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Rev. King speaks as 3000 protest Virginia school closing

RICHMOND, Va. — 3000 persons gathered from all over the state of Virginia in 20 degree cold to protest closing of schools in Prince Edward County, Virginia.

The Board of Supervisors of that Virginia county threw out public education rather than respect a federal desegregation order. At present there are 1700 Negro children without school and 1500 white youth enrolled in an obviously inferior private school set-up. No respite from any quarter, local, state, or federal, has been forthcoming since the public school lock-out last September. The schools were closed under a 'freedom of choice' statute passed in the last session of the General Assembly.

The protest meeting heard Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It was the second protest in Virginia. It came one year to the day following last year's dramatic pilgrimage that attracted some 2400 despite a driving rain.

State coordinator for the protest was the Rev. R. G. William, pastor of Zion Baptist church and first vice-president of the Baptist Allied bodies of Virginia. The Rev. Williams said the "schools are closed because we have closed hearts and closed minds."

Dr. King urged the citizens of Prince Edward not to "sell your birthright of freedom for a mass of segregated pottage." He referred to the offer of a group of white citizens to set up private schools for Negro children. "There is nothing more sublime than suffering and sacrifice for a great cause," he said.

At the conclusion of the service, Dr. King, flanked by the Rev. Williams and the Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker, coordinator, made the 19 block walk pilgrimage of protest that ended on the south portico of the state Capitol building. At least 1500 persons followed them five abreast in the sub-freezing weather in a line of march that at times extended 12 city blocks.

There, the Rev. Wyatt Tee Walker read the resolutions to be presented in the General Assembly. It specifically asked:

1. Immediate relief to the Prince Edward children by opening the closed schools;
2. Repeal of the Perrow Commission statute that allows communities to close schools rather than desegregate;
3. Appointment of a bi-racial commission to ease the social transition across the state in harmony and good-will.



Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. visiting Farmville, Virginia, March 28, 1962.

Photograph in Special Collection Archives of Virginia Union University.

Virginia's Black Belt

New York Amsterdam News

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

April 14, 1962

I did not realize until our "People to People" tour swung through the Black Belt of Virginia last week that the South gave our nation nine of its first twelve Presidents. Seven of them were Virginians. How strange it is that this southern Commonwealth has failed so miserably in giving moral leadership to the South. The idea of "massive resistance" was spawned not in Georgia or Alabama--but in the heart of Southside Virginia, commonly known as the Black Belt.

This section of Virginia is the bulwark of Harry Byrd's political dynasty that holds Virginia's liberal bent in a strangle-hold. The anti-NAACP laws, the infamous trespass ordinances aimed at thwarting the Sit-Ins, the Pupil Placement laws--all children of "massive resistance" had their origin and loudest support from this same Negro majority section of Virginia that makes up most of the Fourth U. S. Congressional District.

What a pity that this state of such early historical distinction has missed an opportunity for real greatness in one of her nation's most critical hours!

It may well have been that the severe social change that is taking place in the South today might have been considerably accelerated had not Virginia, "the mother of Presidents" led the South backward into "massive resistance."

It is refreshing, however, to observe even from this brief vantage point of the struggle's history, that social crises at times produce their greatest need. The nonviolent thrust of the Negro community in the South and Virginia has met "massive resistance" with "massive insistence."

This is a part of the aim of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference [SCLC] "People to "People" program. I am convinced, as I have said many times, that the salvation of the Negro is not in Washington, D. C.

The Supreme Court, the Justice Department, the President of the United States, and the Congress can aid immeasurably in the emancipation process of the Negro, but the major responsibility of securing our full freedom depends on the Negro himself.

Our constitutional guarantees will not be realized until Negroes rise up by the hundreds and the thousands, community by

community, and demand their rights through nonviolence and creative protest.

As our SCLC task force traveled over the Black Belt of Virginia last week I could see the potential of this. In just two days, we touched the lives of nearly 10,000 people. We could see the deep hope and yearning for freedom in the eyes of thousands of Negroes and the sincere commitment to human equality in the eyes of many whites.

The Black Belt of Virginia has a potential of 100,000 voters in the Negro community but there are barely 17,000 registered at present. The Fourth District is similar to many parts of Mississippi with many Negroes who are tied to the land as sharecroppers. Economic suppression is the rule rather than the exception and the poll tax requirement adds to the burden of general apathy in Negro voter registration. It is towards this enormous task in Virginia's Black Belt that our "People to People" tour was directed.

As I indicated in an earlier column, the "People to People" program is aimed at the recruitment of our Freedom Corps and Nonviolent Army in the Negro majority areas of every southern state.

Mississippi was our initial tour and then Virginia.

We joined Fourth District leaders in Petersburg on the first day of our visit and spent the afternoon literally knocking on doors in the First Ward in a voter registration canvass.

We could discern from the response of the occupants of the more than eighty homes visited, that many of our people just need the information as to what they must know and exactly where they must go and what they must do.

In Lynchburg the same evening, along with Ralph Abernathy and Wyatt Tee Walker, we recruited 118 volunteers to work in voter registration. I was overwhelmed by a nine-year-old white lad, Chuck Moran, who came forward and said he wanted to help in this struggle. The example of this tender spirit triggered the response of many of the others who joined the Freedom Corps that night.

Nine a.m. the next day, we saw first-hand the tragedy of Prince Edward County. This is the Virginia County that closed down its public schools rather than comply with the Supreme Court decision of 1954. This is the third year that there has been no public schools for any child white or black.

We could see the obvious lines of strain and weariness in the face of Prince Edward's peerless leader, the Rev. L. Francis Griffin.

He has refused the compromise of half a loaf of freedom and the parents and children have backed him unanimously in this position. Think of it! Closed schools in Virginia, the mother of Presidents.

Virginia State College offered us another thrill. This was a homecoming for Mrs. Dorothy Cotton, Director of the Citizenship Schools, who accompanied us. The students jam-packed Virginia Hall auditorium (capacity 2,500) in a voluntary assembly that a college official said was the first such occasion in history.

It evidences a new breed and a new generation in our Negro community with this kind of enthusiasm and interest.

We rounded out our Virginia tour by attending the trials of 62 Sit-Inners in Hopewell, Virginia and visiting two rural communities in Dinwiddie County, just south of Petersburg.

The last public meeting held at Petersburg's First Baptist Church was a standing room only affair where 158 joined our Freedom Corps to work in voter registration.

As we winged our way back to Atlanta, it came to me that the tremendous response we found in Virginia held promise of changing the political climate in Virginia, and perhaps--perhaps, Virginia might once again produce a president.



Chuck Moran

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Jan 16 · 7 min read



March 27, 1962, Lynchburg, Virginia

The Day I Met MLK

In 1962, civil rights activist Wyatt Tee Walker wrote in *Fifty-Three Hours with Martin Luther King, Jr.*, “The climax of our whirlwind visit to this Mountain City came immediately following Dr. King’s stirring address

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when Rev. Abernathy made the appeal for Freedom Corps volunteers. For a brief moment, you could sense a general hesitancy. Then over the right-center aisle at Dr. King's station, a young white lad, Chuck Moran of Charlottesville, Virginia, only [11] years of age, came forward and gave his hand to Dr. King saying, 'I want to help you in this struggle.'"

Three years before I shook hands with Martin Luther King, Jr., a pair of scuffed-up red Mary Janes twiddled in the pools of Sunday sunlight that played across the linoleum floor. Those shoes, puppeteered by my little sister Ginger, were the only things keeping me from slipping into a boredom-induced stupor. Time had almost stopped there in the silence. I knew I was supposed to be thinking about world peace or love or being kind to people, but that was a tall order for an eight-year-old boy stuck in Quaker Meeting.

It was a warm summer day, and I could hardly wait to get outside. After the interminable hour was up, Pop, Ginger and I walked up the concrete stairs into the sunshine from the basement in Madison Hall at the University of Virginia. One block over, we met our mother who had attended church at St. Paul's Episcopal. The rustling sound of her Sunday-best skirt faded behind us as Ginger and I made a quick beeline down The Corner to Chancellor's Drugstore, where fudge ripple ice cream cones awaited.

In the safety of the 1950s, my parents never thought twice about letting us run ahead ... out of sight. Or if they did, I'm sure it was Pop who prevailed with a calming "Let them go" to my Mom.

It was late August 1958. I had two years at Venable Elementary School under my belt. The ritual loomed: sharpened pencils in a new plastic box. Maybe a new ruler and always the heavy textbooks that we would wrap in flattened Safeway grocery store bags. A new backpack was not in the budget.

School was about to start when my folks announced some bewildering news. They were saying something about having to go to school, to enter the vaunted third grade, in some lady's basement. Something about how the city schools were closed—my Venable Elementary was closed, shuttered because Negro kids weren't going to be allowed to go to school with us white kids. For the fall of that year and into the spring

of the next, we inhabited Mrs. Wilson's basement. Lessons, recess, lunch, nap, home, repeat.

There was a lot I didn't know or understand at the time—how the grownups were acting out what we now see as an overt and dying vestige of racism, how the next years would be filled with demonstrations and clashes, how many people would not feel safe for a while.

U.S. senator Harry F. Byrd, Sr., who firmly controlled Virginia politics, vehemently opposed integrating public schools despite the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision handed down by the United States Supreme Court in 1954. Byrd instituted Massive Resistance, a series of laws designed to maintain segregated public schools. Our Charlottesville Public Schools were seized and closed. Massive Resistance was soon struck down and a few courageous black students began to integrate the schools the following spring.

I don't recall knowing any black kids in any of my first several years of school. I'm not entirely sure I would've noticed anyway because I was never taught that there were any differences. It did seem odd at the time that there were segregated water fountains and bathrooms at Sears and Roebuck, and black kids had to enter the Paramount Theatre through a side door to sit only in the balcony.

As a young lad, another thing I didn't see as distinctive was the idea that my parents had things called principles. Later I would learn that they believed in Adlai Stevenson because of his anti-war stance and support for emerging African nations. My father, "Chic" Moran, became a Quaker in 1930 and a conscientious objector during World War II because he refused to kill. He founded the Charlottesville Friends Meeting (Quakers). Always advocating for peace and cooperation, Pop became the chairman of the Save Our Schools Committee which proposed a bi-racial council to implement the Supreme Court's 1954 school integration decision. Publicly opposing his segregationist boss, University of Virginia president Colgate Darden, Jr., my father was quoted in the *New York Times* in 1956 as saying, "Negroes will never be full-sized citizens until they have actual equal opportunities. Separate and equal are inherently contradictory."

So on that sunny afternoon three years later, I pull on my favorite white spring jacket, and my sister, Ginger, and I climb into the back seat of our Chevy Corvair without thinking about it much. At the wheel, my father heads south to Lynchburg, Virginia. A man is going to give a talk at a high school, and Mom and Pop want us to be there to hear him. About the same time, the speaker, who has just wrapped up a “people-to-people” voter registration canvass in Petersburg, is on his way to Lynchburg in a three-car caravan.

Together with many black families and individuals, we enter the auditorium at the high school. It’s really filling up in here. We make our way to the middle of the room and take seats close to the aisle. Pop is on the outside, then my Mom, Ginger and me. I have no idea what is about to happen.

The speaker rises from his chair and comes to the podium. He’s smiling. His name is Martin Luther King, Jr., founder of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

In a booming, velvet voice, he delivers his message. At the conclusion, to boisterous applause, he walks down from the stage. He’s standing, smiling, in the aisle nearest us, a good ways down from our seats. He’s facing the crowd. Another man, who is at the podium, asks attendees to come forward and meet Dr. King, to join his Volunteer Corps to work for equality and nonviolence.

Something inside is calling me, pushing me. Excited, I lean forward and, looking across my sister, I ask my parents if it’s okay if I go down there. They nod. I climb over my family’s legs and step out into the aisle. Unafraid, I walk toward this man, this warm, smiling man. No one is in line in front of me.

He’s really beaming now as I approach. A flash bulb goes off as I reach out. Dr. King leans toward me and takes my hand in his. His hand is big, soft and strong. He clasps my shoulder and looks me right in the eye. I feel so welcome, cared for, appreciated.

The man on the stage is saying, “Look at this little white boy coming down here!”

I go through a door under the stage and into a room with many other volunteers. Grownups are talking about what’s expected of us.

Several weeks go by, and one day a package arrives in the mail addressed to me. I'm happy to see that it contains flyers to distribute to further the Freedom Corps cause. One of my parents' closest friends, local civil and human rights advocate Francis Fife, volunteers to drive me around so I can stuff mailboxes.

I'm in the army now.

In his memoir, Mr. Walker continues:

“Like an electric current, [the boy coming down] triggered others into decision and commitment. Volunteers began to stream down the aisles from every direction. Some came toward me at my station, others to Bernard Lee and Herbert Coulton at their stations. In all one hundred and eighteen came forward, committing themselves to work in their own communities in voter registration and to deepen their lives in the nonviolent way.

“Downstairs, underneath the stage, where these new members of the Freedom Corps filled in their commitment cards, Dr. King greeted them informally and offered a brief prayer of consecration as the strains of Lift E'vry Voice and Sing filtered down to us. We could not help being moved visibly by this kind of witness, for here were Southerners, old and young, men and women, Negro and white, lettered and unlettered, willing to invest their lives in solving the [South's] sorest dilemma.”

Over the next 50 years, I wondered time and again if the photo that was taken as I met Dr. King was still available, hidden in a folder somewhere. I assumed that a Lynchburg news photographer had taken it and looked online several times to no avail. Then one day in 2013, the photo found me. Stacey Zwald Costello was editing the King Papers Project at Stanford University and had the photo. I can't express how grateful I am to have a copy of the photo (above). I reminds me in the best possible ways of that day; the day I met MLK.

Today is January 16, 2017, Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Four days before a new man is to replace Barack Obama at the helm of our country.

Never having heard anything to the contrary, I assume my membership in the Freedom Corps is still valid. It certainly is in my heart, and I will use the memory of meeting Dr. King in 1962 to rekindle my ability to resist.

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Photo courtesy of Wyatt Tee Walker