

Jesse &

*A Legacy of Leadership,
Business and Community Service*

Azira



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By Charles A Black

Jesse Hill, Jr., has had a long and distinguished career in the Atlanta business community for over 54 years. He has been a member of the vanguard of progressive business and community leadership, and a captain of civil rights activism. And, his influence has been felt throughout the nation and the world.

Jesse arrived in Atlanta July 17, 1949, at the stately Atlanta Terminal Train Station, the present site of the Richard B. Russell Federal Building. His first residence in Atlanta was the Butler Street YMCA, home of the *Hungry Club*, the only forum at which *black and white leaders could engage in serious dialogue on contemporary issues*.

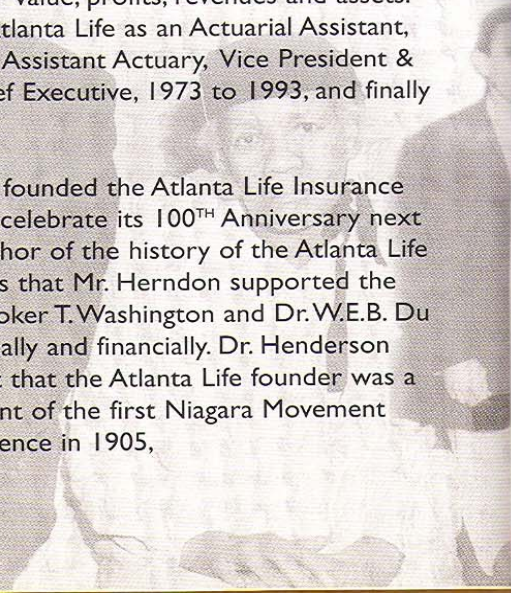
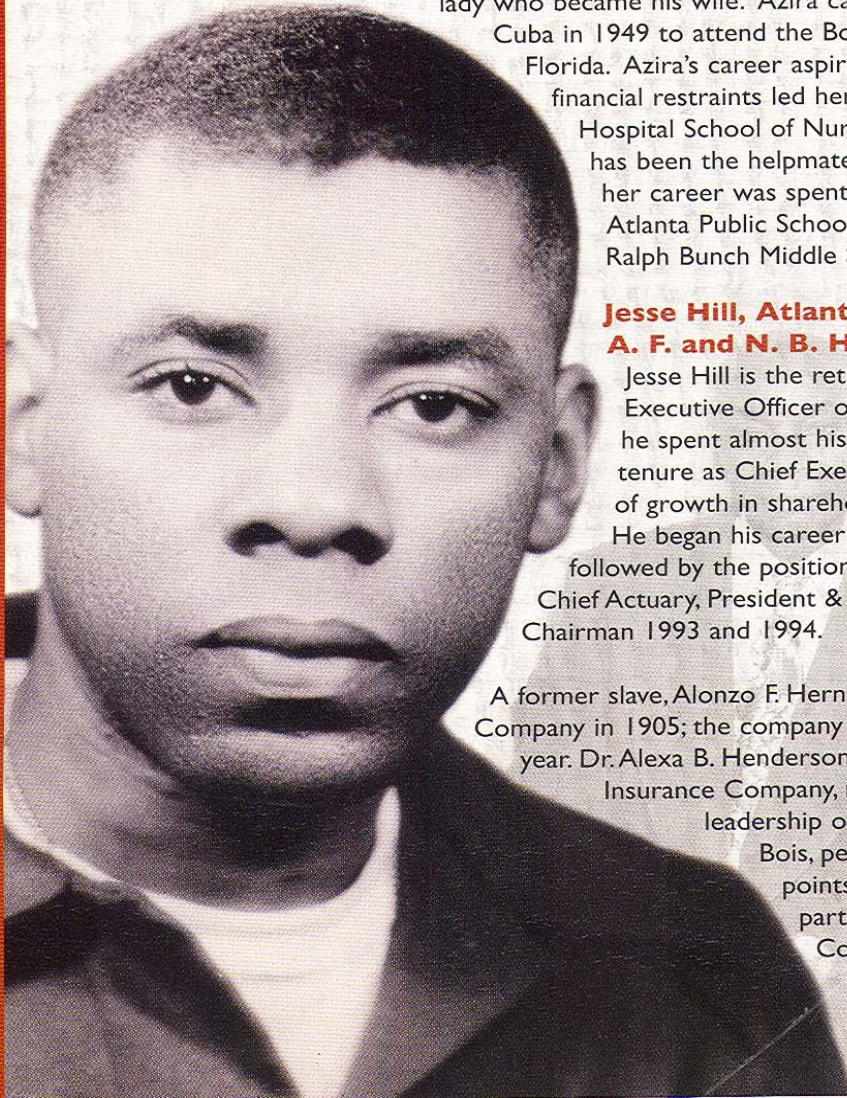
Every important black leader in business, education, politics, religion and community service, entered and exited the Butler Street YMCA weekly and sometimes daily. Jesse immediately met most of the key black leaders during his first few weeks in Atlanta. Among them were Attorney A. T. Walden, John Calhoun, Warren R. Cochrane, John Wesley Dobbs, E. M. Martin, Rev. William Holmes Borders, Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., T. M. Alexander, W. L. Calloway, Q. V. Williamson, N. H. Bronner, Grace Towns Hamilton, C. A. Scott, L. D. Milton, Jesse Blayton and C. R. Yates.

Two years after his arrival, in 1951, Jesse met Azira Gonzalez Sanchez at Big Bethel A. M. E. Church, the young lady who became his wife. Azira came to the United States from Holguin, Cuba in 1949 to attend the Boyland Haven Prep School in Jacksonville, Florida. Azira's career aspiration was to attend medical school, but financial restraints led her to elect to attend the Grady Memorial Hospital School of Nursing, graduating in September 1954. Azira has been the helpmate of Jesse Hill for nearly fifty years. Most of her career was spent working as a school nurse, with the Atlanta Public Schools System at L. J. Price High School and Ralph Bunch Middle School.

Jesse Hill, Atlanta Life Insurance Company, A. F. and N. B. Herndon

Jesse Hill is the retired Chairman, President and Chief Executive Officer of Atlanta Life Insurance Company, where he spent almost his entire regular working years. During his tenure as Chief Executive, Atlanta Life attained its highest level of growth in shareholder value, profits, revenues and assets. He began his career at Atlanta Life as an Actuarial Assistant, followed by the positions of Assistant Actuary, Vice President & Chief Actuary, President & Chief Executive, 1973 to 1993, and finally Chairman 1993 and 1994.

A former slave, Alonzo F. Herndon, founded the Atlanta Life Insurance Company in 1905; the company will celebrate its 100th Anniversary next year. Dr. Alexa B. Henderson, author of the history of the Atlanta Life Insurance Company, notes that Mr. Herndon supported the leadership of Booker T. Washington and Dr. W.E.B. Du Bois, personally and financially. Dr. Henderson points out that the Atlanta Life founder was a participant of the first Niagara Movement Conference in 1905,



The Herndon's only child, Norris B. Herndon, a graduate of the Harvard Business School, became the second president of the company in 1927 following the death of his father. He was the owner of 85% of the Atlanta Life stock and served as Chairman and President until 1973. In May of 1973, Mr. Herndon recommended to the company board of directors that Jesse Hill, Jr. succeed him as the third President, Chief Executive and Chairman of the Executive Committee. Mr. Herndon served as Board Chairman until his death in 1977.

Jesse extols the contributions of Alonzo F. Herndon and Norris B. Herndon as peerless in many areas of service and philanthropy. He expresses his devoted appreciation to Norris Herndon for the opportunity to serve as the Chief Executive Officer of the largest financial institution in America controlled by African Americans from the standpoint of net worth, and also for Mr. Herndon's strong support of his human rights and civil rights activism.

Azira G. Hill, an Outstanding Community Service Volunteer

Azira's involvement and affiliations span a wide spectrum of activities and volunteer service, including the following boards: Atlanta Symphony, Atlanta Branch NAACP, Center for Puppetry Arts, Southeastern Flower Show, Literacy Action, board of the 1996 Atlanta Paralympic Organizing Committee, Urban League Guild, Fulton County Arts Council and Planned Parenthood. The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's Azira G. Hill Talent Development Scholarship Fund was named to honor the leadership and long standing support of Azira Hill, whose vision led to the establishment of the nationally recognized ASO Minority Talent Development Program.

Azira Hill is also a member of the following other social and community service organizations: The Links – Azalea City Chapter, the *Inquirer's Club*, Atlanta Quette's, and Circle-Lets, Atlanta Chapter. She is a life Member of the NAACP and a Life Member of the National Council of Negro Women.

Azira has received many awards, including the Lexus Heritage Award for her work with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's Minority Talent Development Program and the Outstanding Contribution Award from the Georgia School Nurses Association. Her other honors include: Golden Rule Award from J. C. Penny, Inc., Atlanta Public School System Outstanding Service Award, Sarah Allen Award, First District AME Church, NAACP Hall of Fame, MLK Holiday Commission Distinguished Service Award and Quality Living Services "Living Legend" Award.



Jesse Hill, Jr., an Established Leader

Jesse Hill has compiled a long list of “door opening firsts” for African Americans. He has been a prominent Atlanta and national business, civil rights, civic and political leader since the 1950's. He served as Chairman of the historic political campaigns of Maynard Jackson, the first black elected mayor of a major city in the south in 1973; and Andrew Young, the first black elected to Congress from Georgia and the south since Reconstruction.

Jesse, along with Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, Rev. M. L. King, Sr., Mayor Coleman Young of Detroit, Andrew Young and Rev. Fred Bennett, organized a major nationwide press conference and rally in Hurt Park in support of Jimmy Carter, when his presidential campaign faltered in the north as he flirted with an “ethnic purity” theme. Political observers credit this “damage controlling event” as one of the keys to Jimmy Carter's nomination and election as President.

Dr. James J. Duderstat, President of the University of Michigan, in presenting an honorary doctorate degree to Hill a few years ago, stated:

For decades, Jesse Hill has used his business expertise and management skills to influence a broad range of business, educational, civic, and political interests in Atlanta, the state of Georgia and the nation. He has occupied a prominent place on all fronts of the civil rights movement since the mid-1950's when he was the driving force behind the voter registration campaign in Atlanta that saw more than 50,000 African Americans register to vote. He has broken racial barriers in the insurance industry, in corporate boardrooms, in chambers of commerce; and is respected nationwide as an innovative leader in the corporate, political and philanthropic communities.

Boards, Awards and Recognitions

Jesse has served on the board of directors of a number of corporations, including Delta Air Lines, Knight Ridder Inc., SunTrust, National Service Industries, Comsat, S & H Corporation, Rich's Department Store and Morse Shoes. He serves as Chairman of the Board of Governors of Washington, D. C. based Opportunity Funding Corporation (OFC), a position he has held for more than 25 years. OFC was established under the administration of President Richard Nixon. The initiative was spun off from the federal government as a non-profit corporation during the administration of President Jimmy Carter. The mission of OFC is to promote and facilitate the development of minority business enterprise, with financial, technical and managerial support. Jesse says OFC is proud of all of the participants of the program and is especially proud to be one of the early supporters and investors in Radio One which returned handsome rewards for CEO Kathy Hughes, OFC, and all early investors when the national radio network first traded publicly.

Jesse was Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Social Change for over fifteen years. In 1977, he was elected President of the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, the first black to hold such a position in a major United States city.

Over the years, Jesse has been the recipient of numerous awards and honorary degrees, including honorary doctorates from Atlanta University, Bethune Cookman College, Chun Ang University of Seoul Korea, Clark College, Lincoln University of Missouri, the University of Michigan, Morehouse College and Morris Brown College.

Most recently, on February 21, 2004, Morehouse College honored Hill with the “A Candle in the Dark” award for Leadership, with Oprah Winfrey and Ossie Davis both receiving Lifetime Achievement Awards. The 2004 honorees also included distinguished achievers in public service and medicine: Howard H. Carey, Dr. Isaac Willis, Congressman Sanford D. Bishop, Tom Joyner and Dr. LaSalle D. Leffa