosting a barbecue welcoming returning World War I veterans.

WOMEN IN PUBLIC OFFICE: LILLIE MAE SMITH AND EASTER LILY GATES

By the 1920s, women, having achieved the vote, found it acceptable to enter politics. But that acceptance was tentative and was built on considerable assistance from male community leaders.

Broward County's first female elected official, Lillie Mae Smith, became the County Tax Collector in 1925 when W.O. Berryhill resigned early in his term of office to enter the real estate business. Berryhill took "Miss Lillie," his only paid employee, to Tallahassee to meet Governor John Martin. Governor Martin appointed her to fill the office until the next election. In 1926 Miss Lillie ran for the office and handily beat her Republican opponent for the term ending in 1928. In January 1928, she announced that she would not be a candidate in the June Democratic Primary to succeed herself as County Tax Collector. The *Fort Lauderdale Daily News*, in a January 17, 1928 editorial, stated, "It came as a distinct disappointment to her friends to learn that she did not seek the office



Lillie Mae Smith (left), Broward County's first female elected public official. The campaign advertisement at right appeared in the June 6, 1926 *Fort Lauderdale Daily News*.

To the Democratic Voters of Broward County

Owing to the duties of the Office of County Tax Collector being somewhat heavy, in my campaign for nomination to that Office, I have been unable by virtue of the duties of this Office to make a personal canvass of the voters to set forth my reasons for believing that I am fitted to intelligently and conscientiously fill this important office.

It is my intention to pledge, that if I am nominated I will endeavor to faithfully and conscientiously perform the duties of this important office.

Thanking you for your support, and assuring you that your vote and your influence will be carefully appreciated, I am,

Yours respectfully,

(Signed) LILLIE M. SMITH

Printed in Broward County, Florida, June 6, 1926

again. The ability displayed by Miss Smith during the period in which she has served as County Tax Collector is a marked example that women are capable of holding down, efficiently, positions of public trust." Lillie Mae Smith, as the first appointed and elected woman in Broward County government, became a pathfinder for Broward County women seeking public office.

Easter Lily Bilbo Gates moved from Utah to Broward County in 1918 with her husband, George Gates, who had been offered an in-

terest in a farming section where the Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood Airport is located today. Ten years later Easter Lily became the first woman elected to county office for a full term, serving the next forty years as Supervisor of Registration and later, as the responsibilities were enlarged, as Supervisor of Elections. How was this woman able, in the time frame of 1928-1968, to overcome the underlying perception that women should stay at home and even more importantly that they should not hold an elected position?

The answer to that question lies in her personal circumstances and her ability to seize an opportunity. The Gates' had two sons, Robert and Ted. By the time the 1926 hurricane struck Broward County, George was dying of pernicious anemia. Easter Lily's strength and determination enabled her to carry seven-year-old Bob, five-year-old Ted, and her husband to the second story apartment to escape the rising waters. The family lost all their personal possessions in the storm, and George died soon after, leaving Easter Lily penniless.

Easter Lily, though a hat maker by trade, knew she could not support her family during the depression by making and selling hats. Reading that northern women were driving school buses, she persuaded School Superintendent James Rickards to give her an opportunity to work as a bus driver. Overcoming all odds, she was successful in obtaining the job, but the salary was only \$20.00 a month. In 1928 she threw her "hat into the ring" for the elected position of Supervisor of Registration, which paid \$125 a month. In modern day parlance, she took the voter pulse from friends who advised and supported her. When the school superintendent appointed her to the School Election Board, she read the election laws and "saw she could do it." She campaigned using these strategies,



Easter Lily Gates, seen at left canvassing voting returns and in the portrait at right, served as Supervisor of Elections for forty years.

as quoted to Dr. Cooper Kirk in a 1981 oral interview:

I went up to a real estate man's office, Hardy, in Pompano. I passed out my cards, said I was running for the office of Supervisor of Registration. They said they thought a woman's place was at home, to take care of the children and home. Well, I think that's nice. But, my husband passed away. We've lost everything. I'm trying to get a job to take care of my children. We talked for some time. When I left they said, "We'll vote for you, Mrs. Gates, but we won't for another woman." I believe some of them died feeling that way.

Through the qualities of self-denial, sincerity, a complete trust in God, and guilelessness, Easter Lily Bilbo Gates demonstrated that a woman could hold public office in a domain dominated by men.

WOMEN OF DIVERSITY: LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION

Virginia Shuman Young moved into the political arena in the late 1950s, when she filed for election as a trustee of the Board of Public Instruction. Her upbringing, training and family background prepared her well for a career of public service. Virginia's father, Irving Shuman, was pilot master of Port Everglades and a strong influence in her life. Her mother, Myrtle Tenbrook Shuman, was a dedicated church worker and community leader, and her grandmother, Frances Tenbrook, was a local leader in the women's suffrage movement. In March 1937, Virginia married George Young, who entered the building contractor business with his father, also an early Fort Lauderdale pioneer. Growing up in a home where leading political and community leaders were a welcome addition to the family dinner table, Virginia early learned to listen to the men who made decisions concerning Broward County's growth. Toward the end of her life, she recalled, "When I ran for school trustee, my dad gave me every day a list of ten men to visit and

enlist their support for my campaign."

Elected school trustee, Virginia led a campaign to abolish that position, as she felt their purpose was no longer needed. In 1959, she was elected to the Broward County School Board, serving until 1966. Twice she served as chairman of the board.

Losing three subsequent elections — for reelection to the school board, and as Democratic candidate for the state legislature and for Supervisor of Elections — during a period of heavy Republican domination, she came back in 1971 with her election as a Fort Lauderdale City Commissioner and Vice Mayor. With a stunning victory in 1973, she became Mayor of Fort Lauderdale — the first woman to hold that post.

Virginia Shuman Young's huge political base within the City of Fort Lauderdale gave her seven terms as



Virginia Young as she appeared in 1991 (above) and on a 1959 campaign advertisement.

commissioner until she retired in 1986. During elections, she shunned the label of "women's libber" because of her novel position, but the *Fort Lauderdale News* quoted her on November 9, 1980, as saying, "We do outnumber men but we haven't yet recognized the fact we can do something in this country. We can work at home, on our city block, in our neighborhoods. There is much that needs doing."

During these same years, native American women and women of color were making changes in their communities. Betty Mae Tiger Jumper, a leader in the Seminole Tribe, came to the Dania Reservation in 1928 from Indiantown. Betty Mae set out on a path of leadership for her tribe largely as a result of the efforts of Ivy Stranahan, who made it possible for her to obtain formal schooling at the Cherokee Indian Boarding School in North Carolina. With her education and her training in tribal customs and traditions, Betty Mae has spent much of her adult life as a leader of her people. She is the only woman who has been elected Tribal Chairman, President of the Tribe, and Official of the Governing Body of the Seminoles of Florida. Her areas of expertise were housing, child care, jobs, grants, and education. In 1977, Betty Mae summed up her view of her life's work: "My goal is to help with the transition from total Seminole culture to integration with the

<p>EXPERIENCED IN TWO TERMS AS TRUSTEE OF BROWARD SCHOOLS</p>	
	<p>VOTE FOR VIRGINIA YOUNG FOR School Board</p>
	<p>(Board of Public Instruction)</p>
	<p>Democratic Primary Sept. 9th</p>
<p>— 1 —</p>	



Mary Laramore Smith.



Betty Mae Jumper.

white man's." In 1995, she was elected to the Florida Women's Hall of Fame.

Though Mary Laramore Smith was an outstanding teacher at Fort Lauderdale's Walker Elementary School for eighteen years, her personal path has been the preservation of Broward County's black history. In the early 1970s, Mary, a Broward County native, founded the first black historical society in Florida with the assistance of Dr. Cooper Kirk. Through the Broward County Black Historical Society, Mary promoted the recognition of black pioneers, participated in Broward County Pioneer Days, and encouraged families to pre-

serve their history and make that history available to others. She began and completed the process of placing the Old Dillard School on the National Register of Historic Places. Originally named the Fort Lauderdale Colored School, Dillard was Broward County's first twelve-year school for black children when it opened in 1924. With support from the Broward County School Board, the City of Fort Lauderdale, Broward County government, and state funding, Mary oversaw the school's restoration and dedication in the fall of 1990 as Broward County's only museum of black history. Mary Smith walked the path of preservation.

Blanche General Ely and Myra McIlvane Marshall were two women who probably never met professionally, although both were educators in the Broward County School District. Myra Marshall began her teaching career at Fort Lauderdale High School in 1915 teaching home economics and ended her career teaching algebra. She organized the Classroom Teacher's Association and the Teacher's Credit Union in 1946. After her retirement in the late 1950s, she managed the credit union, driving throughout the county to collect loans and make deposits for teachers on payday.

In the 1930s, Blanche General



Myra McIlvane Marshall.



Blanche General Ely.

Ely came to Broward County with her husband, Joseph Ely, and began teaching in a two-room schoolhouse in Pompano. She was never satisfied until that school became Blanche Ely High School. She knew jobs, housing, food and clothing were essential to "bring her boys and girls up." She planted in the minds of students the seeds of continued self improvement and progress.

1974: A POLITICAL BREAKTHROUGH YEAR FOR WOMEN

Three Broward County women, following the tradition of Lillie Mae Smith and Easter Lily Gates, threw their hats in the political ring in 1974. This action marked the beginnings in Broward County of the current Women's Movement. The Broward County Commission on the Status of Women had been founded in 1969, and the National Organization of Women (NOW) was being formed. Into that setting came the following three trailblazers:

Kathleen Cooper Wright, a 1953 graduate of Dillard High School, ran as the first black candidate for the school board; Anne Kolb, a journalist and environmentalist, sought election as the first woman on the Broward County Board of County Commissioners; and Karen Coolman, a young mother interested in fashion and design, decided to use the resources of the NOW network to become the first woman in the Florida House of Representatives from Broward County.

On the first Tuesday in November 1974, all three were elected. Political life for women changed in Broward County.

CONCLUSION

As we review the lives of these women, from Frankee Lewis, a homesteader on the New River frontier, to politically active women of the 1970s, we can appreciate their common characteristics of taking the risks necessary to improve the lives of women in Broward County. Their greater accomplishment is that the lives of all Broward Countians are better because of them.

**Broward County
Commissioner Anne Kolb.**



**Broward County
School Board Member
Kathleen Cooper Wright.**

**Florida State Legislator
Karen Coolman Amlong
(courtesy of the Broward
County Women's History
Coalition).**

