

University of North Carolina at Asheville

Asheville City School Board:  
Efforts to Successfully Desegregate  
the School System

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Department of History in Candidacy for the Degree  
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By  
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The fall of 1969 marked the first year of total desegregation of the Asheville City Schools. Fifteen years following the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling that “separate but equal was inherently equal,” this school system finally adhered to the Constitution.

After years of planning for this momentous occasion, the city of Asheville, as well as the school board, seemed to be well prepared to begin. The *Asheville Citizen* headline 23 August 1969 read “20,698 Students Register In Buncombe County Schools.”<sup>1</sup> The article mentioned nothing about desegregation, suggesting that the city had no expectation for disruptive behavior. Fortunately problems did not develop, in fact, registration ended with “no serious problems despite the inclement weather.”<sup>2</sup> Was everything really pleasing to all the citizens of Asheville, or did they wear a facade, acting as if everything was going well?

Clearly, things were not fine on 29 September 2003, when frustrated African American students staged a walkout. Tensions strengthened throughout the morning, culminating in a clash between students and police officers. The city mayor declared Asheville to be under its first citywide curfew while both State and Federal Bureau of Investigation Officials scrutinized evidence and testimony.

School desegregation created sour feelings for both races throughout the United States, specifically in the southeastern United States where a dual school system had evolved from the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court case that deemed “separate but equal” an acceptable practice. There are numerous case

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<sup>1</sup> “20,698 Students Register In Buncombe County Schools,” *Asheville Citizen*, 23 August 1969, 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

studies on the topic, yet very few concerning the Asheville-Buncombe County School desegregation story. Regardless of the planning and effort put into this transition, the school system did not consider the emotions of the newly integrated students. As a result, a riot ensued led by black students in an attempt to have the same privileges and acceptance among their peers and teachers as to the white students.

Various works have been published concerning the desegregation of American schools. Most of these works focus on the southern school systems, where the desegregated school was deeply rooted. Many of the schools in the southeastern United States fought diligently to continue the dual school system or delay the process of desegregation in any manner possible.

Walter G. Stephan and Joe R. Feagin contend in their book, *School Desegregation: Past, Present, and Future*, that the social environment during the late 1950's changed drastically. The first actions taken in the civil rights movement, was the elimination of the Jim Crow system of segregation. Further, African Americans started sit-ins, voter registration drives and freedom rides. Even though this was occurring, the authors claim that, "Progress in school desegregation was slight. Ten years after the *Brown* decision in 1964, 99% of the nation's black school children were still in segregated schools."<sup>3</sup> Thus, when the Civil Rights Act was enacted, public schools systems were threatened by not receiving money. The authors believe that the desegregation methods that

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Stephan and Joe Feagin eds, *School Desegregation: Past, Present, and Future*, (New York: Plunum Press, 1980), 17.

occurred following this law were unethical because African American schools closed instead of Caucasian schools.<sup>4</sup>

Historian J. Harvie Wilkinson examines the multitude of methods southern school districts used in continuing the segregated school. In Knoxville, Wilkinson explains how the local school district implemented residential zoning as a means to place students in local high schools. The lines were drawn and students were assigned to particular schools. This created racially mixed schools, yet students could apply for a transfer of school if they were in the minority at the assigned school. This case, known as *Goss v. Board of Education*, failed to pass in the Supreme Court. Because it would not be mandatory for races to mix, this plan could not be utilized.<sup>5</sup>

Wilkinson explains the freedom of choice plan that many southern schools used in order to satisfy the courts, but also achieve as much desegregation as possible. In 1966, 12.5% of southern African Americans attended desegregated schools. According to the Fifth Circuit Court, the freedom of choice plan was permissible “in fulfilling its duty to integrate the school system.”<sup>6</sup> The Eighth Circuit court decided that it “is still only in the experimental stage...”<sup>7</sup> This became a way for southern leaders to fulfill the requirements of the federal government, even though bi-racial schools did not appear to be possible six years earlier. Wilkinson contends that this would not lead to integration:

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>5</sup> J. Harvie Wilkinson, *From Brown to Bakke: The Supreme Court and School Integration: 1954-1978*, (New York: Oxford Press, 1979), 95-96.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

In theory, each child's school choice was free; in practice, it was often anything but. For one thing, white children did not choose to go to black schools. And doubtless due to ancient southern mores, many Negroes did not select white schools either.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, with the freedom of choice plan, desegregation could not occur. Both races still controlled their choice as to where they went to school, although the school boards appeared to be putting forth an honest effort to live up to federal regulations.<sup>9</sup>

While most historians base their arguments from specific case studies, the city of Asheville has not been researched thoroughly in the School Board's attempts to successfully desegregate. It is important to note, however, that many of the policies other school districts used in avoiding desegregation were also employed in Western North Carolina. Political leaders and school board members made a token effort to desegregate the schools.

The 1896 United States Supreme Court Case *Plessy v. Ferguson* established that schools could be segregated on the basis that they were "separate but equal."<sup>10</sup> Most segregated schools did not have the same economic allotments for black students as compared to white students.<sup>11</sup> In Washington D.C., one African American student in 1900 received fifty percent of funds that a white student received. In South Carolina, black students made up sixty one percent of the school population yet only received 22.6 percent of the allotted school funds. While there was a less drastic difference in North Carolina

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Southern Education Reporting Services, *With All Deliberate Speed; Segregation-Desegregation in Southern Schools* (New York: Harper Row, 1957), 1.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 3

between funds allotted for African American students and Caucasian students, the spending remained unequal, contradicting *Plessy v. Ferguson*.<sup>12</sup>

Because of an increase in court cases trying the “separate but equal” ruling, North Carolina lawmakers concentrated on areas to improve African American schooling in the 1930’s and 40’s. So, in effect, North Carolina lawmakers improved the quality of some African American schools, only because costs of defending the numerous court cases brought against the state exceeded the costs of simply improving the schools.<sup>13</sup> Race relations were considered to be extremely progressive in North Carolina due to political rhetoric and a lack of massive resistance to school desegregation.<sup>14</sup>

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) consolidated five cases that would be known as *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka*.<sup>15</sup> The court used psychological evidence to illustrate how blacks were emotionally damaged by segregation. Some critics argued that social science evidence should not be permitted to interpret the United States Constitution.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, the NAACP succeeded with their case, and on 17 May 1954, the United States Supreme Court made a unanimous decision that schools must be desegregated.<sup>17</sup> Concerning the decision, Chief Justice Earl

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<sup>12</sup> Louis Harlan, *Separate and Unequal; Public School Campaigns and Racism in the Southern Seaboard States, 1901-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958) 12.

<sup>13</sup> James Paul, *The School Desegregation Decision: A Report to the Governor of North Carolina on the Decision of the Supreme Court of the United States on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May 1954* (Chapel Hill: Institute of Government The University of North Carolina, 1954), 22-23.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Newman, “The Baptist State Convention of North Carolina and Desegregation, 1945-1980,” *North Carolina Historical Review* 75, no. 1 (1998):1.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Pratt, *The Color of Their Skin: Education and Race in Richmond, Virginia, 1954-89* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992) 143.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Warren wrote, “We have this day held that the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment prohibits the states from maintaining racially segregated schools.”<sup>18</sup> The court concluded, “that in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.”<sup>19</sup> Elected politicians of the time disapproved of the Court’s decision. President Dwight Eisenhower shared his opinion by saying the decision to appoint Justice Warren was the “biggest damn fool mistake” of his career.<sup>20</sup>

Southerners condemned the ruling claiming that it was “unwarranted judicial intrusion.”<sup>21</sup> In fact, no southern governor supported the Court’s decision.<sup>22</sup> North Carolina, even though it was considered to be a progressive state in the field of education, was upset about the Supreme Court ruling.<sup>23</sup>

Governor William B. Umstead stated:

The Supreme Court of the United States has spoken. It has reversed itself and has declared segregation in the public schools unconstitutional. In my opinion its previous decision on this question was correct. This reversal of its former decisions is in my judgment a clear and serious invasion of the rights of the Southern states. Nevertheless, this is now the latest interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Paul, 38.

<sup>19</sup> Truman Pierce, *White and Negro Schools in the South: An Analysis of Bi-Racial Education*, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1955), 22.

<sup>20</sup> Pratt, 144.

<sup>21</sup> Pratt, 143.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>23</sup> Vanessa Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>24</sup> Reed Sarratt, *The Ordeal of Desegregation; The First Decade* (Harper and Row: New York, 1966), 4.

The decision remained on the Supreme Court docket because there were questions concerning the implementation of desegregation. Many southern governors adopted a “wait and see” attitude following the original decision. This failure to immediately integrate schools gave southerners a feeling of victory because no changes had been made to the current dual school system.<sup>25</sup> The Court reconvened and on 31 May 1955, the court issued *Brown II*, which stated, “the vitality of these constitutional principles cannot be allowed to yield simply because of disagreement with them.”<sup>26</sup> The justices ordered that integration must continue with “all deliberate speed.”<sup>27</sup> This decision merely handed the problem of desegregating the schools to the local school boards. In the south, desegregation continued to be delayed by various processes.<sup>28</sup>

North Carolina Governor Luther Hodges felt that public schools should remain segregated on the basis that success of all educational facilities hinged on public support. He contended that “the great majority of our citizens—both races included—prefer to keep our schools separate.”<sup>29</sup> Although this was his opinion, he accepted the ruling from the highest court in the land, and pledged “to use every legal means at our disposal to preserve the segregated schools of this state.”<sup>30</sup> Hodges recommended that the children themselves voluntarily attend

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>26</sup> United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Fulfilling the Letter and Spirit of the Law: Desegregation of the Nation's Public Schools: A Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights* (Washington: The Commission, 1976), 1, Hereafter referred to as “Fulfilling the Letter.”

<sup>27</sup> Kim Cobb, “After Desegregation; Public Schools Seek New Remedies Where Race-Based Orders Failed,” *The Houston Chronicle*, 2 June 2002, 1(a).

<sup>28</sup> Wilkinson, 61-63.

<sup>29</sup> Sarratt, 27.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 7.

separate schools in order to preserve the tradition that he so strongly advocated.<sup>31</sup>

In regards to *Brown II*, Dr. Charles F. Carroll, North Carolina State Superintendent of Education asserted:

Any abrupt change to the customary pattern of thought and behavior of a large number of people, regardless of how noble the interest that propels, can produce grave repercussions; change, that is to endure, is born of consent on the part of a firm majority of the people who are to live with it...the most notable observation is that no responsible North Carolinian has proposed the abolition of public education...our basic prayer is that each of us will resolve anew that we shall preserve our cherished system of free public education in North Carolina.<sup>32</sup>

Carroll's statement suggested that since no major discontent had occurred with the continuation of the dual school system, it could continue to be utilized. Thus, the North Carolina General Assembly gave the direction to each local Board of Education with the Pupil Assignment Act in 1955. This demanded that local school boards were to assign students based on the best interest of the child involved, proper administration of the school, proper instruction of the students who attended each school, and finally provide for the health and safety of the children enrolled in each school. The desegregation of the North Carolina Public Schools was left up to local school boards.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to the Pupil Assignment Act, the 1955 North Carolina Session of the General Assembly erected the Pearsall Plan in order to delay school

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>32</sup> Hugh Brown, *E-quality Education in North Carolina Among Negroes* (Raleigh, NC: Irving Swain Press, 1964), 141.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 142.

integration.<sup>34</sup> This plan permitted school boards to organize “local school units to set up administrative procedures regarding school transfers and reassignment requests.”<sup>35</sup> This did nothing but aid in denying African American students the ability to go to school with Caucasian students by several means. First, it made the procedure of requesting a transfer extremely tedious. There was an interview process as well as numerous forms to complete. It also gave the local school boards the ability to refuse admission to any student that they did not wish to grant approval. The committee that created this plan consisted only of white politicians and educators. African Americans wanted to be a part of this process, yet they were ignored.<sup>36</sup> The plan was declared unconstitutional in 1966, but for the time, it kept many African Americans from joining the white school community.<sup>37</sup> In September 1960, only 8 of 173 school systems were desegregated. In May 1964, only .537 percent of African American students attended classes alongside white students.<sup>38</sup> It is clear from these statistics that North Carolina school systems were not concentrating on integrating the schools.

Buncombe County half-heartedly followed recommendations put forth by William Bagwell, the Director of American Friends Service Committee’s School Program, on 20 February 1962. Bagwell addressed the Board and outlined the facts and problems for African American students attending segregated schools in Western North Carolina. In the address to community leaders, Bagwell

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<sup>34</sup> Wilma Peebles-Wilkins, “Reactions of Segments of the Black Community to the North Carolina Pearsall Plan, 1954-1966, *Phylon*, 48 no. 2 (1987), 112.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

discussed statistics concerning black students and their educational plight. Many of the leaders acknowledged the fact that African American students attended schools in facilities that were inferior. These segregated schools for the black students were located in Asheville and because of the larger size of the city all of the black students that lived outside of the city limits were bussed into Asheville in order to attend the segregated schools.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, 150 of the almost 1,000 African American students coming to Asheville boarded a bus before sunrise in order to travel fifty miles to school, thus returning home after sunset.<sup>40</sup> Due to this, many black students spent over twelve hours traveling to and from school and their time spent in the classroom. In contrast, no white students faced this dilemma in the Asheville City Schools.

In addition to the lengthy bus rides, the school faculty was inequitable for African American students. The number of teachers provided for black students was less than the number provided for white students. This created the situation where more students were being taught under the direction of one teacher. In other words, individual students did not receive appropriate lengths of personal attention. According to African American Tyrone Greenlee, a former African American student in the Asheville City School System, the facilities at Asheville High School (AHS) were much larger and much more comfortable than those at the South French Broad School.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> William Bagwell, "The Pitiful State of the Negro Education in Western North Carolina," 20 February 1962, A. Allen Gardner Papers, Special Collections, D. Hiden Ramsay Library, University of North Carolina at Asheville, 1, Hereafter referred to as "The Pitiful State."

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Tyrone Greenlee, interview by the author, tape recording, Asheville N.C., 1 October 2003.

According to Bagwell, there were seven effects of the “unequal and inadequate facilities,” such as Asheville’s all black high school, Stevens-Lee. First, poor facilities gave an inferior education to the “Negro Children.” Not only were the facilities inferior, it was also unconstitutional based on the separate but equal ruling. Also, the fact the school facilities were unequal, made it impossible for school officials to explain the differences in the quality of buildings between the two races, specifically since “separate but equal” no longer held true.<sup>42</sup>

The cost of these segregated schools also added to results of unequal facilities. Lawsuits taken against the city were expensive to defend. The cost of transportation was estimated at one hundred thousand dollars a year. Interaction between people in the public sphere was the final reason Bagwell offered to justify desegregation of the public schools. He suggested that segregation caused spite and strain between the two racial communities and therefore any continuation would continue to split the them.<sup>43</sup> These emotions were evident in the *Asheville Citizen*. “A former student” writes, “Why worry about integration? It’ll never work in this area. Even David Millard and Hall Fletcher junior highs can’t get together on a football game.”<sup>44</sup> Another bitter writer said that some local leaders would “abolish segregation overnight, [and] force integrated schools upon us. The people of North Carolina will not accept such a proposal.”<sup>45</sup> Clearly the emotions ran high in Asheville concerning the impending integration.

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<sup>42</sup> “The Pitiful State,” 2.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> “Bell-Stokely Views on Segregation Bring Varying Degrees of Reaction,” Undated *Asheville Citizen* Article, Helen Reed Papers, Special Collections, D. Hiden Ramsey Library, University of North Carolina at Asheville.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

The dual school system also created obstacles to community development economically, morally, intellectually and spiritually. Finally, these segregated schools gave propaganda to the “enemies of our nation.”<sup>46</sup> Bagwell suggested that in order to achieve equality, the Asheville City Schools needed to terminate the dual school system, which would provide the best possible education for all students.<sup>47</sup>

In response to “The Pitiful State,” the Asheville Area Council on Human Relations (AACHR) joined the struggle to achieve desegregation in the schools of Asheville. This council was founded to nurture greater acceptance and understanding between the Caucasian and African American communities in the Asheville area. Their purpose was to open communication lines between the two races and make the transition easier.<sup>48</sup> Because the leadership of this council was bi-racial, city leadership felt as though they could serve as a model of how desegregation could work, and help smooth the transition of desegregation.<sup>49</sup> The AACHR aided the city in desegregating commercial facilities without causing public uproar. In addition, they helped revoke Article XXIII of the City Code, which forbade white property owners from selling property to any African

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<sup>46</sup> “The Pitiful State,” 2.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Emily Brewer, “Former Teachers Recall High School Race Riots,” *Asheville Citizen-Times*, 11 March 2001, C2.

<sup>49</sup> “Human Relations Project is Highly Encouraging Development; Asheville Area Council on All Inter-Racial Problems,” *Asheville Citizen*, 14 April 1960, Pack Library Newspaper File Collection, North Carolina Collection [Hereafter referred to as PLNFC,NCC], Volume 2, File 1, Race Problems, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, N.C.

American in a mostly white community.<sup>50</sup> This was important because desegregation based on residence boundaries became harder to control.

The initial attempt to desegregate the schools of Asheville was outlined in the *Asheville City Board of Education Plan of Pupil Integration*. The Board planned a gradual integration policy that would take place over five school years. The 1961-62 school year would see the integration of grades first through third. The following year integration began in first through sixth grade the next year integration began through eighth grade, and the next year through ninth grade. Finally, the 1965-66 school year would integrate all students in the Asheville City School district. The Board claimed that this lengthy plan was necessary because of the construction of South French Broad High School.<sup>51</sup>

This freedom of choice plan did not work to achieve racial equality in Asheville schools. Students in segregated schools were allowed to apply for transfer requests to predominantly white schools, although this number was minimal. During the 1964-65 school year one black student attended Jones Elementary School out of 746 children, while Newton Elementary School had 29 black children and 249 white children. This is in no way representative of the black community, which made up thirty percent of the city. In addition, there was no African American faculty employed at these predominantly white schools.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> "Asheville's City Council Calls for Desegregation," *Asheville Citizen*, 14 June 1963, PLNFC, NCC, Volume 2, File 1, Race Problems, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, N.C.

<sup>51</sup> "Asheville City Board of Education Plan for Pupil Integration," Michael F. Keleher Collection, Special Collections, D. Hiden Ramsay Library, University of North Carolina at Asheville, 1.

<sup>52</sup> "Plan for the Asheville City Schools for the Desegregation of its School System in Compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964," Asheville City School Board, adopted 6 July 1965, Asheville City Schools Foundation, Appendix 1-D. Hereafter referred to as "Plan of Compliance."

The Board of Education developed a plan for desegregation to follow the ruling in the Civil Rights Act of 1964.<sup>53</sup> In this document, the history of token desegregation put forth by the Asheville City Schools outlined the token desegregation efforts that they attempted. The School System gave African Americans the choice to attend the previous all white high school, yet forced integration did not occur. The reason why full integration occurred was that the school system was “under Court Order (July 2, 1965) to assign these students to its previously all-white high school.”<sup>54</sup> O.L. Sherrill, an African American teacher in the Asheville City Schools, said that the thought was that it would be acceptable to “all of a sudden” integrate the high schools. No problems would arise from it and therefore the school did not need to consider anything too detailed. Instead of worrying about important issues like how students react towards one another, school officials were more concerned about the school mascot and colors.<sup>55</sup>

This Board’s claims concerning the construction of a new school predicted this scenario accurately. On 8 March 1961, the *Asheville Citizen* reported that the addition of South French Broad School would replace the deteriorating Stephens-Lee High School. Thus the current all black high school would be used

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Of 1964,” adopted 6 July 1965, Asheville City Schools Foundation, Appendix 1-D. Hereafter referred to as “Plan of Compliance.”

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>55</sup> O.L. Sherrill, interview by Dorothy Joynes, tape recording, 25 August 1994, O.L. Sherrill Collection, Special Collections, D. Hiden Ramsay Library, University of North Carolina at Asheville, Asheville, N.C.

as a junior high following the completion of the new high school.<sup>56</sup> Originally, the school was intended to be the segregated African American high school in Asheville. The city planned for Stephens-Lee to serve as a junior high school.<sup>57</sup> The Board did not follow through with the original plans to have the school system integrated by the 1965-66 school year. It was this school year that Stephens-Lee was abandoned. The community misunderstood the meaning of this school for the African American community. An article written by Joan Lois Lockhart simply attributed the loss of these names in the community to “modernization.” So, because of modernization, the African American community lost a part of their legacy when Stephens- Lee was closed down.<sup>58</sup> Finally, in the spring of 1968, Board members were instituting full scale integration with their proposal of using South French Broad as an integrated ninth grade school. According to the *Asheville Citizen*, the school board reported, “... such a move would achieve a proper mixture of the races, as now required, in all three schools.”<sup>59</sup> This suggests that the Asheville City School Board did not focus on the integration of its schools, but rather it was forced by the encroachment of the federal government to enforce desegregation.

Before integration occurred at Asheville High School (AHS) in 1969, numerous groups banded together in order to prepare for a smooth transition for

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<sup>56</sup> “South French Broad Avenue Site OK’d For New High School,” Phillip Clark, *Asheville Citizen* 8 March 1961, PACK Library, PLNFC, NCC, Volume 44, Files 42.29, S-Z, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, N.C.

<sup>57</sup> “New High School Will Be Built,” Bruce Gourlay, *Asheville Citizen*, 19 July 1963, Pack Library, PLFNC, NCC, Volume 44, Files 42.29, S-Z, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, N.C.

<sup>58</sup> Untitled article, *Asheville Citizen*, Joan Lois Lockhart, 3 July 1967, Pack Library, PLFNC, NCC, Volume 44, Files 42.29, S-Z, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, N.C.

<sup>59</sup> “School Board OKs 9<sup>th</sup> Grade School,” Mary Cowles, *Asheville Citizen*, 16 April 1968, Pack Library, PLFNC, NCC, Volume 44, Files 42.29, S-Z, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, N.C.

the students of the separate African American schools and the white schools. The Asheville Area Council on Human Relations was already working hard on the desegregation issue.<sup>60</sup> Teachers met in desegregated groups to discuss the upcoming year two years in advance.<sup>61</sup> This was not enough though. Lucy Herring, a well renowned African American educator in Asheville said that black and white teachers had, “only a cursory acquaintance... We never had an opportunity to know one another as peers. The blinding wall of segregation was a deterrent to our understanding and mutual respect.”<sup>62</sup> The fact that black and white teachers did not communicate except in areas where they were forced, spoke volumes to the students. Why should they try to interact with one another when the adults were not setting the example by doing so?

Drawing conclusions from the *Asheville Citizen*, the mixing of the two races did not appear to be troublesome. The first day of registration ended without racial problems. Registration numbers were average for every grade. There is not one mention about the integration of the schools except for “all senior high school students in the city attending Asheville High School, all ninth grade students attending South French Broad School...”<sup>63</sup> This supports the idea that the city felt that everything was running smoothly.

The morning of 29 September 1969 began as any day at AHS. At 9:15, approximately 200 African American students walked out of their classes and sat

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<sup>60</sup> Brewer, C2.

<sup>61</sup> Charles Wykle, interview by author, tape recording, Asheville, N.C., 26 September 2003.

<sup>62</sup> Bonnie J. Krause, “‘We Did Move Mountains!’ Lucy Saunders Herring, North Carolina Jeanes Supervisor and African American Educator, 1916-1968,” *The North Carolina Historical Review*, 70 No. 2, (2003) 210.

<sup>63</sup> “It’s Back to School Time In Buncombe,” *Asheville Citizen*, 21 August 1969, 6.

on the steps leading to the entrance of the newly integrated school. AHS principal Clarke Pennell later insisted that he attempted to discuss the issue with the disgruntled students “six or seven times.”<sup>64</sup> The students refused to return to class or leave the school campus. They had a list of grievances but no delegated group of representatives to discuss them with the school administration. When students did not respond to Pennell's request, he called the Asheville City Police (ACP).<sup>65</sup>

The African American students planned before the day began.<sup>66</sup> According to some black students at AHS, the expulsion of Leo Gaines triggered the walkout, because of he simply refused to wear socks. Not only because of this instance Gaines was expelled, but he had previously defied school officials in other matters. The expulsion came as a last straw for Pennell. Gaines admitted to Pennell's charges, and asserted that the black students would not return to classes until their grievances were met.<sup>67</sup>

One self-appointed black student leader, James McDowell, said, “If it takes burning the town down, we're going to get some equality over there [AHS]...If you're white, you're right.”<sup>68</sup> Some grievances were that the majority of the cheerleaders at AHS were white, the cosmetology teacher told black students that she could only do white peoples' hair, athletes were forced to get haircuts,

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<sup>64</sup> Ed Seitz, “Curfew Called After Clash: Protest Sparks Violence,” *Asheville Citizen*, 30 September 1969, 5, Asheville High Curfew Vertical File, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, N.C., Hereafter referred to as “Curfew.”

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> “Open Meeting is Scheduled In High School Disturbance,” *Asheville Citizen*, 30 September 1969, 15, Asheville High Curfew Vertical File, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, N.C., Hereafter referred to as “Open Meeting.”

<sup>68</sup> “Countywide Curfew Remains in Effect,” *Asheville Citizen*, 1 October 1969, 1, Asheville High Curfew Vertical File, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, N.C.

African American students were tardy to class because of transportation arrangements, African American history was taught by a white teacher from a text written by a white writer and African American students were called “colored” and “boy” by white students.<sup>69</sup> Charles Wykle, a first year teacher at AHS in 1969, confirms that a lot of this occurred making the African American students uncomfortable.<sup>70</sup>

After Pennell called the ACP, the patrols arrived and made a decision on how to disperse the crowd.<sup>71</sup> The decision was made that students needed to evacuate school grounds by lunchtime, in order to avoid any possible situations that could worsen during the lunch period such as mass violence. Once additional police arrived, they asked the students to leave the school grounds, but the students responded with “singing and clapping and obscene language.”<sup>72</sup> Policeman Eugene Jarvis, along with a group of officers trained in crowd control approached the group of students and asked them to leave. Some students left, while others did not and thus were informed that they were breaking the law.<sup>73</sup>

At 11:35 A.M., the police approached the gathered students. Those students on the left side of the crowd moved into McDowell Street and the other side of the crowd began to resist. Jarvis described the throwing of objects, officers falling onto the ground and students diving from the AHS terrace onto police officers. While he admitted that there was physical contact by police

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<sup>69</sup> “Open Meeting,” 15.

<sup>70</sup> Charles Wykle, interview by author, tape recording, Asheville, N.C., 26 September 2003.

<sup>71</sup> “Curfew,” 5.

<sup>72</sup> Mary Cowles, “Police Action is Described,” *Asheville Citizen*, 4 October 1969, 3, Asheville High Curfew Vertical File, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, N.C..

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

officers, it occurred because the officers were carrying out their jobs and protecting themselves.<sup>74</sup>

ACP Lieutenant John Pipitone was behind the school, where he began to see windows in the school nursery being shattered with rocks. Children were being forced under desks in order to get some cover.<sup>75</sup> Wykle thought it was interesting that the students took their anger out on the school building. It symbolized their anger at the circumstances of being removed from their roots and placed in a new school where they did not know anyone.<sup>76</sup> Greenlee agreed, as he commented on the loss of identity and the breakdown of African American culture because of school integration.<sup>77</sup> Greenlee said that going to a segregated school created a family type of environment that he felt very comfortable in, a place where his teachers care replicated that of an “aunt.”<sup>78</sup>

Although no one was seriously injured, flying rocks, bricks and police batons wounded several students and officers.<sup>79</sup> Businesses in Asheville also reported broken windows from thrown bricks. Mathews Motors, Towne House Bakery, Pick-N-Save and Harrin’s Trim Shop even had holes from bullets shot through windows.<sup>80</sup>

Shortly after the confrontation, Asheville Mayor Wayne Montgomery contacted North Carolina Governor Bob Scott who sent twenty-seven riot-trained

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Wykle.

<sup>77</sup> Greenlee.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> “Curfew,” 1.

<sup>80</sup> Jay Hensley, “City Police Arrest Two Militant Leaders,” *Asheville Citizen*, 1 October 1969, 2, Asheville High Curfew Vertical File, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, N.C.

State Troopers to evaluate the situation.<sup>81</sup> The city was then placed under a state of emergency and a citywide curfew was issued. The curfew ordered that no one should be out of their homes after 9 p.m. until 6 a.m., except for policemen, medical personnel, utility workers and media workers.<sup>82</sup>

Over the next two days, numerous meetings were held amongst a diverse group of community members to discuss the confrontation. On 30 September 1969, the Buncombe County Community Relations Council (BCCRC) held a meeting that was open to anyone who wanted to attend. Co-chairman of the BCCRC, Reverend David J. Armstrong, said on behalf of the council, "We shall move as swiftly as possible to bring about resolution of the problems."<sup>83</sup> The council invited community members to speak, and here the African American students presented their list of grievances again. Several students who approached the board claimed that violence would not have occurred if the police had not been used. Gaines also spoke in front of the BCCRC expressing his version of the story. According to the *Asheville Times*, Gaines claimed that the ACP used excessive force in the clash, and that, "Asheville will continue to have hell until we get what we want."<sup>84</sup> The BCCRC took on the responsibility of thoroughly investigating the incident using evidence from police and students.<sup>85</sup>

On 1 October 1969, the school board announced their plans to pacify the students at AHS. Schools vowed to continue using the orientation program for faculty, staff and students that had been in place for a year. This program was

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<sup>81</sup> "Curfew," 5.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>83</sup> "Open Meeting," 15.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

designed to discuss and understand the differences in cultures and emotions between the two races. They promised to find an immediate part-time African American cosmetology teacher and for the following year, hire one full time. They acknowledged the inefficiency of the transportation system, but could do nothing about it at that time, although it would be factored in for students who were tardy because of poor transportation.<sup>86</sup>

A student government committee was responsible for developing a dress code and, until then, the board refused to make a decision concerning the hairstyle of athletes. The rule requiring male students wearing socks also lay in the hands of the student government dress code. All insignias on athletic jerseys and band uniforms displaying the former Lee H. Edwards High School would be removed and replaced with AHS patches.<sup>87</sup>

A memorial reflecting the two principals at the former Stephens-Lee High School would be added to the AHS campus. This would help add a sentiment of remembrance and legacy for the African American students', which was taken away when they were removed from their former high school. In the meantime, the board transferred all the trophies from the former Stephens-Lee High School to AHS. Finally, corporal punishment would still be permitted, although the administration would promote other means of punishment.<sup>88</sup> The Asheville Board

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<sup>86</sup> Mary Cowles, "School Board Acts on Student Demands," *Asheville Citizen*, 2 October 1969, 1, Asheville High Curfew Vertical File, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, N.C.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

of Education considered these to be, “all reasonable concessions, possible at this time.”<sup>89</sup>

Asheville schools reopened on 2 October 1969 following a court injunction that restrained anyone who intended to interfere with the regular functioning of schools.<sup>90</sup> The school, occupied by police officers, reported no incidents on the first day back to classes. Of the 2,040 students enrolled at AHS, 841 students did not attend classes. The desegregated ninth grade school, South French Broad, reported 256 of 752 absent.<sup>91</sup> The curfew ended on 3 October 1969.<sup>92</sup> The city’s first ever state of emergency ended 4 October 1969.

The walkout and subsequent violence resulted from the African American students being moved from their school into the formerly all white high school in Asheville. The desegregation plan devised for the Asheville City Schools was very well prepared in accordance to the later revoked Pearsall Plan. Even so, in a United States Court of Appeals decision 2 December 1970, the ruling supported the actions taken by the School Board:

...it is plain to see that the Asheville City School Board has gone further down the road toward desegregation than any school board has ever been compelled to go, and probably much further than could be required.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>90</sup> Ed Seitz, “Schools to Reopen; Militants Enjoined,” *Asheville Citizen*, 2 October 1969, 1, Asheville High Curfew Vertical File, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, N.C.

<sup>91</sup> Mary Cowles, “Asheville Schools Open As Police Stand Guard,” *Asheville Citizen*, 3 October 1969, 1, Asheville High Curfew Vertical File, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, N.C.

<sup>92</sup> Ed Seitz, “Curfew Dropped; Emergency Bans Remain In Effect,” *Asheville Citizen*, 3 October 1969, 1, Asheville High Curfew Vertical File, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville, N.C.

<sup>93</sup> “United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit; No. 14, 497,” Michael F. Keleher Collection, Special Collections, D. Hiden Ramsay Library, University of North Carolina at Asheville, 8.

Many of the city's citizens believed that the Board had met all demands and beyond in order to meet the laws put forth by the federal government. On the other hand, evidence shows that this was not the case. The school board was clearly integrating the schools due to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. There was a sign declaring the building to be Asheville High School that hung over the old Lee-Edwards High School sign. This engraving was still visible and undoubtedly added fuel to the fire of the African American students.<sup>94</sup>

The Board accepted the numerous suggestions given to them by educational groups and others who had experience with these issue of race. The only issue that they would not be able to account for was the students' emotional comfort. Stephens-Lee High School was a symbol for the African American community in Asheville. In 1957, the school offered French, Spanish, advanced high school math, biology, physics, chemistry, dramatics, instrumental and vocal music, business education and social studies.<sup>95</sup> As Wykle mentioned, the homecoming queen, who was also president of student run organizations at Stephens-Lee, went to AHS and was not held in such high esteem at the integrated school. Neither the trophies nor heritage symbols of Stephens-Lee High School were displayed at AHS upsetting many of the African Americans. They did not feel included in this new school.<sup>96</sup> Much of the pride that the African American students had not only in themselves, but also their environment, disappeared.

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<sup>94</sup> Wykle.

<sup>95</sup> "Application for Local Landmark Designation Stephens-Lee Community Center," 1991 or 1992, Heritage of Black Highlanders Collection, Special Collections, D. Hiden Ramsay Library, University of North Carolina at Asheville.

<sup>96</sup> Wykle.

Unfortunately, emotions are something that cannot be accounted for. Michael Keheler, an Asheville School Board member at the time of desegregation wrote the following:

True, in many cases there was mere lip service to the law of the land – a token integration and in many cases there were real efforts to circumvent...the Supreme Court decision. However, I feel that the ACSB has been sincere in their efforts to live up to the spirit as well the letter of the law.<sup>97</sup>

It is unfortunate that the riot occurred because it created a sad and frustrating year for the students. The ACSB did not account for emotions such as the loss of heritage from African American students toward their previous high school.<sup>98</sup>

Charles Wykle hoped that desegregation would go smoothly and no altercations would occur. In reality though, Wykle knew that the situation would not be so simple. People of different races did not actively socialize in the community. He charges that the solutions used in 1969 were temporary, and thus a riot again occurred in 1972.<sup>99</sup> Greenlee, who is well recognized in Asheville for his service in the program “Building Bridges,” encourages discussion across racial boundaries. He admits that racial tension not only exists today, but is deep rooted and cannot be easily resolved. The racial uneasiness that lives today stems from institutions like the dual school system erected in North Carolina.<sup>100</sup> In the short term, the Asheville City School Board may have

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<sup>97</sup> Michael F. Keleher, handwritten notes, no date, Michael F. Keleher Collection, Special Collections, D. Hiden Ramsay Library, University of North Carolina at Asheville, 1.

<sup>98</sup> Wykle.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Greenlee.

been doing the students a favor by not making them confront the inevitable issue of integration, but in the long run it has hampered many people and their sentiments towards race to this day.

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