

# HARRIET IDA PICKENS (1909-1969) AND FRANCES ELIZA WILLS (1916-1998)



After the Navy integrated its female reserve force, Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service, or WAVES, in October 1944, Harriet Ida Pickens and Frances Eliza Wills attended the Naval Reserve Midshipman School at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. In December 1944, these accomplished women received commissions in the WAVES, becoming the first female African American officers in the US Navy.

Pickens, the daughter of William Pickens, a founder of the NAACP, graduated with honors from Smith College in 1930 and later received

a Master's degree in Political Science from Columbia University. She worked in the public health field as supervisor of WPA recreation programs in New York City and later as the Executive Secretary of the New York Tuberculosis and Health Association.

Wills, originally from Philadelphia, graduated from Hunter College in New York City and then received her Master's in Social Work from the University of Pittsburgh. As a graduate student she worked with famed poet Langston Hughes and then settled in New York City where she worked at an adoption agency.

As officers in the WAVES, Lieutenant (Junior Grade) Pickens and Ensign Wills served at the Hunter Naval Training Station in the Bronx, the main training facility for WAVES. Harriet led physical training classes and Frances taught naval history and administered classification tests. Out of 86,000 WAVES that served during World War II, there were only 72 African American WAVES and just two officers. At a time when all military branches were segregated, this small group of African American women created a profound and lasting legacy for all women in the military.