

Eartha Mary Magdalene White

Teacher, Businesswoman, Enumerator and Philanthropist

The U.S. Census Bureau is proud of its history of continually evolving to ensure an accurate count of the people of the United States. To accomplish this, the Census Bureau has long embraced the hiring of a diverse workforce representative of local communities and the people who were a part of the neighborhoods that they counted. For this reason, census work was often one of the few government jobs open to minorities. Beginning with the 1870 Census (the first after the abolition of slavery), the Census Bureau began hiring African Americans as enumerators and data processors. With the creation of a permanent Census Bureau in 1902, Black workers and statisticians found an environment with an inclusiveness far greater than many contemporary institutions.

Eartha Mary Magdalene White was born on November 8, 1876, near Jacksonville, Florida, the thirteenth child of former slaves. She was soon adopted by Clara and Lafayette White, who were themselves also former slaves. Lafayette, a laborer and wagon



Eartha M. M. White Collection, Thomas G. Carpenter Library, University of North Florida, Jacksonville, Florida.

Historic census records are maintained and released by the National Archives and Records Administration, not the U.S. Census Bureau.

Visit <http://www.archives.gov> for more information about publicly available records like the one shown here.

Eartha and Clara's 1910 Census.

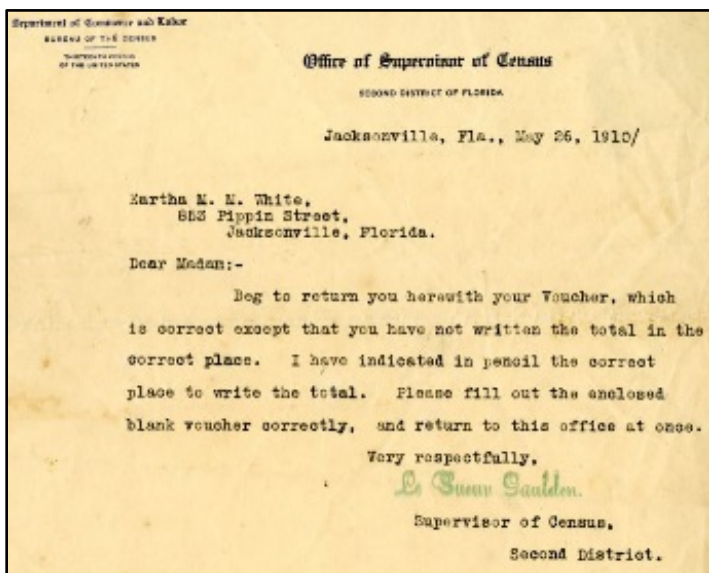
driver, died when Eartha was still young. Clara, who worked in a variety of domestic services, provided Eartha with a strong education at Jacksonville's Stanton School, today known as the prestigious Stanton College Preparatory School, as well as a sense of service and compassion that came to define both of their lives.

After graduating in 1893, Eartha moved to New York City to continue her education as well as to avoid a yellow fever epidemic sweeping Jacksonville. In addition to the Madam Hall Beauty School, Eartha attended the National Conservatory for Music, one of the nation's premier musical institutions at the time. Eartha's musical ability led her to tour the country with one of the nation's first African American opera companies, before returning to Florida in 1896.

Eartha then attended the Florida Baptist Academy, where she soon graduated with her teaching degree, and began a 16-year long career in education. Her first teaching post was in nearby Bayard, where she helped establish the first school and began making her mark as a community activist. In addition to teaching, Eartha took on several other jobs in order to raise funds for her outreach, including working as a realtor and selling insurance, and, in 1910, as a census enumerator.

Eartha's enumerator compensation form.

Eartha M. M. White Collection, Thomas G. Carpenter Library, University of North Florida, Jacksonville, Florida.



Correspondence from the district census supervisor to Eartha.

Eartha M. M. White Collection, Thomas G. Carpenter Library, University of North Florida, Jacksonville, Florida.

After the transition from U.S. Marshals to professional enumerators in 1880, the Census Bureau tried to recruit teachers as prime enumerators. Not only did teachers have greater literacy skills than most of the population, they also had the trust of and knowledge about their local communities.

Beginning on April 15, 1910, Eartha enumerated 4,702 people in her section of Jacksonville and collected data on their agricultural pursuits.

Following the end of the census, Eartha returned to her businesses and philanthropic pursuits. In addition to her other jobs she also started several

companies, including a laundry, a dry goods store, a taxi business, and an employment bureau and house cleaning service. Eartha was so successful she was a founding member of the National Negro Business League along with Booker T. Washington. Despite all of her business acumen, which several scholars and contemporaries estimated as producing well over one million dollars, Eartha never lived a life of leisure or luxury. Instead, almost everything she made went into her charities and community work.

Eartha and Clara had been involved in helping the unfortunate since the 1880s, when Clara operated a soup kitchen. That project evolved into the Clara White Mission. Formally established in 1904 it is still one of the most active community outreach centers for the underadvantaged in Jacksonville. Another major project included the Colored Old Folks Home, established in 1902, which has evolved into the Eartha M.M. White Medical Care Inc. facility and hosts 125 beds. Other projects included establishing a Boy's Improvement Club, a tuberculosis hospital, an orphanage, a public park, and programs to support unwed mothers, alcoholics, and prison inmates.

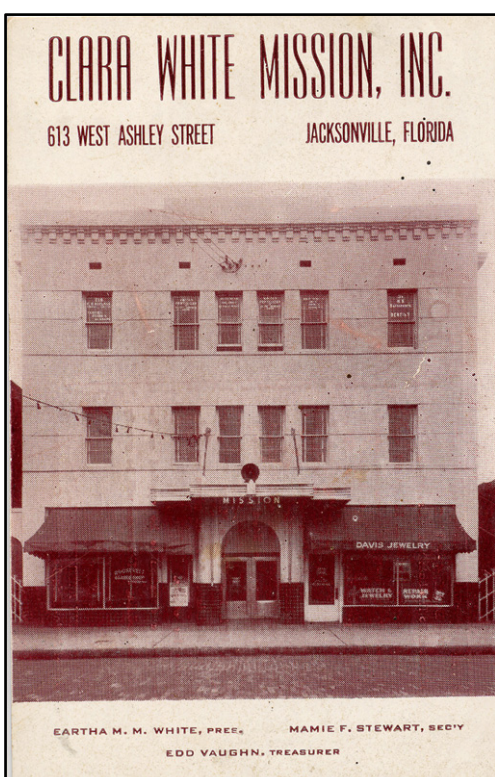


Eartha and her mother Clara.

From the State Archives of Florida, Florida Memory, (<https://www.floridamemory.com/items/show/826>), accessed Jan 31, 2019.

Although Eartha targeted her projects towards the poor black population, which was underserved in the segregated South, her charities supported people of all races. During the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918, one third of the people fed by her soup kitchen were white.

Eartha also supported the advancement of African Americans. In addition to her trailblazing work as a singer and businesswomen, she supported voting rights and helped found the local Colored Citizens Protective League. For a lifetime of public service Eartha received several awards, including the 1970 Lane Bryant Award for Volunteer Service, an appointment to the President's National Center for Volunteer Action in 1971, and recognition as both Florida's Outstanding Senior Citizen in 1972, and as a "Great Floridian" in 2000. Although she had been engaged, Eartha's fiancé died before the wedding, and she remained single the rest of her life. Eartha passed away on January 18, 1974 in Jacksonville. We are grateful for Eartha's service to the U.S. Census Bureau, our nation, and her community.



The Clara White mission, established by Eartha in honor of her mother, still provides services to the needy today.

From the Clara White Mission (theclarawhitemission.org), accessed Jan 31, 2019.