

State officials honor a civil rights pioneer

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In 1990, the Connecticut Historical Commission established an Advisory Committee on Minority and Women's History, to help the commission better recognize the historical contributions of women, Asian-Americans, African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans and other minorities.

Shannahan said the significance of Simpson's work probably would have caused Simpson's home to be listed on the National Register even without the committee. But, Shannahan said Wednesday, he wasn't sure of that.

"[The committee] has opened our eyes," Shannahan said. "So much of American history is about white Anglo-Saxons. There's nothing wrong with that, it's just that it's not the complete story. And we tend to ignore the contributions of other groups."

Marie Simpson, who still lives in the Keney Terrace home she and her husband bought in 1952, said Wednesday he would have been pleased with the National Register listing.

But, she said, the man who said in 1969 that "the racial ghetto must be destroyed in every city in Connecticut" probably would not be satisfied with American race relations in 1994.

"He was never satisfied," Marie Simpson said. "Whenever he saw there was a need for improvement, he would work at it."

Simpson, according to his wife and newspaper accounts from the 1950s and 1960s, was dogged and

persistent in pursuing his goals, rather than bombastic and flamboyant.

He relied on reason, rather than rhetoric, for his achievements, which included opening Hartford-area construction unions and department stores to black workers.

In two series of articles Simpson published in The Courant in 1957 and 1966, he reported on segregation in the South. But after returning, Simpson did not shrink from telling Connecticut that it, too, needed change.

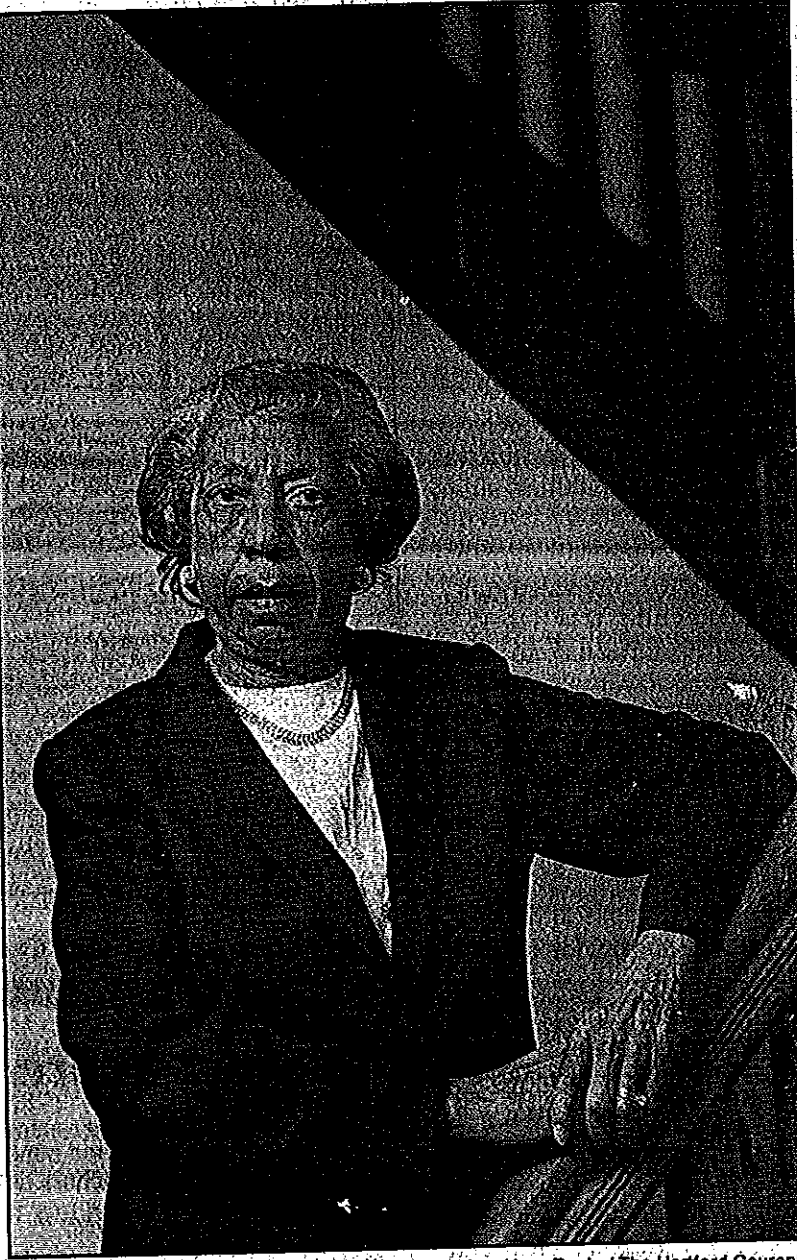
In 1969, Simpson told members of an all-white church in Waterbury that they needed to become better Christians. But he always said "we," instead of "you."

"We in the North can no longer point our finger at the South because we still deprive people of decent housing, of jobs that they are qualified to fill," Simpson told the Waterbury parishioners.

Simpson was born in Florence, Ala., in 1907, and came to Hartford in 1929 to pursue two master's degrees that he received from the Hartford Seminary.

He took the job with the Inter-Racial Commission after 15 years as a social worker in Hartford. The panel, later given enforcement powers, is now known as the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities.

Some historians believe a young Martin Luther King decided to join the ministry partly because of experiences in nonsegregated Connecticut during two summer visits in the 1940s.



Marie Simpson / The Hartford Courant

State officials have presented a commemorative certificate to Marie Simpson of Hartford, whose husband, Frank T. Simpson, was the longtime director of the first state civil rights agency in the United States. He died in 1974.