

Enolia McMillan talks to inmates at the City Jail (left photo), and to a confidant

Enolia McMillan's life and

By Mike Bowler

“We’re buying our own headquarters for the first time, and we’re saving a half-million dollars a year in rent.”

ENOLIA MCMILLAN

Some have called her the “Gray Lady,” others “the NAACP’s Mormon,” referring to the advanced ages of the leaders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Enolia P. McMillan is 81 now, a Baltimorean through and through (though she was born in Pennsylvania and spent the first three years of her life there) and president of both the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and of its Baltimore branch.

Mrs. McMillan was elected Baltimore president in 1969, upsetting Lillie Mae Jackson, who had headed the chapter without opposition for 34 years. (Mrs. McMillan was elected national president in January 1984, and has held that post concurrently.) An *Evening Sun* reporter described her in 1969 as “an elderly woman with slightly rounded shoulders. She has graying hair, wears black-rimmed spectacles and admits to being slightly hard of hearing.”

“One of the things that’s happening to the Negro race,” she said then, “is that they’ve lost their sense of humor.”

Not much has changed. Seventeen years later, Mrs. McMillan, who has chosen to conduct business from the branch headquarters on 25th Street rather than from the new national headquarters in Northwest Baltimore, still has gray hair, still wears black-rimmed glasses, still misses some of what is said and still laughs heartily in the self-deprecating fashion that has been her trademark.

She’s trying to raise \$4 million for purchase and renovation of the building and grounds of

ference on aging.

And NAACP history go together

the new headquarters off Wabash Avenue and Northern Parkway — \$1.1 million from the city sweetened the pot and helped persuade the NAACP to move out of rented quarters in Brooklyn Heights, N.Y.

"Three years ago," she said, "our lease expired in New York. We were paying \$150,000 a year rent and they wanted to raise it to \$600,000. The national board said 'No way.' So we hunted around. We looked at Washington, we looked at 100 pieces of property. I invited them to look at Baltimore. We're buying our own headquarters for the first time, and we're saving a half-million dollars a year in rent."

The redoubtable Mrs. McMillan, the first woman president of the 77-year-old NAACP, attended segregated schools in Baltimore, graduating from the Baltimore Colored High School. She earned her bachelor's degree at Howard University in Washington "because there wasn't a first-rate school in Baltimore I could attend."

Because her parents were too poor to board her at Howard, the former Enolia Pettigen commuted 2½ hours each way. Later, she earned a master's degree in 1933 from Columbia University. Already, she had been teaching in two rural Maryland districts, where pay for black teachers was one-half that of white teachers. Her thesis topic: "The Factors Affecting Secondary Education for Negroes in Maryland Counties."

Mrs. McMillan spent 35 years in the Baltimore schools before retiring in 1969, the same year the "insurgent" candidate, as *The Sun* referred to her, was elected branch president. She taught at Booker T. Washington school from 1935 to 1954, then was one of the first two black teachers to cross the color line after the historic *Brown vs. Board of Education* Su-

preme Court ruling in 1954.

Although the Ku Klux Klan was active in Baltimore that year and conditions were tense, Mrs. McMillan remembers her first months at General Lee School in South Baltimore (a feeder to Southern High School) as "pretty routine. I got nothing but cooperation from the white parents."

Mrs. McMillan rose to "special assistant," a sort of vice principal without portfolio, in city schools, and was the first black administrator at an integrated city school, Clifton Park Junior High. She finally made vice principal and retired from Dunbar Senior High School — but never made principal. Recently, an "honorary principalship" from city school officials "sort of made up for it," she said.

Mrs. McMillan was instrumental in the reactivation of the Baltimore branch of the NAACP in 1935 — it had been chartered originally in 1912 — and has been active since. As president of the branch, she has maintained the day-to-day pressure of her predecessor, now pleading for calm when city schools underwent a period of desegregation in the mid-1970s, now protesting *The Sun's* dropping of a comic strip sympathetic to blacks.

She described her years of activity in civil rights as "butting your head against a brick wall. The bricks don't move, but they're softened a little these days."

She praised the NAACP's strategy of pursuing civil rights through the courts as "the right strategy. . . . It's through the Constitution that the national has had its greatest impact. We've been accused over and over again of being Uncle Toms, but you do better by doing your own thing; no violence, get the facts, negotiate, legislate."

Mrs. McMillan's husband, Betha, died two years ago. A son Betha Jr., is an engineer.