

# Half century later, Brown ruling has lingering effect

The *Brown v. Board of Education* landmark Supreme Court ruling encompassed five lawsuits. In addition to *Topeka, Kan.*, the lead case, other suits were pending against school systems in South Carolina, Delaware, the District of Columbia and Virginia. The strongest resistance to 'Brown' was in Prince Edward County, Va. Below is a recounting of what happened prior to, during and after the 'Brown' ruling.

By Hazel Trice Edney  
and George E. Curry  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

WASHINGTON (NNPA) — On April 23, 1951 — three years before the landmark Brown ruling — Barbara Johns, a 16-year-old junior at Robert R. Moton High School in Farmville, Va., led a walk-out of 450 students to protest deplorable conditions at the all-Black school.

Unlike the school built across town for Whites, Moton High had no cafeteria, no gymnasium, no infirmary and no toilets for teachers. Built in 1939 for 189 students, by 1951, more than twice that many students were packed into the facility. Rather than construct a new Black high school, the county school board authorized the construction of three large plywood buildings. They were covered with tarpaper and were often referred to as "tar-paper-shacks." To further ease overcrowding, some students were taught in an old school bus.

In addition, such courses as world history, Latin, advanced typing and stenography, wood, metal and machine shop work, and drawing were offered only at the White schools.

To spare Black adults of physical and economic repercussions, Johns, the niece of Vernon Johns, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s predecessor at Dexter Street Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala., led a two-week student protest. Days later, she and another student leader, Carrie Stokes, wrote to the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, asking for help.

The next month, Spottswood Robinson III, a future federal judge, and Oliver Hill, a well-respected lawyer, filed suit to overturn Virginia state law requiring segregated schools. When their suit failed before the Virginia state courts, LDF attorneys Thurgood Marshall, James Nabrit, Jr. and Robert Carter urged local residents to become part of a group of cases that would become known collectively as 'Brown.'

Hoping to circumvent an adverse ruling, the Board of

Supervisors authorized funds in 1953 to build a new high school for Blacks. The Virginia General Assembly jumped into the act, adopting a policy of "massive resistance" to all school desegregation efforts. Prince Edward County became part of the first Brown ruling in 1954 (striking down separate but equal facilities as being a violation of the Black students' 14th Amendment rights) and Brown II in 1955 ordering schools to desegregate with "all deliberate speed."

Rather than desegregate the public schools, in 1959 the Prince Edward County Board of Supervisors voted to close its public schools. They remained closed until 1964 when the Supreme Court, responding to yet another suit, forced it to reopen as a desegregated school system.

Now, 50 years later, the pain of that period still lingers.

"As far as race relations itself, I think we have made tremendous improvements. But, as far as how people were affected when the schools closed, a lot of people are still hurt, angry and bitter," says Rita Moseley, a secretary at Prince Edward County High School. "The pain, even within myself, is so deep-rooted. And the scars are there for a lifetime and will never be removed because of the fact that it's a part of our lives. It's something that you just can't heal."

Moseley was in the sixth grade when the school system closed to avoid desegregation. She had hoped that the school would reopen the following year, but it didn't. She held out hope for the next year, but it came and went. Finally, after two idle years, Moseley was sent away to live with strangers while attending school in Blacksburg, Va.

"It was hard being away from my parents, my mother and my family," Moseley recalls. "Our lives were altered. It was devastating. It put us in places and situations where we never would have been and we had to go."

As disrupting as life was for young Rita Moseley, it



Prince Edward County spent \$194 per capita for education tools for Negro students at Robert R. Moton High School while spending \$817 per capita for White students at Farmville High.

Photo credit: Virginia Center for Digital History

was worse for some students who didn't start the first grade until they were 12 years old.

A trip to Farmville, Va., today provides no clue that there had been a major uproar here over Blacks and Whites attending school together. Prince Edward High School is roughly 51 percent Black and 49 percent White. The middle school is 63 percent Black, 35 percent White and 2 percent other. Approximately 59 percent of the elementary school students are African-Americans, 35 percent White and 3 percent others. African-Americans also serve in leadership positions in education.

The hoopla surrounding the Brown anniversary will be more than just a celebration.

"I think with the commemoration of the 50 years, it brings back so many memories," says Odessa Pride, acting principal of the Prince Edward County Middle School. "They haven't forgotten it, but have sort of tried to move on. But when you have big celebrations, of course, it flashes back to what used to be."

What used to be were sentiments favored by the Southern confederacy. Farmville is just two miles from Sailor's Creek, where Robert E. Lee made his land stand. In its 1869-70 session, the Virginia General Assembly passed a law stating that "White and colored persons shall not be taught in the same school, but in separate schools, under the same general regulations as to management, usefulness and efficiency." Identical language was adopted

in subsequent state codes.

Edward H. Peebles Jr., a sociology professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, was an expert witness in the Brown case. He wrote a 1963 report titled, "The Story Without an End."

The report observed, "At the time of the (1951) strike, there were fifteen Negro

schools in the county for an estimated Negro student population of 2,000. The total value of these properties was around \$330,000. All but one of these schools were of wood construction, had no toilet facilities, except for outdoor privies and had wood, coal or kerosene stoves for heat. At the same time,

White pupils had seven schools for an estimated 1,400 students, with a total property value of about \$1,200,000. Each of these schools were of sound brick construction and had indoor flush toilets, lavatories, and steam or hot water heat."

Prince Edward was the last Virginia county to keep its schools closed in an effort to avoid desegregation.

At the time the case was pending in federal court in Richmond, Prince Edward County had about 15,000 residents, slightly more than half African-Americans. There were 386 Black high school students and 346 White.

It took another trip to the Supreme Court, Griffin v. County School Board of Prince Edward County, to force the schools to re-open in 1964. President John F. Kennedy dispatched his brother, Attorney General Robert K. Kennedy to ensure a smooth re-opening.

Moseley, the secretary that lost two years because of the school closings, obtained her high school diploma but wonders what might have happened if her education had not been interrupted.

(See Mend, Page 13)

## Study Criminal Justice At Las Vegas College



CHECK US OUT  
AT OUR NEW  
HENDERSON  
LOCATION!



### Also Offering Career Education In:

Accounting • Administrative Assistant  
Administrative Medical Assistant • Bookkeeping  
Business Administration • Court Reporting • Paralegal  
Computer Office Technologies & Applications  
Legal Administrative Assistant • Medical Assistant  
Scoping Technology • Medical Insurance Billing/Coding  
*• Not All Programs Available At Both Locations*

To find out what your career choices can be, call toll-free:

# 800-646-1468

Ask for dept. 1169 or apply online at [lasvegas-college.com](http://lasvegas-college.com)

## Las Vegas

COLLEGE

4100 West Flamingo Road, Suite 2100 • Las Vegas, NV 89103

170 N. Stephanie Street, 1st Floor • Henderson, NV 89014

Member of the Corinthian Colleges, Inc. Global Network