

WISCONSIN WOMEN MAKING HISTORY

THEIR STORIES
OUR LEGACY

www.womeninwisconsin.org



VELMA BELL HAMILTON

1910–2009

City: Beloit, Madison

County: Dane, Rock

Velma Bell Hamilton was the first Black teacher hired in Dane County and the first president of the Madison Chapter of the NAACP.

Velma Bell was born on February 28, 1910, in Pontotoc, Mississippi. In 1914, her family moved to Beloit, Wisconsin, in search of better job opportunities. She graduated valedictorian of Beloit High School in 1926 and enrolled at Beloit College, where she was the only Black student on campus. She majored in sociology and was the first Black person inducted into the Phi Beta Kappa Honor Society. In 1930, she graduated magna cum laude, meaning “with great honors,” due to her outstanding academic record. After graduation, she worked as an assistant professor at Bennett College in North Carolina. A year later, she returned to Wisconsin to get a master's degree in sociology at the University of Wisconsin (UW). She graduated in 1933 and returned to Beloit. In 1934, she married Harry Lemuel Hamilton. They moved to Tougaloo, Mississippi, and worked at Tougaloo College.

In 1942, Hamilton's family moved to Madison, Wisconsin, and she became involved in the fight for civil rights. The following year, community members relaunched Madison's chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to respond to growing concerns about the expulsion of Black students from the UW medical school and segregation in local United Service Organizations. The Hamiltons served as the chapter's first presidents—her first, him second. As president, Velma Hamilton focused on improving employment and housing opportunities for Black residents. She also worked part-time for UW-Extension, grading English and sociology papers while raising her three kids. In 1945, she was appointed to two three-year terms on the Governor's Commission on Human Rights, working to educate Wisconsin residents about prejudice and end statewide discriminatory practices.

Hamilton valued education. In 1950, she became the first Black teacher hired in Dane County, where she taught English at Madison Vocational School (now Madison College). Beginning in 1957, she volunteered with Madison Friends of International Students (MFIS). For over 35 years, she worked at MFIS events, connecting students with program staff and donating money. Having been appointed to two terms on the Governor's Committee on Children and Youth between the mid-1950s and 1963, Hamilton worked to raise community awareness of student dropout rates and their negative effect on children's future employment opportunities, emphasizing the importance of education for children and families in Wisconsin. From the 1950s to the early 2000s, she served in various positions as a member of Beloit's Alumni Council and offered substantial financial support to students.

In 1974, Hamilton began a two-year appointment on the Wisconsin Arts Board, where she advocated for governmental support and funding for the arts in schools. She was the chair of the General and Liberal Studies Department of Madison College for five years before retiring in 1975. She then worked for the North Central Accrediting Association for two years, evaluating Midwestern technical and vocational schools.

Among her many accolades, Hamilton was named Madison's Citizen of the Year by the Madison Newspaper Guild in 1961. She received honorary doctorates from both Beloit College and Lakeland College. Velma Bell Hamilton died on July 9, 2009, at the age of 99.

To learn more, visit womeninwisconsin.org/profile/velma-bell-hamilton