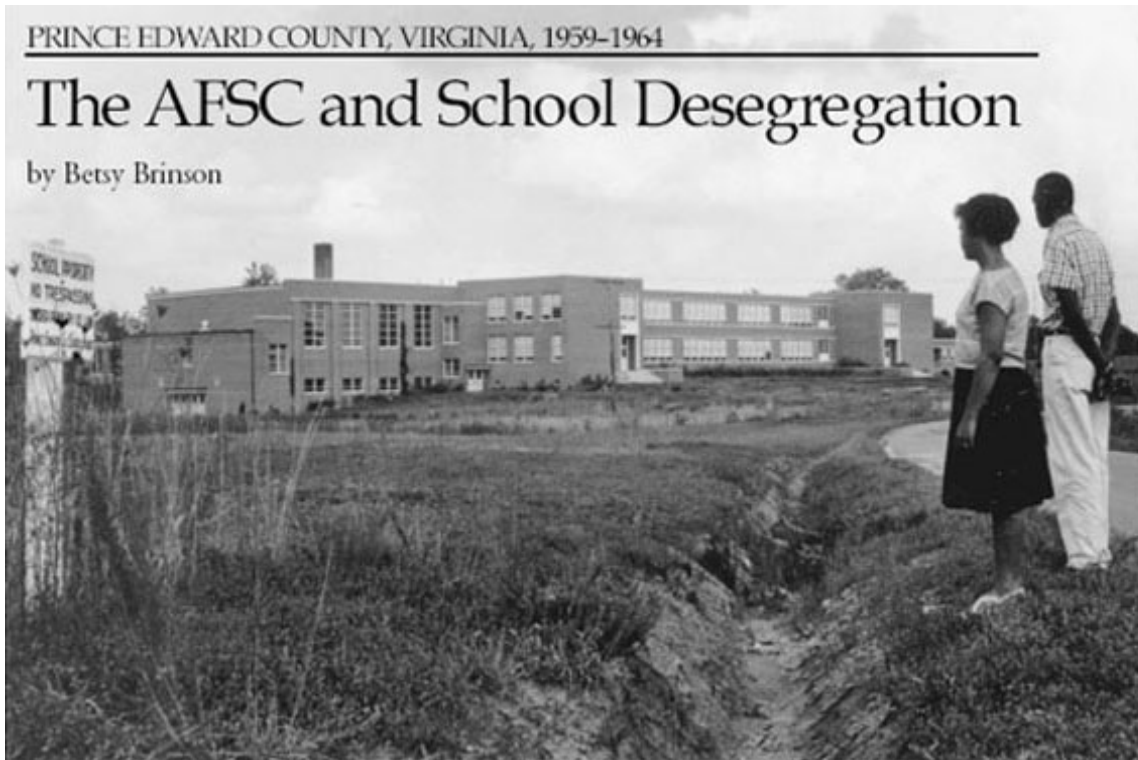


FRIENDS JOURNAL

Published on Friends Journal (<http://www.friendsjournal.org>)

The AFSC and School Desegregation



Robert R. Moton High School, closed to prevent desegregation in the fall of 1959.

The involvement of the Religious Society of Friends in Prince Edward County dates back to the Civil War. Shortly after General Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox in 1865, the African American community in Farmville, the Prince Edward County seat, asked the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands to supply them with a teacher. In response, the Pennsylvania Freedman Relief Association, a largely Quaker group based in Philadelphia, appointed Frederick Brooks to the post. The school grew quickly after opening to have some 300 students. This was part of a broader response by Quakers to meet the urgent educational needs of African Americans. Quakers left the county after this first effort in education, but local African Americans themselves continued to advocate for education reforms.

In 1880 parents asked the school board to employ African American teachers. A series of petitions were presented to the school board in the 1930s requesting improved facilities. In 1939, a new brick high school was opened but the enrollment far exceeded capacity. Unlike the school for white children, the building did not contain a library, a cafeteria, or a gym, and school equipment was very limited. One student recalled that her entire biology class had only one frog to dissect.

In 1940, parents began anew to petition county officials to relieve the overcrowded conditions of their schools. Finally, in 1947, the state Board of Education ruled the school inadequate. In 1948 local

government acted to erect three temporary buildings constructed separate from the main building. Covered with tarpaper, each was divided into two rooms and was heated by wood burned in oil drums with long stovepipes extending the length of the building. Parents protested that the oil drums constituted a fire hazard, but to no avail.

On April 23, 1951, students took matters into their own hands. Without notice to their families, the entire student body of 456 students at the R.R. Moton High School went out on strike to protest unsatisfactory school standards. These clever students, led by 16-year-old Barbara Rose Johns, had met numerous times outside school to develop a careful plan. They arranged a telephone call to the principal asking him to investigate alleged student misbehavior across town. While he was away, they assembled in the auditorium and then left the building.

Barbara Johns called the state NAACP to request legal counsel. S.W. Robinson III and Oliver W. Hill, as NAACP representatives, consulted with the students and later with their parents. They advised that conditions would never be corrected adequately so long as children were segregated by race. The students and their families agreed, and the NAACP filed suit on their behalf. This suit became one of the cases heard by the Supreme Court in the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which ordered school desegregation.

To avoid school desegregation, the Prince Edward County School Board closed its schools in 1959, posting "No Trespassing" signs on the buildings.

In response, the Virginia General Assembly, in 1956, agreed to close any schools under court orders to desegregate. Known as Massive Resistance, the law was later overturned in 1959 by a federal court ruling declaring it unconstitutional. Seven Virginia school districts that had been closed to some 12,000 youth for several months announced that they would reopen and desegregate, but Prince Edward County officials decided to defy the court ruling.

The 1960 census described Prince Edward as a predominantly rural farm community with a population of 14,121. Of these, 42 percent were African American. Dairy farming, tobacco, and sawmill timbering were the largest sources of income. Although some African Americans owned their own farms, most worked for others as agricultural laborers or domestics. While Prince Edward County hosted all-white Longwood College, a public women's college of 400 students, and Hampden Sydney, an all-white private men's college with approximately 1,000 students, there were limited opportunities for African Americans to work and none to be educated in these institutions. Moreover, with 40,000 black residents within a nine-county area, Southside Community Hospital in Farmville maintained only 16 of its 97 hospital beds for African Americans. No black doctors were allowed to join the hospital staff. Local theaters and eating establishments were closed to blacks. Separate water fountains were maintained in town, as were separate bathrooms at the bus and train stations. African American shoppers were not allowed to try on clothing, shoes, or hats before purchase, allegedly for fear that the products would be soiled.

While Prince Edward was in many ways typical of other southern rural communities of the time, the community distinguished itself from most other southern towns in response to the Brown decision. To avoid school desegregation, the Prince Edward County School Board closed its schools in 1959, posting "No Trespassing" signs on the buildings. In the first year, about 1,800 African American children were locked out of their schools. When schools finally reopened in 1964, almost 2,500 African American children had been without public schooling for five years. For white children a segregated system of private academies was hastily organized with tuition grants from public funds. Segregationists elsewhere also gave money to help finance these private academies.

When the schools closed, Quakers again entered Prince Edward County history. In 1959, at a quarterly meeting of the Southern Interagency Conference (SIC), a coalition representing civil rights, human

W relations, labor, and religious organizations, American Friends Service Committee was asked to enter Prince Edward County and survey conditions within the African American community. With Massive Resistance, AFSC decided to lend staff and volunteer support to community efforts in the county. First and foremost, their goal was to work with local individuals to help the African American community reopen schools. AFSC also hoped to work with the few local whites who supported reopening them. This AFSC program has received little attention over the years in news accounts, books, television, or films.

AFSC opened an office in the Farmville building owned by the local African American dentist, Dr. N.P. Miller, and his wife, Minnie B. Miller. Staffed first by Bill Bagwell, Helen Baker, Harry Boyte, and later Nancy Adams, the office became a key coordinator of involvement of other national and local volunteers and organizations. Outside Prince Edward County, Jean Fairfax, in her role as AFSC National Representative for Southern Programs, helped keep the pressure on federal agencies that were extremely reluctant to challenge politically powerful exponents of Massive Resistance in Virginia, including Harry F. Byrd, chair of the U.S. Senate Finance Committee at the time.

In the beginning, most people thought that the Prince Edward schools would reopen quickly. During the first year, the emphasis was clearly on the need to strengthen academic skills and to sustain the morale of the children who remained at home and their families. A few parents were able to find ways to send their children to extended families outside the county so they could go to school. Under the auspices of the Prince Edward County Christian Association (PECCA), directed by Reverend L. Francis Griffin, a key leader in the African American community, about 50 students attended Kittrell College, a Methodist institution in North Carolina. PECCA also organized local reading rooms at African American churches. One student recalled reading “everything she could find” that year in the A.M.E. church library. In addition, AFSC organized a year-round recreation program including softball leagues, movies, and African American history discussions. Girls were taught to hand sew and how to use a sewing machine; boys were introduced to power saws. Students went on field trips to such places as Washington, D.C., and the planetarium at University of North Carolina. Volunteer coordinators Ed Peeples and Ruby Clayton drove from Richmond, 60 miles away, to coordinate 10–15 other volunteers, who came from around central Virginia to help with weekend recreation.



AFSC staff member Bill Bagwell explains the AFSC placement program to prospective participants.

The AFSC office organized the relocation and placement of African American children in schools and families outside the region through its Emergency Student Placement Project. In a memorandum to regional AFSC offices, Jean Fairfax asked for help in mobilizing local sponsoring committees that would recruit host families, select schools, involve counselors, provide cultural experiences, and raise money. Within just a few weeks, 47 students in grades 7–12 were placed in ten local communities in eight states. There were students also in Scattergood Friends School in Iowa and Moorestown Friends School in New Jersey. Forty-two host families, both black and white, were recruited and sponsoring committees became active.

Local leaders spread news of the project in Prince Edward County. Interested students and their parents were interviewed and participated in an orientation program. Students were selected on a first-come, first-served basis, with no consideration of past academic performance.

AFSC did give priority to older students, who needed less time to graduate from high school. The project was organized so quickly—during July and August of 1960—that it was only after children arrived in

some communities that policy and legal issues arose. Among these were whether tuition had to be paid because the students were from out of state, if tuition could be waived, and whether host families had to be officially certified by the state even though they were not technically foster parents.

In the second year, new placements were made in Kentucky, at Berea College Foundation School, and in Massachusetts. Jean Fairfax arranged with a local African American funeral director to use his station wagon, and, along with a second vehicle, she and Minnie B. Miller, a former home economics teacher, drove six students across the Appalachian Mountains to Kentucky. Several students continued their education after high school at Berea College.

Sponsoring committees were charged with finding families for students, working out the sometimes complicated process of enrolling out-of-state students in local public schools, raising money, and hosting interracial community activities for students, families, and host committee members. Maya Hasegawa recalls that her mother, Marii, who with her husband had been confined during World War II in Japanese American internment camps and who AFSC had helped relocate after the war, served on the Moorestown, N.J., sponsoring committee. As a small girl, Maya remembers going to numerous interracial potlucks and other recreational events with students, families, and sponsors.

At a meeting in 1961 with Prince Edward families, the AFSC staff was pleased to learn that the families felt that their children had matured and held an expanded vision of opportunities for the future. With the end of that school year, seven children graduated from high school. By the end of its third and final year in 1963, the AFSC Placement Project had sponsored a total of 67 students with placements in eight states, in sixteen communities and three private schools. Eighteen students had finished high school. Efforts continue now to locate these students and to record their individual stories about their experiences with the AFSC program.

More children could have been placed except for the understandable reluctance of parents to send their children away. The families had traveled little and feared for children to be so far away from home. Having children return home for Christmas holidays and summer vacations was not enough for some parents to grant permission. For parents who sent their children away, AFSC organized a weekly parents' group for information sharing, letter writing, and arranging community holiday homecomings.

While the Placement Project was remarkably successful, there were tensions. Students were homesick, and parents at home missed their children. AFSC evaluated the program frequently in its contacts with parents, children, school counselors, and host families in order to work out glitches. A formal survey the first year found that many host parents were most distressed that not all students were doing well academically, even though they had been advised that student selection had not been based on academic achievement back home. Some students seemed to be uneasy about what might be expected of them. At least one girl feared that she was expected to provide household domestic help in return for room and board. One urban host recalled that her visiting student, used to a safer and more relaxed rural environment with freedom to come and go, had difficulty understanding why he needed to come home directly after school. As a result of these tensions and other factors, eight children left the program during the first year. AFSC was able to place some of these students elsewhere for the next year while parents found arrangements for others.

Twenty-three of the children made a point of saying that their northern schools were more difficult than their school in Prince Edward. This may have been more than academic difficulty. Some children may have felt tensions from attending school with white students for the first time. Most students felt that the greater permissiveness in northern classrooms was preferable even though it required

When schools reopened in 1964, almost 2,500 African American children had been without public schooling for five years. For white children a segregated system of private academies was hastily organized with tuition grants from public funds.

them to adjust. A few thought that corporal punishment, which was used occasionally in their Prince Edward schools, was a good way to maintain order. Although 23 students initially tested with low reading scores in their northern schools, another 26 students had test scores that went up. With the second and third year, many of these concerns had disappeared.

While the students were eager to return to their homes and families, few said during their placement that they would be content to live in Prince Edward or anywhere in the south for the rest of their lives. Regret over extremely limited job opportunities back home and general boredom over life in Prince Edward were reasons they identified.

Barbara Botts Chapman was one of the youngest AFSC students. At age 13, she and her mother, a domestic who had only completed third grade and earned \$2.50 per week, agreed that Barbara would apply to the AFSC program. She spent three years in the program, first in New Jersey and later in Massachusetts. She lived with three families, two African American and one white. Her mother, Geneva, recalls how hard it was for her to let her daughter go but how important it was for Barbara to be educated. The first year she took her daughter by bus, their first bus ride ever, to the New Jersey family placement. Later, after college, Barbara made public education her career choice. For the last five years, she has been the principal of a middle school in Richmond, Virginia. Recently she was awarded her EdD in Educational Administration.



Reverend L. Francis Griffin, the Pastor of Farmville's First Baptist Church, with a group of Prince Edward County students during a visit to Philadelphia.

Today the AFSC students speak appreciatively of their family and school experiences away from home. They are a well-educated, successful group, including lawyers, teachers, social workers, corporate executives, and government leaders. They are grateful to AFSC for being there when the African American community needed help. Today the Moton School, where all this began, is a museum that tells this important civil rights story. The current school board of Prince Edward County is chaired by one of the students who was forced out with the closings.

Even though many thought earlier that they would never return home permanently, some did. At least six more AFSC students have visited Prince Edward regularly over the years. Some say that they have learned things in the greater world that they plan to bring back to Prince Edward County when they retire. The AFSC placement helped open their eyes to a different world in that blacks and whites could live and learn together, an experience that in turn has helped their Prince Edward families and neighbors to aspire to greater things.

In 2003, the Virginia General Assembly passed a resolution expressing “profound regret” over the earlier closing of public schools in Prince Edward County. At a special ceremony in 2003, several hundred former students who never finished high school because of the closings were honored with graduation certificates. Several of the AFSC students feel that while this action may have been perceived as healing, it actually demeans these unfortunate students. One, a career employee of the Foreign Service, feels that reparations should be offered to the children and grandchildren of those individuals who lost their chances for education. While Prince Edward County schools today are racially mixed, the white academy begun during Massive Resistance continues to operate with private funds. Its students are almost all white.

Over the years, many school systems that were once integrated have since become resegregated. Jean Fairfax maintains that the issue of race in the schools is very much still with us. She says, “Efforts today to

establish charter schools, vouchers, special testing, and methods to otherwise minimize public school education stem from the inability of most people to accommodate to a mixed society racially.” The campaign for better public education for all, regardless of race, continues. Are Friends there today as they were in Prince Edward County years ago?

Source URL:

<http://www.friendsjournal.org/afsc-and-school-desegregation>



FRIENDS JOURNAL, 1216 Arch Street, 2A, Philadelphia PA 19107-2835
(215) 563-8629 voice, (215) 568-1377 fax, info@friendsjournal.org. All rights reserved.
All materials on this website copyright © 2008 FRIENDS JOURNAL, except as indicated herein.