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Integrating "The Star City of the South": Roanoke School Desegregation and the Politics of Delay

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Integrating “the Star City of the South”: Roanoke School Desegregation and the Politics of Delay

Peter Carr Jones

Clearwater, Florida

Bachelor of Arts, Washington and Lee University, 2006

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of the College of William and Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of Master of Arts

Lyon Gardiner Tyler Department of History

The College of William and Mary
May 2013
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This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The history of the Civil Rights Movement is often about resistance (both non-violent and violent) to racist environments. In Roanoke, Virginia, it took nearly twenty years to integrate city schools, yet opposition by the African American community has been nearly forgotten. School closings in Prince Edward County became the enduring image of civil rights in Virginia, while historians have generally ignored the patterns of desegregation in Roanoke and other areas in western Virginia because they assumed integration there to be a smooth transition. The case study of Roanoke provides a very different response to civil rights in Virginia that was directed by the city’s white and black elites. While change elsewhere was volatile, change in Roanoke occurred at a much slower pace, a pace comfortable for these leaders. Roanoke’s history does not mirror the traditional model of civil rights action spearheaded by youth and challenges traditional views of Virginia’s postwar twentieth century political history. At the same time, Roanoke’s integration shows that even where whites and blacks generally frowned upon racial violence, children could still receive psychological scars.
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I wish to thank the archivists at the Library of Virginia, the Southeastern branch of the National Archives, the Public Library of Roanoke, the special collections of Washington and Lee University, and Roanoke City Schools for providing access to their files. This work benefitted from financial support by Washington and Lee’s Summer Research Program and Jenks Award, Tyler Travel Grants, and James Madison University’s writing grants. I particularly wish to thank the Harrison Museum of African American History and Culture in Roanoke. They opened their doors to me completely—donating time, resources, and knowledge. My greatest debt is to those who gave me their stories. Without them, my work would be incomplete.
This Thesis is dedicated to those who gave their stories so that the future would be more informed of the past and to my parents who have educated me more than they’ll know...
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Introduction

The School Board of Roanoke City welcomed Dr. Harry T. Penn, a dentist and “Negro political leader,” to its monthly meeting on July 14, 1948.1 Roanoke’s morning newspaper announced the public school system would now be desegregated on page four, under a misleading title. Dr. Penn’s rise to the formerly all-white school board came two years before the University of Virginia desegregated its law school, said to be the first public institution desegregated in Virginia.2 Yet the act earned little public comment from Roanoke’s white observers. Penn’s promise “to render service, not to any one class, but to all” received less newspaper ink than new cafeteria equipment for a Junior High School. This would not be the last news on Roanoke’s desegregation to be hidden from the public, nor would it signify the approach of integrated public schools. These did not come until over a quarter century of struggle.

The history of the Civil Rights Movement is often about resistance (both non-violent and violent) to racist environments. In Roanoke, Virginia, passive resistance to all forms of desegregation delayed meaningful integration longer than massive resistance. “Civil” politics and a lack of open conflict ensured that change came at a pace comfortable to white leaders. As school closings in Prince Edward County became the enduring image of civil rights in Virginia, historians generally ignored the patterns of desegregation in Roanoke and other

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2 Peter Wallenstein, Cradle of America: Four Centuries of Virginia History (Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2007), 336-342.
areas of western Virginia because they assumed integration there to be a smooth transition.\(^3\) The case study of Roanoke provides a very different response to civil rights in Virginia that was directed by the city’s white and black elites. While change elsewhere was volatile, change in Roanoke occurred at a much slower pace, a pace acceptable to these leaders. Roanoke’s history does not mirror the traditional model of civil rights action spearheaded by youth and challenges traditional views of Virginia’s postwar twentieth century political history. At the same time, Roanoke’s integration shows that even where whites and blacks generally frowned upon racial violence, children could still receive scars, both physical and psychological.

Yet the damage done was more subtle than that thrust upon communities in eastern Virginia. After all, the State’s massive resisters closed school systems, amended the state constitution, and even razed entire neighborhoods to avoid desegregating schools.\(^4\) As a candidate for Governor, Lindsay J. Almond famously stated that he “would rather lose [his] right arm than see the first nigra child admitted to the white schools of Virginia” during a campaign speech in Roanoke’s all-white Jefferson High School.\(^5\) Despite Almond’s fiery rhetoric, Roanoke always considered itself more progressive towards African Americans.

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\(^5\) Linwood Holton, *Opportunity Time* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 51. Years afterward Roanoke’s African Americans would jokingly refer to him as “one-armed Lindsay.”
than the rest of Virginia. Former NAACP President Alphonso Holland, concluded the city deserved “an A minus for all they have done.” From A. L. Holland’s perspective, Roanoke managed civil rights laws in a fairer way than many of Virginia’s communities. Over Holland’s lifetime he saw segregation’s dehumanizing effect on African Americans and so any progress was positive. Yet, his assessment did not console African American students who attended overcrowded, outdated schools while the board quietly resisted desegregation plans. The desegregation process in their public schools started in 1948 but was not effectively over until 1974. Why did a city that prided itself on “good” racial relations take almost two decades to achieve effective desegregation? City officials only moved as far as federal courts forced them, while they actively claimed to desegregate more quickly.

Part of the explanation can be found in Roanoke’s social geography. It was a very segregated city with most of the African American population living immediately north of downtown while whites lived in the south and along city-county borders. Roanoke also had a much lower proportion of African Americans than the rest of Virginia. The academic consensus on Virginia’s twentieth century history considers desegregation almost a non-factor in the western portion of the state because so few African Americans resided there. Although in the late

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6 The end date refers to an appeals case won by the City in which the decision certified that the schools had a balanced racial ratio. Due to increased housing segregation, recent Supreme Court decisions, and a revitalized neighborhood schools movement, Roanoke City Schools, like those around the country have re-segregated in the past two decades.

nineteenth century the black community made up a third of Roanoke’s total population, by 1950, the population of Roanoke was 91,921 with 14,575 African Americans comprising less than twenty percent. In 1961, journalist Benjamin Muse, asserted that “race prejudice is at a minimum” in northern and western Virginia where “negroes are few.” The city leadership echoed this sentiment. Throughout the school debates, individuals, black and white, spoke of the great relations enjoyed in the city compared to other places in the South. Many in the city worked hard to maintain a moderate, civilized image, but not all held this perspective. The school board chairman once advised a black member of the school board to “just keep in mind [that] all the Mississippi thinking people are not in Mississippi.”

By revealing the stories of many who lived through desegregation, I hope to challenge historians who describe desegregation in Virginia as a process that lasted less than a decade, began with the Brown Decision, underwent Massive Resistance, achieved legal and legislative recourse, and saved public schools. In Roanoke, massive resistance never became an official policy. With Roanoke’s school desegregation and the movement for civil rights, a pattern of leadership emerged in which members of the African American middle class agreed to

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8 US Census Data, 1950, Roanoke City, VA. This is about 15% of the population, a fairly high number for western Virginia (nearby Wythe County had only 4.6% in 1950). In Surry County, located in Southside Virginia, 63.7% of the population was African American in 1950.


10 Roanoke City School Board Minutes, April 13, 1964, 7. Dr. Paxton, a black school board member, says “This is a fine city with splendid race relations” but he does not “want to see Roanoke have the same difficulties other communities have had.”

minimize open conflict in return for a voice in some city decisions. Indeed, prominent African American leaders did have constant representation in local government. After Dr. Penn’s original victory, the school board had numerous important African American representatives including the Reverend A.L. James who replaced Dr. Penn in 1951. Dr. Wendell Butler rose to chairman of the city school board from 1975 to 1980. The City elected Reverend Noel C. Taylor to City Council in 1970 and then Mayor from 1975 to 1992. Yet, for twenty five years Roanoke had African American representation on a school board that did not move towards desegregation unless forced to do so by judicial mandate. This thesis examines how and why this happened, and what Roanoke’s story contributes to our understanding of both Virginia’s history as well as that of the civil rights movement.

Though important, newspaper articles, court briefs, school board minutes, and desegregation plans leave critical gaps in the history of school desegregation in Roanoke. City leaders primarily created these documents and left their own perspective on the record. The participants themselves tell a more complex narrative.12 Many meetings took place behind closed doors or in

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12 Several interviews were conducted between 2004-2007. The interviewees range from some of the first integrated students, teachers, school administrators, politicians, parents of students, school board members, and many others white and black, male and female. They are part of a larger project on school desegregation in western Virginia conducted by Ted DeLaney and other professors at Washington and Lee University. As the project is ongoing and many of the participants have not yet had a chance to edit and return transcripts of the interviews, they remain anonymous but are identified with pseudonyms (“Fred,” “Ella”) and by their relationship to the project (a black student, a white teacher, etc.). Their words often do a much better job than mine of explaining the emotions and atmosphere involved. The Harrison Museum of African American Culture conducted several oral histories in the early 1990s with African American community leaders about the communities history in the twentieth-century, with topics ranging from the local All-black life saving crew to urban renewal, and especially civil rights. Tapes of several interviews conducted by Lillian Potter have also been used. These feature important members of the white and black communities, including several white ministers.
executive session. This study of desegregation in Roanoke will not use oral histories to supply facts that provide alternative explanations; instead, as Elizabeth Tonkin argues, these oral histories make us “uncomfortably aware of the elusive quality of historical truth itself.” These oral sources will challenge Roanoke’s popular historical myth of “good race relations” and how it compares to other “moderate” Southern cities.

Roanoke was one of several “moderate” southern cities. Many scholars have examined such cities as case studies illuminating larger aspects of the civil rights movement. These included William Chafe’s history of Greensboro, North Carolina and Davison Douglas’ work on Charlotte. Like Roanoke, leaders in these cities made a conscious decision that token desegregation provided economic benefits. Moderate cities had their own “civil” politics which proved problematic to African American leaders who had to follow these political limitations, while still engaging in meaningful change. In Greensboro, Chafe points to activist students who led direct protests to racial injustice and “civil” politics. Douglas saw similar popular movements at work in Charlotte during the early 1960s era of desegregation, but by 1970 it was legal activism that brought involved in integration. Finally, the author conducted a round of interviews with additional students, teachers, and community members. William and Mary’s Institutional Review Board approved the interview protocol, but per IRB requirements some of these interviews were destroyed and are unavailable for future researchers.


about the most change. In Roanoke, no African American college drew student activists to protest with the volume of those in Greensboro. Likewise, Roanoke followed a similar legal path to Charlotte, but its busing system looked radically different from Charlotte’s. These major differences helped shape Roanoke and ultimately delayed meaningful integration.

Roanoke’s Early Racial History

Major racial conflicts rocked Roanoke at the height of its nineteenth century economic boom and these played an important role in developing its “civilized” reaction to threats of racial violence. One resident mentioned how the early history affected such thinking: “that lynching, was such ancient history that was buried and left. Because it would bring to rise something that the [city] leadership thought ‘well we don’t want this anymore because it will never happen again.’” The early history of Roanoke’s African American community provided an important context to its politics of respectability. Hilly and remote, western Virginia generally did not support tobacco farming as easily as the Tidewater region. The culture of tobacco and a plantation slave labor system did not spread to the former as it did in the latter. As a result, western Virginia generally had a much smaller African American population. When the Supreme Court first announced the Brown decision, the

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16 “Fred,” White male teacher, Interview with Author, June 14, 2005, Roanoke, VA, 16.
17 See Appendix A
Roanoke Times reinforced the fact that the ruling did not apply to Buchanan County in Southwestern Virginia, as no African Americans resided there.  

Roanoke was a city forged by the railroads and this had important consequences for its geographic and economic development. The Virginia and Tennessee Railroad which became the Norfolk and Western, then the Norfolk Southern, crossed through a swamp named Big Lick. At this intersection of two lines, a city named after the nearby Roanoke River was born. With the railroad came increased migration, commerce, and industry. As a “Magic City” in the New South, Roanoke grew by “around 2,000 percent from 1882-1890.” This tremendous growth brought businessmen from the North who hoped to make money on Roanoke’s boomtown status. The presence of so many northerners, compared to so few native Virginians made Roanoke rather unique among Virginia cities and indeed, cities throughout the South.

Despite its unique population, Roanoke was not immune to the post-reconstruction racial conflict that plagued other southern cities. Several cases of...

18 "Ban Does Not Affect Schools in Buchanan" Roanoke Times, May 19, 1954.

19 Raymond P. Barnes, A History of the City of Roanoke, (Radford, Virginia; Commonwealth Press, 1968), 48-49. Barnes' work is a business oriented chronology. As a source for dates, place names, and early history his book is more successful than as a scholarly history. It ends in 1940 and has little perspective on desegregation issues.

20 Roanoke was originally named Big Lick because the swampy area actually contained a significant salinity. Local wildlife flocked to the area, because it provided them salt which they could not ingest in other ways. This “salt lick” became “Big Lick.” When the N&W railroad decided to make Big Lick a major terminus, it changed its name to the better sounding Roanoke, after the nearby Roanoke River.

21 Rand Dotson, Roanoke, Virginia, 1882-1912: Magic City of the New South (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 239. There are several “Magic Cities” in the south, all named because of their “magic” growth, the most famous is Birmingham, Alabama which had the second highest percentage of growth behind Roanoke.
lynching within the city attest to this. The first notable case came in 1892 with the lynching of William Lavender by a group of masked men.\footnote{Barnes, \textit{History of Roanoke}, 245.} No one was convicted of any crimes related to the lynching, and city chroniclers considered it a “civilized” lynching conducted by “respectable citizens.”\footnote{Dotson, \textit{Magic City of the New South}, 127-129.} Another lynching occurred a year later. This time, a mob of poor whites lynched Thomas Smith. Unlike the previous vigilante violence sanctioned by city leaders, the mayor attempted to protect the accused and called in the city militia. Eight citizens died in the ensuing riot. Roanoke's violence spurred a state-wide response to limit such lawless behavior.\footnote{Dotson, \textit{Magic City of the New South}, 160.} The Magic City of the South, as Roanoke's boosters referred to the city, was far from perfect.\footnote{Dotson points out that the result for African Americans was essentially the same before and after the riot: Jim Crow racism.} Statewide disgust toward the “Roanoke Riot of 1893” led to new legislation that discouraged lynchings and the mob rule that caused them. Roanoke worked hard to polish its image, but for the city's African American residents accused of capital crimes, officially sanctioned “justice” replaced that of vigilantes.\footnote{Roanoke is often referred to as the “Star City of the South” because of the very large illuminated star that sits atop Mill Mountain and can be seen throughout the city. In the 19th century, boosters called Roanoke the “Magic City” because it grew so rapidly, as if by magic.} Roanoke's 19th century leadership looked at the separate incidents based on how they were conducted, not based on the...
eventual results- extralegal and brutal lynching. When the struggle over school desegregation came to Roanoke, the city leaders also focused on how the process would appear to the outside world, and minimized conflict. As with 19th century lynching or passive resistance to school desegregation in the twentieth, it was the African American community that suffered.

In Roanoke, as in the rest of Virginia, the needs of the black community were subordinate to the needs of the white community. The city's residential segregation reiterated this political hierarchy, which was not only by custom, but by law. Besides white northerners, the railroad brought many African Americans hoping to work the unskilled labor positions required by the railroad. Even in the nineteenth century, the African American community, according to historian Rand Dotson, “lived in clusters along the same streets, the vast majority worked similar unskilled or day labor jobs, and most patronized the same all-black saloons and dance halls.”27 While each section had general political autonomy, the all-white city hall made the rules. In 1913, this included an ordinance banning the sale of previously white owned homes to African Americans and African Americans who bought such homes would be at fault. In 1917, the Supreme Court struck down residential segregation ordinances in the Buchanan v. Warley case, but many communities in Virginia ignored the decision, including Roanoke.28 Though the NAACP Legal Defense Fund was successful in bringing suit against residential

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27 Dotson, Magic City of the New South, 122.

segregation ordinances, communities continued to flaunt the prevailing case law. In 1921, city officials called a meeting with leaders of the black community. City leaders intended to discuss a resolution verifying residential segregation of the city after some encroachment by blacks into all-white neighborhoods. African American leaders hoped to address the terrible conditions in their neighborhoods. Most areas lacked paved streets, sewers, gas, or electricity and reports indicated poor conditions at schools. The meeting ended when the two sides realized they had irreconcilable agendas. The rigid residential segregation continued as evidenced by Roanoke Times advertisements like "Modern Homes for Colored People" in the 1920s.

This de facto segregation continued into the post-war period. By then, the city could be divided into four quadrants: Northwest, Northeast, Southwest, and Southeast. Each of these quadrants had a specific racial and class character with most of the poorest blacks resided in the Northeast in close proximity to the railroad yards, the riverside industry, and the brick factory. Middle-class African Americans lived in the Northwest. White areas of town were as segregated by class. More affluent whites lived in the Southwest part of town; the Southeast remained distinctly blue collar and white. There was little movement of people between quadrants and none between white and black areas of town. When

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31 Advertisement, *Roanoke Times*, April 11, 1922 as quoted in Mattos, "Segregation by Custom," Exhibit 3. The housing for sale was located in the Gainesboro neighborhood, then in transition from white to black. Offers would only be made to "high class colored people."
residential segregation was threatened, whites responded harshly. After Leonard Williams, an African American manager at an ABC store moved across the 10th St. racial dividing line in 1959, white teenagers threatened him and later tossed eggs, rocks, and firecrackers through his windows. Responding to one occasion, he “reached down and grabbed [his] 38 [caliber revolver] and put it up...[he said] ‘here’s what you all want, right here... move.’” On another occasion, as his wife “sat on the front porch there and ... had [white neighbors] pass by many times. ‘Get out niggers!’ hollering and screaming loud as they [could].”32 According to another black resident,, South Roanoke was “kind of an area which was taboo to black people.”33 This extreme segregation made it easy to keep the black and white communities insulated from one another and friction between them to a minimum. While this limited violence, it would cause significant trouble to complete integration of Roanoke schools. The physical distance added to Roanoke’s “moderate” response, but also became one more factor to delay implementation of the Supreme Court’s most famous decision.

*Brown* Comes to Virginia

On May 17, 1954, the school board of Roanoke gathered to meet at the administration building around 8:00 PM. That morning, Chief Justice Earl Warren announced perhaps the most important and far reaching court decision of the twentieth century. On such a momentous day, Roanoke City’s school board met

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but issued no momentous decisions. Instead, Leroy H. Smith tendered his resignation because “the textile markets [had] been in rather unstable condition.” Likewise, Rev. A.L. James terminated his service to the board due to health problems. These excuses were plausible. Smith had served on the board for over 15 years and James died only three years after resigning. Yet, no one mentioned the elephant in the room: the Brown Decision.

It is difficult to forecast whether desegregation may have come to Roanoke City more quickly had the board’s most respected members remained for its implementation. Considering Virginia’s state-wide massive resistance legislation, Roanoke might have been forced to wait the six years it took for even token desegregation to occur. But the decision by James and Smith to avoid what they knew would be a long, difficult, and unpopular path continued a pattern of racial relations. Roanoke would choose foot dragging over confronting what the Roanoke Times called the South’s “most critical problem since reconstruction.”

It is impossible to tell the story of desegregation in Roanoke without putting it in the context of the state-wide and national desegregation narrative. The Brown Decision was actually five separate cases including plaintiffs from Topeka, Kansas; Clarendon County, South Carolina; Hockessin, Delaware; Washington, DC; and Prince Edward County, Virginia. Of these, the story of

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34 Roanoke City School Board Minutes, May 17, 1954, pg 5-6.

35 At times, “Roanoke” will be referred to in this paper. This always refers to Roanoke City. The full name will be used whenever Roanoke County is the subject.

Prince Edward County, where African Americans were nearly half the county’s population, is most relevant as it became the symbol of Virginia’s school desegregation narrative.

In many ways, the Southside area was an unlikely place for the frontlines of school desegregation in Virginia. The local NAACP leadership even tried to discourage mass protest against segregated education initially due to the forces arrayed against them.\(^\text{37}\) Prince Edward County was 44% African American, but run by notoriously conservative white citizens. The case in Prince Edward County revolved around Robert Moton High School in Farmville, Virginia. Moton was the town’s black high school and badly neglected. To cope with its overcrowding, the school board erected three low temporary buildings topped with black tar paper. The “tar paper shacks,” as African Americans dubbed them, angered the community as they had heavily contributed to a municipal bond offering in 1948, partly to improve local education. The school board gave the NAACP chapter president, the Reverend L. Francis Griffin, little redress. Finally a Moton PTA committee devoted to lobbying for a new school was told that there was no point in returning to the monthly school board meetings as no improvements were forthcoming.\(^\text{38}\)

It was at this point that the Prince Edward County story became interesting. A junior at Robert Moton High School, Barbara Johns, decided to take


\(^{38}\) Patterson, *Brown v. Board*, 25. Bob Smith, *They Closed Their Schools: Prince Edward County, Virginia, 1951-1964*, (Chapel Hill; University of North Carolina Press, 1965), 13, 18, 25. This work is more of a journalistic view of the desegregation controversy in Prince Edward County, but it does provide a very good account of the happenings prior to 1965.
matters into her own hands. Johns was the niece of the Reverend Vernon Johns, a pastor at Dexter Street Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, and a figure in the civil rights movement.\(^{39}\) In 1951, following further foot dragging by the School Board of Prince Edward County, Johns secretly organized a strike by the students of Moton High. Years before mass protests in Montgomery, most of the students walked out of class and refused to return. They marched with homemade placards displaying slogans like “We Want a New School or None At All” and “Down with the Tar Paper Shacks.”\(^{40}\) In a notice about a mass meeting of the PTA and NAACP about the case being filed, the black leaders reminded the community that “the eyes of the world are on us.”\(^{41}\) The students stayed out of school for two weeks. Initially, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (LDF) was hesitant to take the case. The students pressed for equalization of funding for white and black schools; the “equal” of “separate, but equal.” The LDF committed to a strategy of overturning segregation, rather than equalization of separate facilities. Also, Prince Edward County would be one of the worst environments to receive a favorable decision. Likewise, plaintiffs could expect far more retribution and attack than in a more moderate Virginia community. Over these concerns, the students and their parents chose to fight against segregation and, with the help of NAACP LDF Lawyers, Spotswood Robinson and Oliver Hill, the students

\(^{39}\) Patterson, *Brown V. Board*, 28.

\(^{40}\) Smith, *They Closed Their Schools*, 40.

\(^{41}\) Smith, *They Closed Their Schools*, 58.
sued the School Board of Prince George's County. The case was eventually added to the *Brown v. Board* cases.\(^{42}\)

On May 17, 1954, Chief Justice Earl Warren announced that in the field of public education, the doctrine of “separate but equal’ has no place.”\(^{43}\) In the days and months following the first decision, the *Roanoke Times* issued several editorials cautioning against radical change in the wake of the decision. A July 4\(^{th}\) editorial promoted finding middle ground “between social theories of the Supreme Court and the obfuscations of those who would radically alter our political system.”\(^{44}\) The *Times* fluctuated between advocating research on school systems segregated by sex and moving slowly on both plans for desegregation and plans advocating massive resistance. On Roanoke City’s school board, two of its most prominent members resigned and *Brown* went unmentioned.

Though the court ruled segregation in public schools unconstitutional in the first *Brown* decision, the justices waited to recommend any specific recourse for school districts and asked for advice from each state as to the best course of action. A year after the original verdict, the Supreme Court announced what would be called “*Brown II.*” This decision instructed the Federal District and Appeals Courts to require defendants to begin a “prompt and reasonable start toward full compliance” with *Brown*. The district courts would also be required to “enter such orders and decrees consistent with this opinion as are necessary and


\(^{43}\) *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954)

\(^{44}\) “1776- We, the people- 1954,” *Roanoke Times*, July 4, 1954.
proper to admit to public schools on a racially nondiscriminatory basis with all
deliberate speed the parties to these cases."^45

The Supreme Court appeared to mollify the South with a decision that
would give them plenty of time to create plans for desegregation. The ruling also
focused solely on the defendants and did not require immediate universal
desegregation of other schools. The members of each school district would have
to fight their way through the courts before schools would be desegregated.
Finally, the phrase “all deliberate speed” came to mean “all deliberate delay” to
most school districts, including Roanoke’s.

In order to generate a plan to resist the Supreme Court ruling, the state’s
governor, Thomas Stanley, created a commission of legislators led by Senator
Garland Gray. Stanley immediately announced that there would be no integration
for the school year 1954-55 in order to study the problem. Senator Byrd began
drafting what would become the Southern Manifesto in 1956, a statement signed
by the eighty-two Representatives and nineteen Senators and entered into
congressional record alleging the Brown decision to be an illegal intrusion on
State’s Rights. They promised to keep their home districts segregated. Massive
Resistance had begun.^46

^45 Brown V. Board of Education of Topeka, 349 U.S. 294 (1955) from Patterson, Brown V. Board, 84.
^46 For more on Massive Resistance see Ely, Crisis of Conservative Virginia; Gates, The Making of
Massive Resistance; James Howard Hershman, Jr. There’s a Rumbling in the Museum: The
Opponents of Virginia’s Massive Resistance (University of Virginia: Unpublished PhD
dissertation, 1978); Brian Daugherty “Keep on Keeping On': African Americans and the
Implementation of Brown v. Board of Education in Virginia” in With All Deliberate Speed:
Massive Resistance refers specifically to a political movement that sought to avoid federally mandated desegregation by creating state laws to penalize any district planning to desegregate, whether voluntarily or by court order. It lasted from 1955 to 1964 in some areas, like Prince Edward County. The movement was most powerful from 1956 until 1958 when courts overturned most massive resistance legislation. In Virginia, the mechanism for resisting was a law that would go into effect once an African American student threatened to desegregate a white school. The school board would immediately lose control of their system and the Virginia Governor would determine its fate which was, in the case of Prince Edward County, closure.

Along with closing schools, Senator Byrd called for amendments to Virginia’s constitution allowing the state legislature to appropriate money to private, segregated academies and repealing mandatory public education clauses. Virginia’s massive resisters considered themselves part of a political movement, but despite their contempt for federal rulings they did not openly advocate racial violence as some leaders did in the Deep South. Passive resistance, on the other hand, was not an organized political movement, but a style of avoiding major integration by allowing token desegregation, discouraging litigation, and staying quiet on the subject. Passive and Massive Resistance were political strategies of perpetuating racial segregation but did not actively encourage racial violence in any way.

47 Heinemann, Ronald, Harry Byrd of Virginia (Charlottesville; University of Virginia Press, 1996), 353-354.
Though not the official policy, many groups did encourage such violence. In Richmond, a new organization formed to enforce segregation through personal terror and coercion. The Defenders of State Sovereignty and Independent Liberties formed on October 8th, 1954. Like other pro-white groups such as the Klan, Anglo-Saxon Clubs, and White Citizens’ Councils, the Defenders of State Sovereignty pressured School Boards in each county to resist integration. Even Roanoke County might have gotten a visit from Supporters of this organization who came to Roanoke when, according to a white teacher of Roanoke County and City Schools:

Three white guys, kind of rough but presentable looking; they came in and had a private conference with the Principal... They came and said, ‘Mr. Johnson we are concerned with what is taking place and what has taken place. We want you to know if you need any help in regards to the welfare of the white students under these circumstances, we are there to help.’

The group was particularly active in Prince Edward County and helped galvanize white opinion to support massive resistance. Moderates were left with little choice between closing public schools rather than desegregate or joining white liberals and black supporters of integration shunned by mainstream white society. Indeed, the Reverend James R. Kennedy, the pastor of white Farmville Presbyterian Church, felt that “as a Christian, [he couldn’t] defend segregation... [because] you can’t take the gospel with its great message of His love for everyone and defend enforced segregation.” Kennedy was run out of town for

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48 “Fred,” white male school teacher, June 14, 2005, 4. It is to be noted that this is secondhand information to the interviewee, but there is no reason to question its authenticity.

49 Smith, They Closed Their Schools, 126.
his support of keeping schools open despite the risk of desegregation. Though he did not consider himself an integrationist, Kennedy received swift castigation. Moderates had great trouble finding a middle ground in the debate throughout eastern Virginia and the rest of the South. More than many political issues, desegregation polarized communities. In Roanoke, society did not literally kick moderates out of town, but public moderate views often brought social marginalization. One white parent described the atmosphere:

The people that were opposed to it were more outspoken and when we get together to play cards or have friends in for dinner and sit around and have coffee and talk about things, that was usually the situation. The folks that were opposed were pretty outspoken about it and vehement about it.50

Publicly, white Roanokers hesitated to discuss desegregation, but privately, the topic occupied many conversations.

In the midst of local debates on integration, the Gray Commission, a blue ribbon group tasked with determining a state-wide policy that would meet federal law, reported its findings. It recommended a state policy of having no white children attend an integrated school against the will of their parents. Integration of schools would be determined by community choice. Local schools could also be closed by community choice rather than desegregate. Parents who did not wish their child to attend an integrated school would be given tuition grants to private segregated schools.51 The idea of tuition grants would be a part of many desegregation plans in the years to come as an “escape clause.” In localities


51 Smith, They Closed Their Schools, 141.
around the state, private schools sprang up to meet the new demand for segregated schooling. Even citizens in Roanoke created new segregated private schools. In nearby Bedford County, the Bedford Academy was created on the eve of desegregation and roughly half of the county’s white school children attended it.52

The maneuverings between Governor Stanley and the Gray Commission occurred in a highly politicized atmosphere and under the close supervision of Senator Harry F. Byrd, Virginia’s political leader since the end of the Second World War. Byrd’s political machine had almost complete control over key statewide positions, but in western Virginia his power was much weaker. Because western Virginia had strong pockets of GOP support, it avoided the major fight between the Byrd machine and more independent Democrats like Harry Howell. Linwood Holton, one of western Virginia’s most successful politicians, articulated the disconnect between the eastern and western establishments: “It was then the perception of most southwestern Virginians... that the attitude of the Richmond establishment is that you’ve reached the end of the state when you get to Roanoke.”53 The distance from the Byrd machine also meant Roanoke politicians had more autonomy than politicians in eastern cities like Richmond or Norfolk.

52 “Fred,” 4 and “Jane,” a white female student integrated in Bedford County Schools in 1965, 4.

53 Holton, Opportunity Time, 7-8. A supporter had introduced Holton as “the Governor that knows Virginia doesn’t stop at Roanoke.” She said later, “Lin, Virginia does end at Roanoke, if you’re going east!”
Despite the freedom to take a course independent from the Byrd machine, the Roanoke School Board sided with the Gray Commission and passed a resolution voicing its support of an amendment to Section 141 of the Virginia Constitution, which mandated that private schools not be funded with public money. The school board resolution did not pass unanimously. A white member and Dr. Lylburn Downing, the board’s lone African American member dissented. Following Roanoke’s code of civilized discussion, Dr. Downing observed that “even though he could not conscientiously vote otherwise, he certainly recognized the action of the board as an excellent example of the democratic way of transacting business.” The constitutional amendment was part of a referendum on segregation put in front of the voters only two weeks later. Segregationists billed it as a referendum for or against integration. The amendment passed in Roanoke by a small margin. Despite a reputation for moderation, Roanoke missed a crucial opportunity to support their public schools, delaying desegregation for years.

In 1956, Judge Sterling Hutchinson refused to obey the Supreme Court order requiring Prince Edward County to desegregate. He felt that his superiors in the Federal Court System understood neither the situation in the county nor the racial relations of Black Belt Virginia. Under Virginia’s massive resistance law, the governor closed these schools to stop their desegregation by federal court order. As moderates won seats in the 1958 state elections and the courts

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54 Roanoke City School Board Minutes, December, 19, 1955, 4-5.

ruled many of the laws and school closings unconstitutional, the local efforts at massive resistance waned... State and local politicians formulated a new plan of "passive resistance." The ideas of "all deliberate delay" and token desegregation were the new tactics used by school boards around Virginia, including Roanoke's.

Roanoke's School System in the Era of Massive Resistance

Though the School Board preferred to focus on anything but desegregation, the Roanoke NAACP did not allow this complacency. In 1956, following the city-wide vote on funding private schools, the organization made a deliberate change to its previous strategy by electing African American attorney Reuben Lawson, "a militant President." Lawson gave a powerful acceptance speech, arguing that "Our forebears were slaves and so are we, because we can never be free until every man is free... I shall contact the State Legal Head of NAACP and ask his help and advice as to procedures for bringing desegregation to Roanoke." The result was a letter sent seven months later from Lawson to the school board inquiring into school desegregation plans for the fall of 1956. The Board "noted that the communication had been received from Mr. Lawson as an individual and not as a representative of any group" despite his official position as NAACP President. Dr. Lylburn Downing, the board's only African American member, "observed that 'it had to come up, sooner or later' but that he

56 "Roanoke Branch Elects Militant President At Crowded Meeting", Roanoke Tribune, January 28, 1956.
“saw no reason for a hurried reply.” Well over a month later came the board’s unanimous response: “the Board does not contemplate at the present time, any change in the operation of the public schools in Roanoke.” In response to Lawson’s action, the Roanoke Times threatened that the [white] South might enact economic retribution against African Americans for pushing school integration. Referring to African Americans: “he knows that to force himself into a situation where he is not acceptable may prove more costly than profitable.”

This economic threat was clear. It had taken over eight months for Roanoke’s leaders, white and black, to decide that no action would occur in 1956. During this same time period, African Americans in Montgomery, Alabama waged one of the most successful mass protests of the civil rights movement. Compared to the Montgomery bus boycott, Roanoke’s relative silence was deafening.

Despite its sluggish pace, Roanoke’s African American community continued to push for improvements in education. Though newer black schools like Lucy Addison High School had excellent facilities, many were well below standards of white schools. In 1957, the Gainsboro Elementary PTA noted that the school still had no indoor plumbing, no cafeteria, auditorium, and was heated by wood stoves. That same year, students forced out of Northeast neighborhoods by the Commonwealth urban renewal project had overcrowded Gilmer and Loudon Elementary Schools. Their parents protested that if the

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57 Roanoke City School Board Minutes, July 16, 1956, 3-5.
58 Roanoke City School Board Minutes, August 20, 1956, 17-18.
60 Roanoke City School Board Minutes, February 11, 1957, 1-3.
situation was not corrected, students would be forced to apply to West End Elementary, a white school. The board voted to defer action on the matter.\textsuperscript{61}

The overcrowding at Gilmer and Loudon Elementary Schools was symptomatic of the entire Roanoke system. The School Board had responded to a boom in population with few new buildings. Classrooms were partitioned. Cafeterias, auditoriums, and storage closets were turned into classrooms. The administration finally turned to using morning and afternoon sessions in most of the schools. These would not be enough to check the post war baby boom. With little money coming from the state for new school construction, Roanoke had to turn to alternate sources for funds. In 1958, the city proposed a bond to raise money for a very ambitious school building program. This project supported the construction of two new high schools, new libraries, auditoriums, and over 80 new classrooms in the white and black areas of town.

The city-wide political campaign over the $8 million bond was heated. In the end, the school bond issue passed with 54.9% of the vote, mostly with support from the African American community and white neighborhoods closest

\textsuperscript{61} Roanoke City School Board Minutes, October, 21, 1957, 4-5. Milton Garrison, “Supreme Court’s Action in Evidence At Roanoke School Board Meet,” \textit{Roanoke Times}, October 22, 1957. This was likely an action with strong political overtones. Virginia was in the midst of a gubernatorial race between Republican Ted Dalton and Democrat Lindsay Almond. The two were scheduled for a debate in Roanoke on October 2nd. Furthermore, some of Almond’s resistance legislation had just been ruled unconstitutional by Federal Judge Walter Hoffman (who had been on Dalton’s ticket for Attorney General in 1953) with the Supreme Court declining to grant it certiorari. Almond was particularly embarrassed by the action because he had been Virginia’s Attorney General and primarily created the legislation to resist judicial scrutiny. For more on how Virginian and national politics intersected with school desegregation see Ely, \textit{Crisis of Conservative Virginia}; Gates, \textit{The Making of Massive Resistance}; James Howard Hershman, Jr. \textit{There’s a Rumbling in the Museum: The Opponents of Virginia’s Massive Resistance} (University of Virginia: Unpublished PhD dissertation, 1978).
to schools to be built or expanded by the bond.62 This was not an overwhelming approval of public education by the City, but forced Roanoke onto a particular path regarding school desegregation in the short term. As James Hershman has explained, Virginia’s massive resistance legislation tightened the school bond market. According to the legislation, a district’s schools would be forced to close in the event of desegregation. This would cause an expensive private school voucher system to be implemented, putting great strain on city and county treasuries.63 Though Virginia’s constitution provided that the state would pay off debt in cases of municipality default, northern bankers were not satisfied. Lorin Thompson commented at the time that "any plan to liquidate the public school system in favor of a private arrangement as the massive resisters contemplated… would necessitate an immediate settlement with the bondholders."64

Roanoke’s business community and its leaders who played an important role on the school board knew that efforts at desegregation could cause school closings and unrest between those who strongly favored or opposed desegregation. Unrest caused uncertainty about bond issues on the New York market and would make it difficult to find investors for Roanoke’s debt. At this

62 “School Bond Issue Passes 6,412 to 5259” Roanoke Times, March 12, 1958. The political alliance between wealthy, white Southwest Roanoke and Northwest was an unlikely one, but both groups pushed hard for the bond’s passage. The PTA Alliance, an African American school group, had twelve members speak at a public hearing on the bond and gave a donation of 10% of its treasury ($30) to the Citizens Committee for Schools, an organization promoting the bond.


64 Hershman, “Public School Bonds and Virginia’s Massive Resistance.” 408.
time, Little Rock was receiving national attention because of its fight against school desegregation. City councilmen in Roanoke must have reflected on Little Rock’s own fairly moderate, business minded city council as that city became embroiled in conflict. Little Rock had been poised for a major economic boom following the creation of the Little Rock Air Base and Little Rock Industrial District in 1951. In fall 1957, the director of the Little Rock Chamber of Commerce, Everett Tucker, despaired as the city lost industrial prospects that could not move to a place with major racial conflict and no high schools.\footnote{Elizabeth Jacoway, \textit{Turn Away Thy Son: Little Rock, The Crisis that Shocked the Nation} (New York: Free Press, 2007), 310-311. A national company, like Proctor and Gamble could not be seen as supporting a segregationist city. Additionally, their workers would have no public schools at which their children could enroll.}

Contrasting this situation, many media reports favorably compared Charlotte. In fact, it was one of the only southern cities with racial conflict to actually see increases in new business, a fact certainly noted by Roanoke’s business leaders.\footnote{Douglas, \textit{Reading, Writing, Race}, 74-75.}

In January 1959 the Virginia Supreme Court and a Federal District Court found the school closing laws illegal. With court decisions throwing out many Massive Resistance laws and the Federal intervention at Little Rock, Virginia changed its model of massive resistance. In response to the efforts by state courts, the General Assembly repealed Virginia’s compulsory education requirement and suggested to municipalities that they had no power to enforce local compulsory education requirements.\footnote{Heinemann, \textit{Harry Byrd of Virginia}, 347; Roanoke City School Board Minutes, February 23, 1959, 11-12.} The state government provided pupil...
scholarship grants to allow students to attend (presumably segregated) private schools or public schools in another school district.\textsuperscript{68}

With the threat of state enforced school closing over, the Roanoke School Board began to push back against the program of Massive Resistance. On August 17, 1959, the School Board declined to renew membership in the Virginia Education Association which had strongly supported segregationist positions. Although this symbolic step might seem inconsequential, it sent a clear message to the forces of Massive Resistance in the state capital. On September 8th, the City Council passed an ordinance requiring compulsory school attendance in reaction to a Virginia law designed to make school optional for white children too poor for private segregated academies. The School Board did continue to provide pupil scholarships to students who applied and met requirements for the scholarships, though some students still could not afford private schooling even with the grants.\textsuperscript{69} Whether the Board felt new freedom to act with their bond issue passed (and a revenue source independent of Richmond) or because massive resistance seemed to be floundering in Virginia and elsewhere, by attacking Richmond's last attempts at Massive Resistance, Roanoke stated its preference for "passive resistance." The small challenges did not add up to a major revision in thinking, but a gradual recognition that change would eventually come. The City's leadership embraced the technique of all deliberate delay by slowing any

\textsuperscript{68} Regulations of the State Board of Education Governing Pupil Scholarships, Adopted June 25, 1959. In addition, these regulations provided that scholarships could only be approved for non-sectarian schools within the United States.

\textsuperscript{69} Roanoke City School Board Minutes, August 17, 1959, 11. Roanoke City School Board Minutes, September 21, 1959, 2-3.
integration. The technique worked for many years despite protest from Roanoke’s African American community.

Roanoke’s Racial Pioneers

This protest came in the form of a letter to the School Board from NAACP Lawyer, Reuben Lawson, who informed the board that 34 students sought transfer to “NON-SEGREGATED schools nearest to their homes.” The Board did not deal with the petition, but let the state board assign the children. The State Pupil Placement Board determined that nine of the children could not be denied admission to white schools except due to race. These nine were scheduled to begin September at three white schools in Roanoke. Twenty-eight of the rejected students and an additional seven filed a federal desegregation suit in August of 1960. The case became known as Cynthia Greene et al. v. School Board of Roanoke City. The case worked its way through the court system with one additional student being admitted to a white school. As the opinion in the 1962 court of appeals case in Cynthia Green, et. al. v. School Board of Roanoke stated, “In practice, the state Pupil Placement Board’s role in the assignment of pupils is largely a formality.” Judge Sobeloff went on to state that “the pupil assignment system in effect in the City of Roanoke ... is, as demonstrated by the facts, infected throughout with racially discriminatory applications of assignment criteria.” African American students needed to live closer to a white school than a black school, score significantly higher on standardized tests than white students,

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70 Roanoke City School Board Minutes, June 20, 1960, 8-12. Emphasis in original document. It is also important to note the written “protest”, in keeping with Roanoke’s “politics of civility.”
and voluntarily apply for such a transfer. The Pupil Placement Board mistakenly rejected one student who lived closer to a white school and five students whose younger siblings scored too low on standardized tests. According to the School Board, African American students needed to be smarter than their white classmates to “to avoid placing any Negroes in white schools ‘who would be failures.’”71 The students chosen to meet the nearly impossible requirements were all the best and brightest of the African American community, yet most did not graduate.72

Of the students who were denied transfer, many were only told a few days before classes began so they did not have enough time to appeal the decision. The City’s resistance in court demonstrated their reluctance to allow any desegregation, a narrative that would be remembered differently by leaders and the public years later. While the School Board and NAACP fought in court over the students whose transfer requests had been rejected, the accepted students prepared for new schools.

On September 6th, 1960, the first black school children desegregated several elementary schools without incident. On September 7th, however, Cecilia Long and Eula Poindexter confronted a white crowd in front of Monroe Junior High. As Cecilia Long, “drove up to the school...there were these [white] people” that were “lined up on the sidewalks and looking really angry.” In addition to

71 Sobeloff, Chief Judge, and Boreman and J. Spencer Bell, Circuit Judges, Decision in Cynthia Green, et al. vs. School Board of the City of Roanoke, May 22, 1962, Records for the U.S. Court of Appeals 4th Circuit, Richmond, Virginia, Correspondence Relating to Cases 1891-1977, Box 702.

72 As this paper will elaborate, though they were very intelligent and members of the top Roanoke families, many did not graduate from Roanoke City schools.
throwing eggs and tomatoes at the car, they “yelled all sorts of things..., like ‘go back to where you are supposed to be’, ‘coons get out of the neighborhood...’” Cecilia endured the abuse while thinking “gosh, we’re just coming to school....”73

The incident was not reported in the *Roanoke Times* account of the first day of integration. Although the paper had reporters present, they downplayed white opposition to promote Roanoke’s moderate and racially conscious image. National news outlets, including the *New York Times* echoed that “Negro and White children attended classes together, without incidents” on the sixth, but neglected to mention any resistance on the seventh.74 Roanoke’s leadership knew that national media coverage would focus on the first day of desegregated school. Yet threats of violence towards African American students on the second day did not cause concern for city leaders, as long as it stayed out of local and national media outlets.

Other African American students from the first “pioneering” or desegregating generation had similar problems with desegregating the previously all-white schools. With the prevalence of scattered integration, particularly in the first years, white teachers and students often marginalized or treated African Americans poorly. To be one of a few African American students moved to a strange, white world proved very difficult. Leonard A. Williams’ children had serious problems acclimating to the predominantly white school. He recalled that


“they were hurt by the way they were treated in grammar school” and “they come home crying ‘bout what the kids said. They just didn’t want to be around the white kids to go to high school” and would have quit school had they been forced to attend the white high school. Williams eventually allowed them to transfer to Addison.75

In 1969, the school board investigated the pioneering students’ experience. Of the seventeen African American students to desegregate schools in 1960-61 (and who were no longer in Roanoke’s school system), only 9 graduated from Roanoke High Schools with three attending college. Of the students who did not finish high school in Roanoke, two of the students transferred out of the area and five dropped out.76 An almost 30% drop out rate was extremely high attrition for children chosen as the best and brightest of the community. These were children of Roanoke’s most prominent families. Future mayor, Noel Taylor’s daughter integrated early and NAACP President, Reverend Raymond Wilkinson’s daughters formed part of the first integrated cohort. Other students applying for placement into previously white schools were the children of ministers, doctors, and dentists. The problems encountered by these students did not become part of the “popular memory” or community narrative on desegregation despite their high standing in the community.

In July of 1962, Roanoke began moving beyond the initial desegregation under pupil placement plans. U.S. District Judge Thomas Michie required the

75 Interview with Leonard Williams, 29-30.
76 “Desegregation in the Roanoke City Schools”, Report attached to Roanoke City School Board Minutes, March 25, 1969. One of the students who dropped out later received his/her GED.
School Board to plan for the full desegregation of the schools in eight months.
The initial plan, created by the school superintendent E.W. Rushton, called for a
gradual desegregation of a few grades per year starting with the 1963-64 school
year and being completed by the 1967-68 school year. The plan also contained
an escape clause by which “any pupil assigned to a school in which his race is in
the minority may transfer to a school selected by the superintendent in which that
race is in the majority.” This plan had serious flaws. It did not allow for any
integration of faculty, the timeline of desegregation was too long, and the “escape
clause” would not stand up in court after recent rulings. By 1964, the School
Board put forth a modified plan that solved the major issues of the initial effort.
This plan passed federal scrutiny but progress was slow. Like Roanoke,
Charlotte disguised its stasis by celebrating token desegregation even while
flouting many of the laws which would increase integration. The African
American community became impatient with the sluggish change.

While Roanoke’s schools slowly achieved token desegregation, the city’s
confrontation over public accommodations and civil rights reached its zenith. The
black community hoped that the city might close a major open garbage dump
located in the heart of its community. This issue had been around for years and
was a serious blight in their neighborhoods. Only after community organizations
threatened to hold “Birmingham-style demonstrations” and mass meetings did
the city take action. Where such events threatened to harm its reputation and

77 Roanoke City School Board Minutes, February 25, 1963, 5.
78 Roanoke City School Board Minutes, June 27, 1963, pg. 1.
79 Douglas, Reading, Writing, Race, 75-76.
damage its business-friendly image, white Roanoke acted on the demands of the NAACP.

The Non-Violent Movement Comes to Roanoke

Roanoke’s most vocal civil rights controversy involved the operation of an open dump. The Washington Park dump was located squarely in the black Northwest section of Roanoke. The historic neighborhood of Gainesboro, because of an older settlement by the same name at the location, was the heart of the African American community in Roanoke. The city used rock from a quarry nearby for construction purposes as the economy exploded in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The dump had long been in existence and for just as long, the African American community protested against its ugly presence. Years later, this empty quarry proved to be a perfect place for the city to dump trash. Black residents remember the dumping at least as early as the 1920s. In September of 1953, the *Roanoke Tribune*, a weekly African American newspaper reported on citizens who, “having become exhausted after years of wishful waiting, have united to obtain absolute discontinuance of an open dump which the City is operating right in the midst of a thickly populated section of the city.”

Unfortunately, the City Council would not “agree without delay to discontinue this open dump and thereby remove that terrible blot from our ‘All-American City’” as

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80 “Irate Citizens Unite to Fight Health Hazard”, *Roanoke Tribune*, September 26, 1953. Unfortunately most extant copies of the Roanoke Tribune were destroyed in a fire at the newspaper. Most of the remaining run can be found at the State Library of Virginia in Richmond.
the Tribune’s editor, F.E. Alexander hoped. Frank W. Claytor spoke on behalf of the African American community, saying that no improvements had been made for the previous two years despite promises of reform. The Council countered that the dump was still two years away from being filled, when it could become a park for the Gainesboro neighborhood. Despite a report by Virginia’s Health Commission urging closure, the Council unanimously adopted a motion to study the health effects of the dump and look into costs of a new incinerator or landfill. In other words, delay. The dump would not be closed in the promised two years and it became a wound to Roanoke’s African American community that continued to fester.

The dump was within smelling distance of Lucy Addison High School, Burrell Memorial Hospital, the Lincoln Terrace Housing Projects, First Street Baptist Church, Hill Street Baptist Church, and several other institutions of the black community. The metric of smelling distance is germane because the residents could smell it well. According to Reverend Edward Burton, it was “an open dump… I emphasize the term dump, now, and I’m saying dump and not landfill… in the landfill, of course, they continue to cover it over and in this open city dump they did not cover it over.” Juanita Taylor remembers “big rats and things were running all over Orange Avenue, all over Lincoln Terrace, all over

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82 Roanoke City Council Minutes, September 28, 1953, pg 450.

everywhere. Great big rats. Not mice, rats." In the summer of 1962, a dead horse was thrown into the dump. Reverend Burton saw this throwing of the horse "in the dump and I sort of think that ... just... blew the lid off." 

In early 1963, it was announced that the city would close the dump by June 1. A few months later, city manager Arthur Owens announced that this date was impossible to meet because of repairs needed to an incinerator that was to replace the dump. The new closing date was scheduled for February of 1964, outraging an African American community tired of delay. In May, members of the NAACP and Reverend Wilkinson attended a City Council meeting and threatened demonstrations. Wilkinson told the City Council "we are willing to walk [and] to demonstrate." He also criticized the delaying of the Council by asking "How long do you want us to have to wait? My people are tired of ... of this old, ugly subject." The phrase "Birmingham-style demonstrations" swept through the white and black communities in Roanoke. The actual demonstrations planned by the NAACP involved mothers living in Gainesboro. They 'were going to come down... to march around Washington Park dump and say, “Look ya'll this is not healthy.’” The gendered protest fit the “respectable and civilized” mold that most politics in Roanoke followed. By using mothers and baby carriages, the Roanoke

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85 Burton, 8.
88 “Fred,” white male school teacher, 7.
NAACP sent a message parallel to other non-violent protests that emphasized the humanity of marginalized African Americans. The demonstration had been extensively planned out. Even with such an emotional issue that had plagued the community for decades, NAACP leaders prepared the participants to remain disciplined and “civilized.” It was also notable that the protest was entirely female driven. The NAACP leadership and members of City Council were all male. With the female protesters, the African American leaders distanced themselves from those actually protesting. The gendered protest fit within Roanoke’s politics of respectability. Male African American leaders avoided participation in the civil disobedience.

A leader who broke Roanoke’s code of “respectable” protest was Reverend James Allison, a white minister for the Raleigh Court Presbyterian Church. Allison called the dump “immoral” and threatened that “this is the kind of thing from which social riots are made. I submit that this is a danger.”

Surprisingly, Allison’s comments drew more criticism from local leaders and citizens, than Wilkinson’s. Allison became one of the primary spokespersons for the movement to close the dump. He declared it evidence of a “monumental indifference in the well-being of black people” in Roanoke. The white newspapers, the Roanoke Times and Roanoke World-News, both printed editorials critical of the ministers, but the World-News went farther, in arguing that the dump was not a racial issue. The editorial board felt that

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90 Interview with Reverend James Allison.
It [was] highly unfortunate... that two ministers, one white and one Negro, should raise the specter of racial demonstrations and even of riots over the city's inability to close the open dump in Washington Park... Their words could have the effect of stimulating just such trouble as Birmingham has been witnessing.91

The editorial also argued that

Negro Citizens of the community, particularly those who reside near the dump, would have the most to lose by any sort of mass demonstrations. These inevitably would raise tensions and set back the Negro's drive for equality under the law and social progress... A bit more temperance of expression and considerable amount of restraint are what is needed.

The white community knew the dump was a serious problem, but the threat of demonstrations or violence deflated any will to solve this problem. White Roanokers reserved their strongest anger for Allison as a white minister who acknowledged the black demands and favored supporting them. In the overall scheme of maintaining white political power, Allison's vocal response was ultimately dangerous to the status quo. Similar anger was reserved for the Episcopal Bishop William Marmion, another liberal clergyman who supported desegregation.92

Additionally, 1963 had been a major year for the Civil Rights movement in Birmingham, and the images of Bull Connor with his attack dogs and water hoses were vivid in the minds of Roanokers who had seen this broadcast over the evening news only months before. Likewise, nearby Danville, Virginia had received some of the largest and most violent civil rights demonstrations in


92 Marmion had long fought internally within the Episcopal diocese to desegregate the Church's summer bible camp.
Virginia. Martin Luther King had made a well publicized appearance, something Roanoke’s white leaders dreaded. Years later, Wilkinson commented that “when the thing got hot in Danville... we got closer together... under the administration of former [Roanoke] Mayor Stoller.” Wilkinson partially credited this communication with achieving NAACP goals without as many demonstrations.

With protests that crossed gender and racial lines and openly confronted the city’s power, along with a tense national environment, the city’s white leadership knew it had to create a quick solution. Roanoke’s most powerful men responded to the potential racial problems by reviving the old biracial committee that had not met since school desegregation in 1960. The committee declared it imperative to close the dump by June 1, 1963 if race relations were to be kept harmonious. The group drew up several plans and finally decided that the best one would create a landfill in the predominantly white, but sparsely populated East Gate neighborhood. Three of the group’s members pitched this idea to the mayor. The entire committee did not go because “two or three [members] who [they] felt could do the best job” would be less intimidating to those in charge. The mayor agreed with the plan and put it to the City Council soon after. The City Council reluctantly agreed to close the dump by a vote of 4-2 in a meeting behind closed doors.

95 “Stoller Calls Council To Act On City Dump,” Roanoke World-News, May 23, 1963
The city’s leadership and business elite often decided racial issues behind closed doors. Following the city dump protest, Roanoke’s leaders and the biracial committee decided that lunch counters and public areas had to be desegregated to avoid further demonstrations. This was primarily accomplished through an “interracial group working privately,” including, “John Hancock, the [now] deceased Chairman of Roanoke Steel and several other prominent people.”

The group planned for:

one white person and one black person, [which] they assigned... to lunch counters throughout the City and drugstores... Two or three days later the Roanoke Times and World News came out with an editorial congratulating Roanokers for accepting integration unlike other southern cities that had had so many problems. The idea was that if you could tell people they did something, and it was done they would be satisfied. And indeed it worked out very well.

The school board continued this pattern, frequently acting out of the public eye and taking special care in the language it used concerning actions related to desegregation. Nearly every meeting on desegregation required the presence of the city attorney, because any decisions made by the School Board could have far reaching consequences in this time period.

In communities like Roanoke or Charlotte, demonstrations could successfully force city leaders to take action because they “were acutely aware of their national image on racial issues.” Greensboro, North Carolina served as the most well-known example of such demonstrations. Both Roanoke and Greensboro featured similar percentages of African Americans, and the white

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96 Interview with “Fred,” 7.
97 Interview with “Fred,” 7.
98 Davison Douglas, Reading, Writing, and Race, 89.
leadership considered itself “beacon[s] of southern progressivism” committed to “good race relations.” Yet Roanoke’s “respectable” protest never reached the level of participation of that found in Greensboro. Unlike Greensboro, activism in Roanoke always originated with African American elites, not students.

One possible explanation for Roanoke’s unique history compared to that of Greensboro, a similar city, is that Roanoke lacked a Historically Black College. This provided a radical element of change in Greensboro. By launching the student sit-in movement, Greensboro’s black community clashed directly with the white power structure, defining more equal relations that were not based on “civilities.” In Greensboro’s protests, the students “were the only ones who could have begun the sit-ins.” While the entire African American community later joined in the demonstrations, the students had an ability to protest because they could “speak up loudly… without fear of economic reprisal.” In Roanoke, no student element radicalized the black community, which eventually felt the effects of such “smooth” relations. This is not to say that high school students did not attempt to fill this role. In some communities, like Chicago, high school students were intimately aware of the substandard conditions in predominantly African American schools. These students, inspired by the non-violent and direct action movements of the period, used sit-ins, walkouts, and boycotts to protest school

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100 Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 94.

101 Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 94.
policies and conditions. A teacher at Lucy Addison High School explains why similar actions did not occur in Roanoke:

What happened was there was a fellow in town who patterned himself as a Black Panther. He dressed in the black leather jacket, the black clothes, the beret, the bandana and he carried a briefcase. I think he came several times to have a conference with the black Principal, man to man... He invited this young man in with his outfit and this attaché case... Well again, this is all hearsay after the fact, but supposedly Mr. Day said, “What is on your mind?” And he started going through this litany of black power philosophy at the time... [Mr. Day] got up from his desk, he took off his coat, put it on the back of a chair and said, “Son, let me tell you something. I have worked all my life for this day. If you and any of your actions screw it up then you will answer to me.” After he took off his coat he rolled up his sleeves, and in effect confronted what he considered to be a potential with counter potential, and that is the last we heard of the black militant coming on campus for any reason.

Roanoke’s conservative middle class would not allow protest or any Black Nationalist politics, particularly in schools. In communities like Greensboro, students mostly avoided college administrators who tried to snuff out dissent by threatening expulsion to students who attempted to get arrested protesting. The absence of significant activism from students became a defining feature of Roanoke’s response to the civil rights movement. This would influence city leader’s actions during the next phase of integration and indeed, “civility” also defined busing in Roanoke.


103 “Fred,” 10-11. The teacher’s derisive tone regarding Black Nationalist style and politics reinforce the status such students held in Roanoke.

104 Chafe, Civilities and Civil Rights, 130-135.
Roanoke For Busing?

On March 9, 1965, Reverend Raymond Wilkinson chastised the school board for failing to erect a new Junior High School in Northwest Roanoke.\textsuperscript{105} Booker T. Washington Junior High had long been the only black Junior High in the city and it was extremely overcrowded. In 1962, the enrollment for Booker T. Washington was at 684 although it was only built to hold 500. The overcrowded conditions were supposed to have been alleviated by the bond issue of 1958, but the black community was, according to Rev. Wilkinson, “put up on a scaffold of promise in 1958 that cost $600,000. [The School Board] broke the scaffold and [the black community] fell in a valley of need and want surrounded by broken promises.”\textsuperscript{106} Despite the abstract analogies, the black community was serious about its demands. The school board pointed out that the land for a new junior high was in conflict with a spur of Interstate 581, so construction was delayed until this was resolved.\textsuperscript{107} Although this was a legitimate excuse, the school board had more trouble explaining the many under capacity white schools and the overcrowded black schools.

In 1966-67, Roanoke finished desegregating its schools according to school board plans. Despite the completion of their plan, the “fully integrated area


\textsuperscript{107}Roanoke County School Board Minutes, March 9, 1965, 1-2. The I-581 issue has more far reaching problems for the Roanoke African American community. The city constructed the Orange Avenue on-ramp over an African American cemetery, necessitating movement of the several graves. The project also forced the relocation of several houses in this primarily African American neighborhood, causing the subsequent closing of many small businesses and economic depression in the area.
schools” did not appear as successfully integrated as proposed.108 During the 1967-68 school year, of the four high schools in the area, desegregation had occurred at William Fleming and Jefferson (15% and 10% African American respectively), but Patrick Henry remained all white and Lucy Addison all black. The junior high schools reflected similar numbers with several schools maintaining segregation or having token integration (Breckinridge Junior High had 3 black students in a total population of 926). Even formerly integrated schools like Melrose Elementary became re-segregated due to changing housing patterns and white flight. Faculties were somewhat desegregated but on an even more modest scale than that of students.109 The primary cause of the continued segregation was extensive housing segregation. As long as Roanoke’s black and white communities remained separated, the school board had no way to integrate schools without requiring transportation. Of course, school jurisdiction lines had not been drawn to promote integration, but even an earnest effort would not have created schools with a racial balance proportional to Roanoke’s population.

By 1969 the situation had not improved with only one white student in the otherwise all black Lucy Addison High School. Patrick Henry High School remained all-white. The junior high and elementary schools also made little improvement. The black community became impatient and filed an appeal to the


109 Interrogatories, Roanoke Office of the Superintendent, October 26, 1967. This table is reproduced in Appendix B and contains the numbers and ethnicities enrolled in Roanoke city schools as well as Faculty and Staff employed in each school.
district court seeking further racial balance in the schools. A three Judge panel
decided the case on June 17, 1970, ruling that Roanoke schools had “failed to
dismantle its dual school system and [was] not presently operating a unitary system.”110 The court went on to say that the case of “Swann v. Charlotte-
Mecklenburg Bd. Of Ed. controls this school case.”111 This decision meant that
Roanoke would need more racially balanced schools and would have to rely on
mandated busing to achieve this balance.

In 1970, busing was extremely controversial throughout the nation.
President Nixon argued against using busing to achieve desegregation and many
whites in the North and South, sided with him. Judge James B. McMillan had
decided in the Swann case that the only way to desegregate the large Charlotte
school district was through busing. Schools in the inner city would be grouped
with those in the suburbs and an equal number of people would be cross-bused
between the two.112 The “cross-busing” plan was particularly controversial
because so many students would be forced to attend schools outside their
neighborhood.

In Roanoke, the school board avoided cross-busing. A former member of
the school board explained: “We had a busing-out plan. We closed the schools in
the inner-city and bused them out. That kept down [white] resistance because

110 United States Fourth Court of Appeals, Cynthia Greene V. Roanoke School Board, June 17,

111 Green v. Roanoke School Board, 3.

112 Bernard Schwartz, Swann’s Way: The School Busing Case and the Supreme Court, (New
there was not any cross-busing, it was one way."\textsuperscript{113} Clear planning by the school board minimized conflict, particularly within the white community. In 1970, Virginia Governor Linwood Holton received over a thousand letters on busing almost all in opposition. Most came from Richmond or Norfolk, with only four from Roanoke, the fourth largest metropolitan area in Virginia. Of these, two were for busing and two against.\textsuperscript{114} Busing did not become a divisive force for hate and violence in Roanoke as it did in cities from Richmond to Boston.

The comparable lack of racial antipathy, as well as changing housing patterns led to the first election of an African American to the City Council. Noel C. Taylor, the minister of High Street Baptist Church since 1961, won a tight City Council Election after dozens of other African Americans had subsequently lost, including Roanoke Tribune editor F. E. Alexander on numerous occasions. While Richmond held segregationist rallies attended by hundreds, South Carolina mobs attacked the school buses and children themselves, and even supposedly liberal Boston strenuously resisted the policy.\textsuperscript{115} Roanoke elected its first African American to the City Council, partly because City leadership managed to limit the number of white students who travelled to black neighborhood schools. The precedent for avoiding any and all racial conflict helped earn political


\textsuperscript{114} Linwood Holton Governor Papers 1970, Library of Virginia, Box 144, Education/Busing Folder. The numbers cited don't include correspondence without a return address, though this occurred in only a small minority of letters.

representation, but forced African American students to attend schools far from their neighborhoods.

While these schools often provided a good education, a sense of community was lost with the eventual closing of Booker T. Washington Junior High and Lucy Addison’s transformation to a city administration building and a magnet middle school. Many African Americans felt that integration was positive and offered educational benefits, but some argued that the community itself lost cohesiveness when the institution of the black school and especially the black high school disappeared. According to many in the community “the true [Lucy] Addison [High School] ended in the fall of 1970” with the integration of white students. Even today, Addison’s high school reunions remain a segregated affair with no white students invited to them.116 According to a former white teacher at Addison, “Blacks, you know, had decreased from it being their school to it being just another public institution.”117 The black community that revolved around Lucy Addison High School and its athletics, teachers, band, and students disappeared. Another black resident felt that:

After integration, I think, blacks lost a lot of identity. I have people that had families up on Henry Street, what we call Henry Street, and all that just went away. You could go there and really see just about anybody you wanted to see. Then after integration everything just went the other way.118

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116 Darlene Richardson. Interview with Author, November 17, 2007, Washington D.C. Darlene is one of the white students not invited to reunions.

117 Interview with “Fred,” 12.

118 “Hank,” Former black male parent, Interviewed by Peter Jones and Emma Burris, June 27, 2005, Roanoke, VA, 4.
With the opening of downtown and white businesses to the black community, many shopped where they worked, rather than where they lived. The once dynamic black commerce in Gainesboro atrophied.

With busing, the student bodies of Roanoke’s high schools achieved racial balances of essentially 3 to 1, the ratio of white to black residents in the city. Students interacted in different ways with the increased integration. One area of interaction between white and black students, extracurricular activities, brought interesting results. Sports were one of the easiest ways to ease the tensions of desegregation. According to one female black student, “football and basketball in particular, really gave the two different races the ability to get to know each other individually and as a team.”119 Black athletes could also provide a role model for positive reactions to integration. At Lucy Addison High School, Al Holland, who later played for the Philadelphia Phillies and lettered in several sports, helped smooth race relations whenever fights broke out.120

In 1973, the Federal Court of Appeals considered Roanoke’s school system desegregated enough to remand the Cynthea Green v. Roanoke School Board case back to lower district court for monitoring. Later, the city continued to combat white flight and changing housing patterns with more busing and redistricting. In 1986, Frank Tota would take over control as Superintendent and install magnet programs in several different schools. School systems nation-wide considered this a way to achieve a more uniform racial balance with less public

119 "Mary," 1 January 2005, female black student, pg 12.
120 Darlene Richardson, Interview with Author, November 17, 2007
resistance than busing.\textsuperscript{121} In trying to maintain a representative racial balance, magnet schools provided one method of many available to the school board. Unfortunately, with continued re-segregation of housing, schools also became re-segregated.

Educationally, school integration provided many changes to the school system with far reaching effects that were both expected and unintended. One of the most discussed is a generation of children, white and black, who learned to interact socially together. Lucy Addison's 1970-71 yearbook mentions the "problems" but concludes that the students made it work. Likewise, Darlene Richardson, a white student in the first integrated class at Addison tells what she learned on the first day:

My Dad, like I said, had scared me to death. He'd said, "Just let one of them lay one finger on you and ... I'll probably be in jail" and "they like little blond haired girls." And he just had me scared to death. And I remember going to home room and sitting in the desk and there on the desk, you can tell, it's years and years of hearts with initials in it and I'm like, "they're just like us." It hit me then, I thought, "how does Dad know, he didn't go to school with them." I don't know, it just hit me that he didn't know what he was talking about.\textsuperscript{122}

Integrated schooling expanded her perspective on race and led to her role as a public historian in which she has helped protect an African American cemetery from being destroyed by urban development.

But students' experiences did not mirror that of teachers. With the integration of schools came major changes for white and black teachers. As early

\textsuperscript{121} Lester, \textit{Three Decades of Delay}, 35. Tota was also unpopular as an outsider who made drastic changes to the school administration when he arrived.

\textsuperscript{122} Darlene Richardson, Interview with Author, November 17, 2007, Arlington, Virginia, 4.
as June, 1954, a Roanoke Times editorial cautioned that African American teachers could lose jobs as a result of integration. In some school districts, African American teachers were fired wholesale as dual school systems became unitary ones. Many teachers, including those in western Virginia preemptively left their jobs in Virginia for positions farther north in Maryland or Pennsylvania. In Lexington, VA this was particularly devastating to the small African American community in which school teachers were the backbone of the middle class. Several African American businesses closed as a result of the teacher exodus.

Roanoke did not experience such effects to any major degree. When asked whether any teachers were let go as a result of integration, a school board administrator responded “no, we didn’t have enough black teachers” to make up the 20% needed under Roanoke’s plan. In addition, “where there was a white principle, [the school board] placed a black assistant principle... so the kids could relate. If they got in trouble and went to the office, they could see somebody who looked like them.”

During the early 1960s, Roanoke’s faculty integration was limited. Traditionally white faculties remained that way with integration as piecemeal as that of students. By the mid 1960s, Federal Court rulings made it clear that integration had to come to faculties to a greater extent and Roanoke responded with increases in faculty transfers. The school administration scrutinized these

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124 Interview with “Warren,” 5.
125 Interview with “Warren,” 4.
very thoroughly. One teacher requested a transfer to an all-black school in order to teach a more desirable subject. He describes his interview:

‘Well [name redacted], everything sounds alright but we just wanted to check you out to make sure you weren’t some kind of radical or something.’ See the idea, at that time—if a white person had—I guess, and I am not saying this is a compliment to me—but if a white person out of the blue said in this time, ‘I want to go to an all black school,’ they had a legitimate concern. ‘What is this guy’s motivation to be here? Does he have an agenda or is he living in some kind of world in which he really doesn’t know about things.’

Though student integration remained scattered, the changes affected faculty retention. In each year that the level of desegregation noticeably increased, 1960-61 and 1970-71, or threatened to increase, like 1955-56, the school system saw white teachers flood out of the occupation. School board minutes list the reasons as “transferred out of school district”, “retired early”, “left the profession”, or “personal reasons.” Yet, the specter of teaching desegregated classrooms loomed for many of these teachers and must be considered as an unspoken motive.

The exodus of teachers on the eve of major school desegregation events had unintended results on educational outcomes, both positive and negative effects. Presumably, teachers uncomfortable enough with integration to leave school would not treat African American and white children equally and possibly discriminate as some interviews indicate. Sandra Smith Jordan recalls her first year of integration:

I, myself, was put in a school that teachers point blank told me, ‘hey, we didn’t ask you niggers to come here, and I got mine. You

\[126\] Interview with “Fred,” 6.
get yours the best way you can.’ My ninth grade education was nada- nothing.\textsuperscript{127}

One pioneering African American student described her experience with teachers unsure of how to handle African American students:

The teaching systems were different. The 7 of us that went in into Monroe, we were all gifted kids. Very good in grades, the best of quality I guess of the students, as far as grades. However, the teachers did not acknowledge us. We were just like we weren’t there as far as being taught. The teachers were afraid of us. They didn’t know how to handle us. The older teachers were mean and hateful and rude. Teachers were bad. They didn’t want to teach us. It was just like we weren’t wanted anyway and the students were the same way.\textsuperscript{128}

Though some students and teachers had difficult experiences relating in the classroom, most studies concluded that desegregation led to positive educational outcomes. With the changes in faculty and students, along with the closing of inner city schools and the construction of new schools (as a result of the 1958 School Bond), Roanoke’s school system underwent incredible changes. This had major effects on an urban community that itself had been undergoing intense structural change.

The “Renewal” of a Community

Along with the opening and closing of certain neighborhood schools, Roanoke’s black northeast and northwest neighborhoods underwent extensive physical changes between 1950 and the 1970s. The process began in Roanoke,


\textsuperscript{128} Interview with “Diane,” 2-3.
along with cities across America, following the Housing Acts of 1949 and 1954. The new acts offered significant federal funding and an expanded definition of eminent domain to clear “blighted” areas in the inner city. The first housing developments in Roanoke were the white Lansdowne Park and the black Lincoln Terrace, built in 1952. The first slum clearance projects, as the city council described them, targeted black neighborhoods in Northeast Roanoke in 1955.  

The Commonwealth project resulted in most of Northeast's housing replaced by the Roanoke Civic Center and other private businesses. 

In 1964, a second program of urban renewal cleared much of the remaining housing in Roanoke's northeast. The Kimball Project made many of the same mistakes made by the Commonwealth Project. Though both built public housing for the displaced residents, it was not big enough and the rent too expensive for many former residents. Following the Kimball Project, Roanoke planned a major project for Gainsboro in 1968. This project was different from the earlier developments because it attacked the neighborhood in a piecemeal fashion. Several roads were closed or diverted to make room for easements and changes in traffic patterns related to the growth. The “history of promoting the ‘clearance and removal’ philosophy of... urban renewal” caused the closing of such community icons as the Hotel Dumas, The Ebony Club, Lincoln Theater, and Palace Hotel. Because of the school board’s “busing out” plan, numerous

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130 Please see detailed map of urban renewal in Appendix C.

neighborhood schools were closed including Lucy Addison High School. The effect on the historic neighborhood was disastrous. With the closure of these icons, came the loss of more than just buildings, but a sense of community. Henry Street became a shell of its former self with the closing of nearly fifty businesses, law offices, doctors’ and dentists’ offices, churches, and theatres.

Concurrent with Urban Renewal, a second feature arrived on the urban landscape: the raised highway. In 1966, the city completed a major raised highway running from Interstate 81 through the city. City planners routed Interstate 581 between the historic, black community of Gainesboro and the Commonwealth project. Indeed, one argument for the renewal projects had been that the dilapidated housing did not provide “a very prestigious entrance to the city” according to Mary Picket, a Roanoke city councilwoman in the 1950s. Despite the neighborhood’s appearance, Zenobia Ferguson told Mindy Thompson Fullilove that “we felt like we owned something. But then when the community was taken away, and we had to move away from it, it was just sad. It took that feeling of pride away from us.”

While Roanoke’s urban renewal policy had negative outcomes for many involved and the community as a whole, it must not be examined only in hindsight. The Roanoke City Council came to the project with good intentions and thought renewal would bring improvements to all residents, including those

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whose houses would be cleared. This was not the case in Norfolk’s where Mayor Fred Duckworth initiated a more sinister brand of clearance between 1956 and 1958. Norfolk’s business oriented civic leadership had participated in legitimate early urban planning efforts in the early fifties. With the rise of Massive Resistance, however, Duckworth led urban planning in alarming directions. A process began where communities that pushed for desegregation suddenly became listed for redevelopment and in a matter of months dozens of acres of houses would be razed under the Housing Act of 1949. Most of the projects had little to no rationale for clearance except the color of the residents’ skin. In the Atlantic City neighborhood, middle class African Americans had begun moving into the mostly single-family dwellings. This neighborhood initially had good enough housing that the Norfolk health department targeted it for code-enforcement meaning that property values would increase from improvements made to existing structures. Poor neighborhood (“slums”) property values would be better served through demolition and affluent neighborhoods wouldn’t have enough code violations to significantly depress property values. Furthermore, the area was the only district that was predominantly white but with 10% black residents. Thirteen of the students in the NAACP’s school integration suit of 1956 lived in Atlantic City. Redevelopment of the neighborhood was announced between the process of discovery and the Judge’s order to integrate the school.


\[\text{\underline{135} White, } \textit{Pride and Prejudice,} 103-115.\]

\[\text{\underline{136} White, } \textit{Pride and Prejudice,} 122-135.\]
Between the announcement of redevelopment and initial demolition, only nine months passed. By the 1957-58 school year, the threat to integration had been averted through demolition diplomacy.\(^{137}\)

The contrast here to Roanoke is stark. The attitude within the African American community was not monolithic. A. L. Holland described this: “see you got your two Ps, preservation and progress. I got a 1997 Ford Ranger, but I couldn’t expect to get the price for that like a 2004. So some things you got to let go.”\(^{138}\) One anonymous Gainsboro resident said that Henry Street (Gainsboro’s primary commercial district) had been “glamorized and romanticized. Henry Street was a street of hustlers. Just realize… life was nice, but life was hard.”\(^{139}\) Roanoke’s process of urban renewal did not aim to cause problems for its displaced residents. Efforts were made to create new housing, pay a “fair price”, and use land constructively. Neighborhoods were chosen with urban policy, though politics was inevitably a part. Yet the forces of urban renewal and school closings created major pains for the community's identity. With the closing of its largest landmarks came more than just the loss of bricks and mortar.

Unfortunately, these forces occurred simultaneously with problems for the greater city economy. The Norfolk Southern Railroad ended passenger service to Roanoke in the 1970s; in the 1980s it transferred its headquarters from Roanoke to Norfolk, along with thousands of jobs.\(^{140}\) Roanoke responded to these

\(^{137}\) White, *Pride and Prejudice*, 138-140.

\(^{138}\) Alphonso Holland, Sr. Interview with author. November 30, 2007, Roanoke, VA, 8.


\(^{140}\) Dotson, *Magic City of the New South*, 241.
changes in similar ways to rust belt cities by attempting to increase tourism and the technology industry, but the economy did not return to previous levels. African Americans were often the first fired when jobs were cut, showing the disparities that still existed between the two communities despite rhetoric to the contrary.141

Integrating the ‘Star City’

The integration of Roanoke was much more complex than assumed by previous scholars. While there were no school closings to evade desegregation and widespread violence did not occur, resistance to desegregation was just as strong as that in the eastern portion of Virginia. Even in a city that prided itself on “smooth” racial relations, the intervention of Roanoke Steel’s John Hancock as part of the “secret biracial committee” suggests that reforms would come at a speed appropriate to those in power. A style of inside and backchannel leadership within Roanoke thwarted African American resistance to urban renewal.

With integration, many doors opened educationally for African Americans. It is also important to remember the decades of delay and sheer difficulty of achieving any semblance of desegregation. While achieving civil rights with minimal conflict was a positive characteristic of Roanoke’s style, in the end, it proved to be a double-edged sword, cutting the black community off at its roots.

The image of Prince Edward County's Massive Resistance will always remain the symbol for Virginia’s Civil Rights Movement. It is an event that deals directly with what Eric Foner called “American Irony.” A female black high school student, leading her classmates in a strike against oppressive authorities made a great story. Political pressures from below pushed NAACP lawyers farther than they wanted to go in the name of freedom. These are ideals enumerated in America’s founding documents. Prince Edward County also provides examples of how America has never completely lived up to its ideals. A generation of African Americans never graduated from high school in Prince Edward County. Violence and hate served to remind African Americans who ran that county, as the schools were closed from 1959 to 1964. Ultimately, that morality play gained a happy ending when fully integrated schools were opened there in 1964. The era of Massive Resistance was a powerful time, but scholars need to remember that another type of resistance occurred.

The stories of those who lived through events in Roanoke challenged the Prince Edward County model of desegregation in Virginia. In Roanoke, massive resistance never became an official policy. Yet “smooth” relations did not bring meaningful integration. Leaders of the African American middle class agreed to minimize open conflict in return for a voice in some city decisions. African Americans consistently held appointed positions on the Roanoke School Board and Noel C. Taylor was even elected mayor from 1975 to 1992. Despite African American representation on the school board, it did not move towards desegregation unless forced to do so by judicial mandate.
In Roanoke, passive resistance kept schools essentially (or completely) segregated much longer than massive resistance. Urban renewal brought positive changes for Roanoke’s downtown, but at the expense of a black community who lost not only bricks and mortar but pieces of their identity and history. These are some of the ironies of Roanoke’s Civil Rights Movement. The democratic movements, for which the Civil Rights Movement is famous, only touched Roanoke briefly. Replacing these were a secret biracial committee that successfully integrated many businesses, golf courses, parks, waiting rooms, and buses. The School Board resisted change for over a decade and then closed inner city schools that whites largely did not want to attend. This smoothing over of racial conflicts and reliance on civilized discussion even in the face of discrimination created an environment where it was possible for an African American to be elected mayor in a City which was overwhelmingly white.

Roanoke acted like other southern “moderate” cities, but unlike Greensboro, it didn’t feature a large activist student population. Though Roanoke bused thousands of students, it never bused white students to black schools in as large of numbers as Charlotte did in the early 1970s. This created an environment in Roanoke that differed greatly from Greensboro, Charlotte, and especially Prince Edward County.

For historians of the Civil Rights Movement, it can be tempting to focus only on the most scandalous or well-known events. But it can be dangerous to make a symbol stand for an entire state. Roanoke shows that discrimination in the context of school desegregation cannot be calculated by the number of
schools closed. Likewise, the 1960s did not inspire popular resistance
movements in every urban area. Yet even without shuttered schools or a forceful
protest movement, Roanoke changed dramatically. Policies like the Great Society
and urban renewal interacted with desegregation in complex ways; bulldozing
made desegregation somewhat simpler. Finally, we must remember that passive
resistance kept schools largely segregated much longer than massive resistance.
Though Roanoke City leaders would prefer to hide this fact, scholars must not.
Appendix A

Map 1. Negro Population Percentages in Virginia, 1960

Source: Ely, Crisis of Conservative Virginia, 35.
## Appendix B

### Students and Teachers in Roanoke City Schools, 1967-68

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<th>School</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Total Students</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Total Teachers</th>
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## Student Enrollment in Roanoke City Schools, 1970-71

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**Source:** Interrogatories, Roanoke Office of the Superintendent, October 26, 1967, September 17, 1970.
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