This essay explores the transition from civil rights protest to black power protest in Boston through the example of Muriel Snowden and her organization, the Freedom House. Muriel Snowden and her husband Otto created Freedom House in 1949 as a community center dedicated to improving the black middle class area of Roxbury, MA. The Snowdens originally conceived of the Freedom House as a community center designed to foster interracial cooperation and community development. Freedom House reached the zenith of its popularity and influence in the 1950s owing to its prominent role in Boston's civil rights movement. By the 1960s, however, the complex dynamics of urban decay, unemployment, and overcrowding challenged Freedom House's moderate approach to race relations and the Snowdens' commitment to integration. Increasing numbers of black Bostonians turned to more radical measures and methods, including those called for by black power, to achieve greater access to community resources. Historians have typically characterized Muriel Snowden and Freedom House as steadfast supporters of moderate protest and integrationist methods. However, a closer look reveals a more complex story of political fluidity, in which Muriel Snowden and Freedom House openly embraced black power rhetoric, tactics, and goals.

Scholars of the civil rights era have called for increased attention to local struggles in order to assess fully the scope and success of the black power movement. Yet few have examined local civil rights organizations that explored black power protest. Even fewer have examined this political shift among African American women. Muriel Snowden and her programming at the Freedom House offer the opportunity to examine the appeal of black power for moderates. Snowden's transition from a moderate leader to an avid supporter of black power goals and ideals does not mean that she counted herself among the many black power radicals in Boston. Rather it suggests that for a period of time she believed that black power offered a meaningful and viable form of protest needed to secure rights for Roxbury citizens. Snowden’s dynamic political agenda and the programs developed at Freedom House complicate the static picture of black power protest at the local level. A brief exploration of the changing priorities of Snowden and Freedom House can highlight new avenues for assessing the scope, influence, and limitations of black power protest.

Snowden's Early Community Organizing

Muriel Snowden, along with her two siblings, grew up in the exclusive suburban town of Glen Ridge, New Jersey in what she called a “very pleasant childhood.” To be sure, Snowden experienced racism in the suburbs of New Jersey. Yet her father's social standing as a doctor in the local community shielded her from many of the harshest experiences with racism and sexism. Snowden’s middle-class background and strong academic record afforded her the opportunity earn a degree from Radcliffe College in Cambridge, MA and a fellowship from the Urban League for study at the New York
School of Social Work. Snowden never completed her degree in social work, however, as a job with the Welfare Board of New Jersey altered her personal and political priorities.

From 1938 to 1943 Snowden worked as a social investigator in Newark, New Jersey, where she made daily house calls to black families. Social work offered Snowden her first real glimpse into the numerous stresses and strains that poor and working-class African Americans experienced in the overcrowded post-war city. This experience fundamentally altered her worldview on race relations and the role of white federal funding in African American communities. She recalled that through this experience her "young eyes were opened to the hidden poor, the shutting away of people whom the city, society, would rather not see." For Snowden this was a tremendous shock that awakened her racial consciousness. Reflecting on her time as an employee of the Welfare Board Snowden remarked,

"I cared about what happened to the people with whom I worked, that they were not case numbers, but living breathing human beings caught up in a vicious set of circumstances that stamped them from Aid to Dependent Children to Old Age Assistance. My case load was 100% Negro, so I developed a racial identification—not what some sentimentalists like to believe is a bond of color—some kind of mysterious brown kinship and warmth, culture, and tradition—but rather a more negatively powerful thing. It was the recognition that just as long as masses of Negroes were penned into ghettos . . . for just as long my own individuality and freedom were at stake."

Snowden's time as a social worker allowed her to experience personally the intricate network of the discriminatory labor market, restrictive covenants, housing conditions that culminated in perpetual injustice and poverty in black urban communities. This experience propelled Snowden towards a life of community organizing rather than state-sanctioned social work. Soon after she married Otto Snowden, Muriel relocated to Boston where she threw herself into a dizzying number of community service projects designed to promote urban renewal and community development. As a member of the NAACP, the National Association of Intergroup Relations, the Mayor's Committee of Civic Unity, and the Roxbury-North Dorchester Urban Renewal Program Snowden made a name for herself as a tireless organizer and proponent of integration.

Muriel Snowden came of age as a community organizer during a period in which moderate activists sought to link black equality with successful attempts at democracy at home and abroad. In her early years as an organizer, she often forged intellectual connections between black community development to American war and peace efforts. She positioned her work in racial uplift as a critical part of developing the democratic system in African American communities. The Boston media capitalized on this discourse and heralded Snowden as an organizer who put "democracy into action and helping to bring nearer the day when racial prejudice will be as universally despised as Hitlerism and as obsolete as horse-drawn trolley cars."

Snowden's ability to link her community work with progressive liberal political goals allowed her to become a powerful local symbol of black middle-class success. As a community leader she brokered many interracial alliances among Boston's various ethnic and racial groups and forged relationships between white officials and Boston's black middle-class. By 1950, she was able to translate this notoriety into the development of her own community center.

In 1951, Snowden formally resigned from her post at the Civil Liberties Union to devote all her time to the creation of Freedom House. She told her fellow board members upon her resignation:

"Freedom House seems to us to be one answer—the establishment of a non-sectarian meeting place where those of us who are concerned may come together freely across racial and religious lines to plan joint action on those problems which affect us all as citizens of a community."

Snowden and her husband drew on their experiences as community organizers in Boston to create a center dedicated to rejuvenating the deteriorating urban landscape of Roxbury. The Snowdens also envisioned Freedom House as providing a much-needed physical space where the black community
could come together and forge relationships with other ethnic and racial groups. Through her work with Freedom House Snowden gained a reputation with both black and white Bostonians as a leader committed to racial equality through community action programming.

Snowden’s public commitment to integration did not preclude her interest in political causes prevalent on the black Left. Although she remained a proponent of moderate racial politics throughout the 1950s, Snowden sympathized with her radical contemporaries who were the targets of government persecution for their activism. She often used her position in the community to speak out against the repression of black activists. She openly proclaimed her disagreement with the tactics of the US government namely those employed by led by Sen. Joseph McCarthy in his witch hunt against communists and other perceived radicals, including many blacks. Her support of black radicals as well as her connection with her brother Bill Sutherland, a radical activist in Africa, garnered the attention of the FBI in the late 1950s. The government disliked Snowden’s willingness to work with multiple groups including those with communist and radical agendas and continued to track her activities throughout the 1970s. Consistent government surveillance did not keep Snowden from exploring and supporting diverse political perspectives and opinions. In fact, she often used the knowledge of world affairs she gained from her brother Bill Sutherland as the basis of her early Freedom House programming. Snowden consistently infused her activism and Freedom House programming with speakers and materials concerning Pan-African solidarity and international struggles. She clearly displayed an interest in achieving black equality that defied domestic borders and strict political affiliations early on in her organizing career.

**Freedom House: Inception and Early Years**

At its inception, Freedom House focused on what the leaders called a “program of self-help” to restore “a positive feeling of belonging in the people who live in Roxbury.” Freedom House leaders believed the community center could rehabilitate the image of Roxbury and bring new resources to the burgeoning black community. The conceptual framework for Freedom House developed in the Snowdens’ living room one cold February night in 1949. The Roxbury couple invited a small interracial cohort of Boston activists and leaders to their home to discuss plans for community development and urban renewal in Upper Roxbury. Together this group developed the foundation for an interracial and interfaith civic center to serve Roxbury’s interests.

Freedom House began as a rented a room in a local community center where Roxbury residents held community events. Gradually, some of Boston’s most influential citizens and politicians appreciated Freedom House’s efforts at urban renewal and cross-racial alliances and lent their support to the Snowdens’ cause. Before three years elapsed the Snowdens transformed their one room operation into a full-scale building and community center complete with different meeting space and a series of ongoing community programs. It was not long before the Snowdens gained local and national support for their vision of interracial community building. Their good reputation helped the Snowdens become some of the most prominent voices in race relations and urban planning in Boston. Even though a full-scale fire threatened to destroy the Snowdens’ community center in 1960, the reputation of Freedom House allowed the Snowdens to rebuild their center in a little over a year. Widespread support of their programs also allowed the Freedom House to develop auxiliary institutes like the Freedom House Institute on Schools and Education. This institute and several other longstanding community initiatives continue to support the Roxbury community today.

The Snowdens dedicated the first decade of Freedom House programming to fostering a middle-class community and mentality. Common programs during this period included Children’s Halloween Parties, Spaghetti Parties, and fraternity parties to raise money for neighborhood clean-up projects and promote neighborhood safety.
Freedom House also offered the socially segregated black communities in Boston a space to develop their own programs and relationships. True to its mission, Freedom House organizers also promoted programs to foster relationships between the African American and Jewish residents of Roxbury.

It was during this initial phase of Freedom House’s development that Snowden developed into a community leader and political activist in her own right. Now in charge of Freedom House, Snowden developed programming that spoke to the needs of the citizens of Roxbury and to her own interests in world affairs and women’s rights. She used this relative freedom to develop programs like the “Coffee Hour” and the annual “International Tea” where she invited speakers from all over the world to engage the women and homemakers of Roxbury. Each year, Snowden centered the programming around a different theme in order to connect the black women of Roxbury with national and international affairs. Loosely structured around themes like “Women are Important” and “Women and the World,” Snowden created community programs that explored a vast array of issues in order for “homemakers to expand [their] horizons.” Snowden challenged her fellow women to engage in the problems, goals, and experiences of women nationally and internationally in order to promote community development worldwide.

Snowden’s Coffee Hour epitomized the original goals of Freedom House, “to conserve and improve the Upper Roxbury neighborhood” and “provide opportunities for greater interracial contact and understanding.” During the 1950s, Muriel Snowden’s community programs were highly successful and brought hundreds of African American men and women to Freedom House. This programming showcased her ability to create viable community resources that catered to the needs and interests of the citizens of Roxbury. Snowden’s ability to comprehend the pressing concerns of Roxbury residents and respond with events that explored a variety of perspectives would serve her well in years to come. Soon the shifting demography of Roxbury called upon

the Freedom House leader to rethink her initial political priorities and goals.

Boston’s Brand of Black Power

Over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a steady trickle of African Americans came to Boston in the hopes of finding peace and prosperity. This modest growth of Boston’s black community lasted until after World War I, after which Boston experienced a large influx in African American migrants from the South and West. Between 1930 and 1960 the African American population of Boston nearly tripled. The black population increased another two-thirds during the 1960s.

By mid-century, a series of restrictive covenants; discriminatory loan practices, immigrant tensions, and overt racism established clear “black” and “white” parts of Boston. Residential segregation forced African Americans to crowd into Upper and Lower Roxbury as well as the neighboring community of Dorchester. This influx of black migrants also diversified Roxbury’s socio-economic make-up. The middle-class interracial neighborhood in which the Snowdens first settled evolved into an exclusively black working-class neighborhood. As in many northern cities, this socio-economic shift also signaled a decline in local government support and neglect on behalf of local city officials.

The changing priorities of Roxbury caused Freedom House leaders to shift their focus from themes like racial uplift and urban planning to direct engagement in civil rights protest. The Snowdens drew upon their existing networks in the black community to mount a formidable challenge to segregation in Boston. Freedom House became what the Boston Globe called the “operational base” for black civil rights projects and a leader in race relations in Boston. With community support the Snowdens forged new fronts in local desegregation struggles. They also formed lasting alliances with national civil rights organizations like the NAACP.

Freedom House led “every civil rights struggle in Boston’s Black community for a generation” and was the preeminent moderate organization in Boston during the gold-
en years of the civil rights movement. The most prominent example of Freedom House's central role was their widespread support and leadership of the school desegregation fight in Boston. The foundation of the school desegregation movement in Boston began with Ruth Batson, a lifelong Roxbury resident. As Jeanne Theoharis notes, "Batson's personal experience and political work laid the groundwork for the [school desegregation] movement that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. Batson, along with local activists Melnea Cass and Muriel Snowden formed a powerful trifecta of black female activists, intent on integrating the Boston Public School System. With the weight of Freedom House behind them, the women leaders created a sizable movement comprised of teachers, parents, and community leaders in Boston. The Boston desegregation movement was multi-faceted and attacked busing strategies, racist ideologies among immigrant groups, and unequal learning facilities. Among its most notable successes was the Freedom House sponsored "Stay at Home for Freedom" protest designed and supported by the women activists and mothers. Leaders asked parents to keep their children out of school as a show of mass support for integrated schooling. This and other protests hastened the pace of school desegregation efforts in the North. Freedom House played a critical role in "creating the climate" of public dissatisfaction that culminated in Judge Arthur Garriott's order to desegregate Boston schools in June of 1974.

For Snowden, the school desegregation battle was a transformative experience. She garnered both accolades and criticism for her participation in Boston's civil rights protests. Black leaders lauded her role in denouncing the inadequacies of the Boston Public School system and her ability to link educational equality with the larger struggle African American equality. Her white supporters, on the other hand, chastised her for becoming too "radical" in her outspoken dissatisfaction with separate and unequal schooling. The Snowdens lost financial backing and personal friends based on outspoken agreement with local civil rights struggles. Loss of support and the overt racism of white officials led Snowden to question her white counterparts' commitment to integration and equality. Amazed by the backlash she experienced from her participation in moderate protest, Snowden began to disassociate herself from white supporters with whom she disagreed. Subsequently, she capitalized on her local notoriety and used it as a platform from which to highlight white culpability and demand change. When asked to speak at the predominantly white St. Andrew's Church in Wellesley, MA, for example, Snowden used this opportunity to denounce white racist attitudes. "The time is now to demand that white America make a drastic change in its thinking" she told her audience in 1964. "This is the end of the line. I can't wait any longer for you to wake up and recognize that it is the sickness of white America that is the problem." White liberal hypocrisy and minimal racial progress forced Snowden to question the effectiveness of moderate activism and augmented her support of more militant measures.

Snowden was not alone in her frustration over the slow pace of civil rights gains. While Freedom House adherents forged ahead in their school desegregation battle, a growing contingent of black Bostonians searched for a more direct route to black equality and opportunity. The circumstances and conditions of the post-war city made Boston an increasingly ripe location for more aggressive styles of black leadership. Clashes between Roxbury citizens and Boston police and lawmakers manifested in the development a militant wing of black politics in Boston that included local and national black power organizations. The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Black Panthers, and other local black cultural and educational groups developed a significant following in Boston in the 1960s. As black Bostonians turned toward more militant action they received the support and attention of black radicals and community leaders. Roxbury and Dorchester citizens saw the likes of Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, and Elijah Muhammad each...
espousing their own position on black power and calling them to join in black revolt.27 Black Bostonians’ avid support of these radicals led local civil rights leaders like Reverend Virgil Wood, head of the local chapter of SCLC, to proclaim in 1965 that “the Negro Movement in Boston is beyond the Civil Rights phase.”28

**Freedom House, Snowden, and the Politics of Black Power**

**Muriel Snowden** counted herself among those who interpreted black power as the next phase of black political struggle. The rising unrest among black Bostonians resonated with her own frustrations over the lack of gains made by moderate protest. Like her fellow Roxbury citizens, she began to see black power as a way to transition into more direct community action. It also freed her from brokering deals with white officials and appeasing white supporters of Freedom House. Muriel Snowden’s speech to the Radcliffe Club in 1975 best illustrates this shift in her political outlook:

> It was not really until the turmoil of the ‘60s with the cries of "Black Power" and "Black is Beautiful" did I realize how much of an Oreo I was and how much I need to learn to "think Black."29

The renewed focus on African American interests showed Snowden the importance of placing black interests and cultural values at the center of her political organizing. It also affirmed the importance of the black communal self-reliance she had previously promoted as a community leader. The Freedom House leader believed that this shift in her political thinking constituted, in her words, a critical “second step” in her personal liberation.

In this second stage, Snowden charted a new course for black activism and community development. She proclaimed:

> The key to the change is the concept, the development, and the expression of Black consciousness. "Black is Beautiful," "Black Power"—"Say it loud, I’m black and I’m proud" that cuts across all kinds of lines in the black community and manifests itself in a multiplicity of ways.30

By the mid 1960s, Snowden backed away from her long-held vision of an integrated community and interracial alliances. Instead, she began to explore avenues for developing black political and cultural consciousness and independent black political organizing. Snowden believed that Freedom House could play a critical role in developing black power in the Roxbury community. As a result, Freedom House became a center dedicated to experimenting with community control and black power organizing despite its outwardly integrationist mission. Under Muriel Snowden’s leadership, Freedom House actively pursued initiatives aimed at promoting black political education, pan-Africanism, black nationalism, and other forms of black self-sufficiency and militancy.

For Snowden, a critical part of developing this new political agenda was revamping Freedom House programming. Some of the most notable changes included a switch from Coffee Hours and International Teas to the “Sunday at 8 Forum.” Muriel and Otto Snowden created the Sunday at 8 Forum as a space for “knowledgeable persons to share the kind of information and suggestions which can give direction and to Roxbury citizens’ thinking.” This forum brought prominent local and national intellectuals and activists to Freedom House to talk about various approaches to black struggle and empowerment. Topics included: “Where is Boston in the Integration Picture?”, “Impressions of Africa from Senator Kennedy,” “Discrimination in Housing,” “School Desegregation—Northern Style with Kenneth Clarke;” SNCC; and voter registration drives in the South.34 Snowden also brought representatives from black power groups like the Deacons of Defense to Freedom House in order to explore further more radical protest options with her fellow Roxbury citizens. With the Sunday at 8 Forum, the Snowdens created a space where the Roxbury community could effectively engage in national and international debates about race, rights, and militancy. These sessions served as consciousness raising meetings and black power strategy sessions for the citizens of Roxbury. With this type of programming the Freedom House leader was able to show support for black power in all of its forms and connect black Bostonians with the larger national movement.

The Snowdens also reconstituted some of
their community initiatives created in the 1950s in order to better support the calls for community control and self-determination. This included retooling existing programming as well as creating new programs. For example, in the organizations’ early years Muriel Snowden spearheaded the Roxbury Community Council (RCC) to support urban renewal and improve the physical landscape of Roxbury. These councils served as the precursor of subsequent community groups interested in more direct approaches to community empowerment and change. By the mid-1960s, Snowden reconstituted the RCC into the Citizens Urban Renewal Action Committee (CURAC) in order to “keep up with urban renewal developments and insist on being included in all decisions” after “being given the run around by federal officials.” With the CURAC, urban renewal took on a new meaning. The council did not limit itself to developing the physical landscape of Roxbury as before. Now, the organization facilitated the development of self-sufficiency and self-reliance in Roxbury. The group organized patrols to ensure the safety of residents, sought to fill the housing needs of Roxbury residents, and looked for creative ways to create community resources for low-income residents. Rather than relying on interracial cooperation and liberal political support for their renewal and safety initiatives, Snowden and her supporters now followed the blue print of black power by turning inward and relying on the black community to solve their pressing social problems. Snowden now vowed that she would not look to officials to support her community efforts or resolve Roxbury’s problems. Instead she called upon Roxbury citizens to do “whatever was necessary” to ensure that the Roxbury Community got the resources it so sorely needed.35

Snowden also created several new programs to promote community control and black self-determination. Among these was the “Blacks Helping Blacks” program which was explicitly aimed at hastening the process of “black communities trying to achieve self-determination,” through community-based employment and referral services.36 Programs like this showed Snowden’s commitment to community development and black power in various forms. In addition, the Freedom House also created several art and culture programs celebrating black heritage and culture. In the midst of this new development, Snowden continued to broaden her own political horizons by exploring pan-African and black nationalist organizing at home and abroad. She shared her experiences, like her visit to the 6th Pan-African Congress in Tanzania where she was a personal guest of Tanzanian president Julius Nyerere, with Roxbury residents in the hopes of creating third word solidarity in the community.37 These programs and political discussions replaced the more moderate programs on the Freedom House calendar for much of the late 1960s and early 1970s.37

Freedom House’s private shift to programming aimed at community control and self-determination reflects the pervasive influence of the national black power movement in local communities of the US. Equally important, this shift shows that black power politics appealed to moderates like Muriel Snowden because of it called for community development, community control, and black pride. These social and political values resonated with Snowden who dedicated her life to bettering the life of black Bostonians through community action. As a result, Muriel Snowden and Freedom House played an unlikely and underappreciated role in the city’s emerging black power protest.

Conclusion

Muriel Snowden’s life-long commitment to community development served as a stabilizing force that allowed the Roxbury community to thrive over the course of the 20th century. As Roxbury resident Mary Jones stated at a dinner honoring the Freedom House founders: “I was born in Roxbury, I grew up in Roxbury, and after I got married I lived in Roxbury. But it was not until I met Muriel and Otto Snowden that I decided to stay in Roxbury.”38 Mrs. Jones’s sentiments highlight the Snowdens’ continual commitment to improving the lives of black Bostonians and the impact of their community activism in the lives of others. Snowden spent
over forty years committed to developing and sustaining the Roxbury community and its goals. In 1984, Muriel Snowden and her husband retired as directors of Freedom House. Leadership of the Freedom House passed on to a new generation who continue to carry on the Snowdens' commitment to increased access to resources for African Americans in Roxbury and surrounding areas.

The changing political outlook and strategy of Muriel Snowden and Freedom House offer an opportunity to examine closely the dynamics of black leadership and community empowerment during the height of the black power movement. The story of Freedom House, particularly in the 1960s, is a story that reflects the shifting ideologies and tactics of black empowerment and the reach of black power in the black communities of Boston. While Snowden began her grassroots organizing with integrationist tactics and goals, the growing hostility of white Bostonians caused her to rethink her commitment to these ideas and tactics. For Snowden in particular, black power offered a way to foreground the goals and needs of the black community without the approval of white officials and supporters. Black power goals and protest also allowed Snowden to foreground the frustrations of the black community unapologetically and to create immediate solutions to community problems. She found that black power ideals and goals resonated with the change and progress she envisioned as a community organizer precisely because they called for community cohesion and reliance. Therefore, Snowden, like many of her fellow Bostonians, understood black power as an indispensable part of community organizing.

The changing priorities and approaches of Muriel Snowden over her career in community organizing reflect the manner in which other African American women also engaged in discussion about the meaning and trajectory of community organizing and social change. They did so in both women-centered and mixed-sex organizations during the latter half of the twentieth century. African American women also contributed to communal definitions of black pride, black power, civil rights, and community. Equally notable, they did so without explicit concerns for gender constraints or dichotomies, and as a result, they articulated and popularized many social programs that had a lasting effect in black communities. In the process, women like Snowden defied popular characterizations of black power as a working-class and male dominated political ideology.

Finally, the intellectual trajectory of Snowden herself is critical to this story. As a middle-class community organizer from New Jersey, Snowden defied traditional frameworks about class, race, and gender in civil rights and black power organizing. Historical narratives often show the ways in which middle-class and working-class organizing among black women was quite different and at times conflicting in terms of goals and tactics. However, Snowden was able to cross class lines in order to develop her vision of community and black empowerment. At times Snowden had difficulty navigating the tensions between black working-class and middle-class visions of organizing and community. However, her ability to adapt to different political strategies and recognize the importance of black power in the Boston community allowed her to weld this divide over time.

This and other research on local organizations like Freedom House suggests that well before and after the call for black power electrified the black masses, many local leaders explored the meaning of black power as a political strategy. It also reveals that there was no stereotypical proponent of black power since middle-class women like Snowden led successful black power protests in their local communities. Muriel Snowden's engagement in black power politics and rhetoric reflect the fact that black power defied a singular definition or manifestation. Instead, black communities developed and sustained black power protest by grappling with ideas of identity, community, racial justice, and equality. In the process, black power gained a host of unlikely supporters and practitioners including Muriel Snowden and her Freedom House.

2. Snowden, for example, recalls that when she faced discrimination at local public venues, her father’s standing in the community forced proprietors to bend segregation laws for Snowden and her siblings. See: Muriel S. Snowden Interview with Cheryl Gikes in Ruth Hill (ed.), The Black Women’s Oral History Project. (Westport: Meckler, 1991).


6. Snowden was a part of many different organizations even while she led Freedom House. See for example: Muriel Snowden, "St. Marks Social Center—Its Place in the Community" Folder 175; Letter from Muriel Snowden to Mr. Henry Berlin, March 25, 1951; "Snowden Work Program by Categories—Internal and external" Folder 1, Snowden Papers.


10. For coverage of Snowden’s activities see Muriel Snowden, Federal Bureau of Investigations File.


20. Ibid.

21. Jeanne Theoharis, "I’d Rather Go to School in the South," 129.

22. Ibid, 137.


29. Ibid.


31. Ibid.


34. For more information on Sunday at 8 programming see Sunday at 8 program flyers. Folder 819, Freedom House Papers.


