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“Only a Matter of Time”

Christiansburg Institute and Desegregation in Southwestern

Virginia: 1959 – 1960

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May 2005

School integration in southwestern Virginia, and the methods by which legal cases were formulated to end school segregation were not simple processes; they were grounded in local circumstances full of complexity and irony. The presence of Christiansburg Institute, a successful and well-supported black school modeled on Booker T. Washington's program at Tuskegee, played a major role in how citizens of the surrounding counties thought about public schooling and the opportunities for black students. Southwestern Virginia, historically viewed as a stronghold of moderate viewpoints within Virginia, is often seen as exceptional in school desegregation. While politicians and newspapers provided a moderate viewpoint, the people of Southwestern Virginia held onto segregation. In their minds, separate but equal had been faithfully adhered to because of the presence of Christiansburg Institute. When the NAACP challenged the prevailing comfort with separate but equal to bring about school integration throughout southwestern Virginia, white citizens in the region faced competing values. They valued moderation in racial matters but also were committed to the ideal of separate but equal. In fact, ironically, their perceptions of the ideal of separate but equal came in large part from the activities of Christiansburg Institute. There was further a double irony: these whites who relied so heavily in the early fifties on the Institute to rationalize segregation did not pay for or build the Institute.

Christiansburg Institute, located in Montgomery County, operated for 100 years serving the surrounding black communities. Founded by a retired Civil War veteran, Charles S. Schaeffer, in 1866, its original purpose was to help educate the newly freed slaves located in southwestern Virginia who otherwise had very few options when it came to the issue of education. The Philadelphia-based Friends' Freedmen's

Association, a group of Quakers working to help with the education of freedmen in the south after the Civil War, supervised the institute, providing both direction and funds for the school to operate.

At its height, Christiansburg Institute operated on a 185-acre campus and consisted of fourteen buildings, instructed 340 students, and taught a variety of subjects, both traditional and technical. As one student remarked, looking back on his arrival at Christiansburg for the first time,

“I was overwhelmed to see the beautiful rolling green hills of Christiansburg, the campus entrance was lined with maple trees on both sides of the pavement for about one-fourth mile. Three brick buildings stood majestically, the principal’s home, Morris-Baily Hall and Morris Hall; four frame cottages, one Rev. Wayne Lester’s the agriculture building and the ‘Mansion house’ just below the Edgar A. Long Building and the barn.”¹

The school’s curriculum originally revolved around traditional, classic education, involving literature, mathematics, and other elements of a classical education as directed by Schaeffer.² As the nineteenth century progressed, the Institute shifted its focus and began to incorporate technical education. The Christiansburg Industrial Institute, as it was then known, became an important location for technical education in southwest Virginia.

¹ Christiansburg [Virginia] Industrial Institute, Historical Documents, 1866-1991, Ms91-033, Digital Libraries and Archives, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Box 1, Folder 2.

² The collections at Virginia Tech provide information on school curriculum, especially in the early part of the 20th century. Edgar A. Long, one of the presidents of the Institute, left many of his papers and also provided a collection of lectures given at the Institute. Many of the materials available in this collection are also available as photocopies at Virginia State University’s Special Collections department, whose CI collection includes many physical artifacts such as yearbooks, programs, and apparel.

In 1895, Christiansburg Institute entered into an era of supervision by Booker T. Washington, one of the most prominent black figures of the era. Washington became superintendent of the school, and, in essence, oversaw the operation of the facility from Tuskegee. During this time period that the school began to gain the faculty, and with it, the respect, that would help to establish it as one of the premier black schools in the nation, and certainly the premier black school in the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Under Washington's supervision, the school expanded rapidly. Washington was able to recruit effective faculty from his students at Tuskegee, and he brought in principals and teachers who were highly respected and well educated. When Washington died in 1915, his successor at Tuskegee would also serve as the superintendent at Christiansburg. Robert Moton continued the Tuskegee stewardship of Christiansburg Institute, and to guide the school on its path to prominence until the oversight of Tuskegee ended in 1934. The loss of oversight by Tuskegee did not lessen the reputation of Christiansburg Institute in the eyes of the state or by accrediting institutions. Between 1941 and 1942, Christiansburg Institute was accredited by the Virginia Department of Education, as well as by the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, making it one of the only black schools in the country with such impressive credentials.³

Despite being the only black high school in southwest Virginia, Christiansburg Institute continued to operate privately until 1949. In 1949 as NAACP equalization suits put more pressure on the operation of separate but equal schools, the counties of Montgomery, Pulaski, and the City of Radford entered into an agreement to run the school – seemingly an easier option than constructing schools of their own, especially

³ James W. Smith and Amanda E. DeHart, *Christiansburg Institute: A Proud Heritage*, (Petersburg, Virginia: Westar Publishing Company. 1991.)

with such a well-respected, accredited institution in close proximity. By doing so, they relieved the efforts that the Friends' Freedmen's Association, who still held a supervisory position over the school, had in coming up with funds for operation. The Friends continued to play a role in the Christiansburg Institute, as it still held the deed to all of the Institute's property.

As the Institute transformed itself into a public operation, other counties within the region began to send their students to Christiansburg for an education. While some contributed to the operation of the Institute directly, others paid tuition for their students to attend. Tuition paying counties included Giles, which sent only one student, Carroll, which sent only two students, and Floyd. The counties, however, which bused their students to Christiansburg in large numbers, Floyd and Pulaski, bypassed white high schools along the way. These counties did not have large black populations where students were forced to attend an all-black county high school. The counties involved in the legislation, had, in fact, quite the opposite statistical breakdowns. Pulaski County had the largest black percentage of all counties involved in the litigation according to the 1950 census. With a total population of 27,758 citizens, only 2,069, or seven percent, were black. Ten years later it had lost black residents—with a total population of 27,258, and a black population of 1,788, or six percent.⁴

Montgomery County, where Christiansburg Institute was located, had a similar racial composition. The total population of Montgomery County in 1950 was 29,780, and its black population was 1,569, representing five percent of the total. Of all the counties involved in legislation in the 1959 and 1960 era, Montgomery was the only

⁴ University of Virginia Geostat Center: Historical Census Browser.
<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html>

county to have an increase in total population in the 1960 census. However, despite the increase in total population, the black population decreased. In 1960, the total population was 32,923, with 1,422 of those persons black, representing four percent.⁵

Compared with other parts of the state, such as Southside Virginia where high populations of black residents correlated with a deep commitment to segregation among whites, Southwest Virginia would appear to have had low barriers to integration. These counties had low black populations but they also developed a commitment to the ideal of separate but equal, an outlook on the matter that proceeded from pride in their supposed commitment to equality. Nearly all of these counties had a declining black population over the 1950s and 60s. With a total population of only 11,351 in 1950, the black population in Floyd County (490 people) represented four percent of the total population. Floyd County, however, was the only county in this study to have an increase in the percentage of black persons from the 1950 to the 1960 census. In 1960, the total population of Floyd County was 10,462, with blacks making up 532 of that total, or, five percent.⁶ Grayson County, in the 1950 census, had a total population of 21,379. Blacks represented 932 of that total number, or four percent. By 1960, Grayson County experienced a large drop off in their population, but black representation fell at a more rapid rate. In 1960, Grayson County had a total population of 17,390, with blacks making up 681 of the total, or only three percent of the population.⁷

⁵ University of Virginia Geostat Center: Historical Census Browser.
<http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html>

⁶ University of Virginia Geostat Center: Historical Census Browser.
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Historians have traditionally argued the exceptionality of southwestern Virginia on the basis of these population numbers, claiming it as a more moderate area of the Commonwealth. James Ely, in his work, *The Crisis of Conservative Virginia*, wrote, “the very fact that [southwestern Virginia counties] were less exposed [to black citizens] tended to cool their enthusiasm for resistance schemes.”⁸ Ironically, the very small percentages of blacks living in these counties during this time period meant that the scarcity of black students helped lead to, not cool down, the explosion of civil rights legislation that occurred in southwestern Virginia. The lack of black students did not make the construction of a black high school financially feasible. Instead, these counties found it to be much more convenient to bus their students to Christiansburg, for some, a ride of almost 100 miles away. While this was not the same method of massive resistance used throughout the Commonwealth, the citizens of southwestern Virginia became strongly committed to segregation and saw their region as uniquely living up to the ideal of separate equality.

Southwestern Virginia has also been considered “moderate” especially because of its mild Republicanism. Ely argued, “Traditional southern mountain Republicanism... was the party’s mainstay, and GOP candidates fared best in the counties of southwest Virginia.”⁹ Lassiter and Lewis noted that southwestern Virginia politicians were, indeed, viewed as moderates.¹⁰ Newspapers in the region, such as The Roanoke World News, according to Benjamin Muse, a *Washington Post* columnist and anti-Byrd Organization

⁸ James W. Ely, Jr., *The Crisis of Conservative Virginia*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 36.

⁹ James W. Ely, Jr., *The Crisis of Conservative Virginia*, (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 26.

¹⁰ Matthew Lassiter, et al, *The Moderates Dilemma*, (The University of Virginia Press, 1998), 131.

gubernatorial candidate, also provided moderate viewpoints to their readers.¹¹ The citizens that read these newspapers and whom the politicians represented, however, maintained the attitudes of massive resistance that were prevalent throughout the state.

As the counties in control of Christiansburg Institute began to see that, in fact, Supreme Court ordered integration could occur, they acted to help delay the onset of what, to many, seemed to be an eventual inevitability: school integration. In 1957, teacher salaries at Christiansburg Institute were raised to the levels of the white teachers in Montgomery County.¹²

As early as 1951 NAACP attorney Oliver Hill considered a case out of Christiansburg as a part of the strategy that eventually became the Brown v. Board cases. Events in Prince Edward County, however, captured the NAACP's attention, and Christiansburg waited. The earliest reports of the first school integration suit planned for Southwest Virginia came years later, appearing on April 22, 1959. Although NAACP attorneys and black community members were tight lipped about the location of such a suit, the central argument for the integration of schools did appear in the newspaper accounts, "the group of children is tired of 'riding past white schools to attend schools in adjacent counties' ... Pulaski and Floyd Counties have no Negro high schools. Negro students are transported to Christiansburg Institute in Montgomery County."¹³

To many in the area at the time, the law suits came as no surprise, as the counties sending their students to attend Christiansburg Institute seemed to be an easy target. The April 23, 1959 The Roanoke World News editorial held, "It comes as no surprise that the

¹¹ Benjamin Muse, *Ten Years of Prelude*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1964), 179.

¹² James W. Smith and Amanda E. DeHart, *Christiansburg Institute: A Proud Heritage*, (Petersburg, Virginia: Westar Publishing Company. 1991), 63.

¹³ "School Suit Near Roanoke Planned", *The Roanoke World News*, April 22, 1959.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People is prepared to file a school integration suit... had the [NAACP] not been so busy elsewhere it would have tackled some of the Southwest Virginia... counties long ago.”¹⁴ The prospects for a black school in each county were virtually impossible, as no county in the region could afford a black high school for its small black population. The editorial continues, “In none of them is the Negro school population sufficiently large to warrant economical operation of a separate black high school. This, then, creates a problem.”¹⁵

Although the suits came as no surprise, there certainly was not a groundswell of popular support in southwestern Virginia, for desegregation. If indeed the cases were ruled in favor of integration, many parents were concerned about the effect it would have on their children. M. Carl Andrews, editor of The Roanoke World News stated in a town meeting, “We must continue our efforts to give the Negro equality of opportunity under law. At the same time we must encourage him to understand that race advancement cannot be obtained by force, that nobody can force people to like him or to associate with him.”¹⁶

At the same time as stories were beginning to leak out about school integration suits in Southwest Virginia, and as worries began to mount, the Commonwealth of Virginia was struggling to contain the school integration movement and to provide support to those who chose not to participate. The Perrow Plan, endorsed by Governor Almond, was making its way through the state legislature. The plan, according to The Roanoke World News, provided for three things, the first of which was to set up the state’s Pupil Placement Board, effective March 1, 1960. The second was to provide

¹⁴ “Integration Threat in Southwest”, The Roanoke World News, April 23, 1959.

¹⁵ “Integration Threat in Southwest”, The Roanoke World News, April 23, 1959.

¹⁶ “Be Realistic On Schools, Women Told”, The Roanoke World News, May 1, 1959.

subsidies, or, “scholarship,” to citizens not wishing to attend desegregated public schools. The third, and most significant, gave counties the authority to remove all funding from their public school systems, essentially shutting them down.¹⁷ This legislation was important, especially in regards to cases sprouting up in southwestern Virginia, as the ability to close schools was an issue that all residents would have to face.

The first county which was to face the seemingly inevitable question of school desegregation in southwestern Virginia was Floyd. Reuben E. Lawson, the NAACP counsel in Roanoke, filed transfer petitions on behalf of fourteen students seeking admission into white Floyd County high schools. Despite the surprise that such a statement generated, in a county where race relations were described as, “better than any place in Virginia,”¹⁸ by the school superintendent, the decision did not surprise Delegate Joseph H. Poff, the representative of Floyd. He stated, in what would become a recurring rationalization, “we have no Negro high school and don’t have enough Negro students to justify one. We’re most vulnerable.”¹⁹

Christiansburg Institute, and the support given to it by surrounding localities, was again a major issue in the minds of some prominent Floyd County members. Many refused to see how the case would have any legal standing, as the conditions that existed for the black students at Christiansburg were above and beyond what existed in many localities’ white high schools. The reputation, at least, of Christiansburg Institute was still well respected by whites in Floyd. C. E. Hollandsworth, chairman of the Floyd County Board of Supervisors told The Roanoke World News, “I don’t see that the

¹⁷ “General Assembly Provides State With Shaky Second Defense Line”, *The Roanoke World News*, April 25, 1959.

¹⁸ “Feelings in Floyd Vary Sharply on Integration”, *The Roanoke World News*, May 12, 1959.

¹⁹ “Floyd Legislator Would Avoid Suit Over Integration”, *The Roanoke World News*, May 12, 1959.

Negroes have any kick, they have a better school than the whites. I have two boys in high school, and I wouldn't mind them having to take a bus ride if the school was as good as the Negroes have."²⁰

Despite the academic and facility advantages offered to black students attending Christiansburg Institute compared to their white counterparts in Floyd County, the black plaintiffs cited the inconveniences as too great an inequality. Lawson stated to The Roanoke World News that the long bus rides pushed the NAACP to file a suit against Floyd County. The Roanoke World News reports, "[some students] must travel 70 miles per day by bus to attend Christiansburg Institute, arise before dawn to catch the bus and return home after dark."²¹ Christiansburg Institute and its threads within the social and educational fabric of southwestern Virginia had now become clearly visible – as a well-respected institution that whites saw as a more than acceptable option for black children, a badge proving white's commitment to separate equality.

As the events in Floyd County began to unfold, and as word of the events spread to the citizens of the county, reactions were mixed at best. While white students were speaking out, black students and their families kept silent.²² Many students interviewed by The Roanoke World News indicated that they thought there would be problems with integration of their high schools. One student indicated that she felt sorry for the possible integrating students, as they would certainly be a clear minority in a county with very few black high school aged children. Not all were pessimistic, however, as one student

²⁰ "Floyd Legislator Would Avoid Suit Over Integration," The Roanoke World News, May 12, 1959.

²¹ "Floyd Legislator Would Avoid Suit Over Integration," The Roanoke World News, May 12, 1959.

²² "Parents of Negroes Silent on Schools," The Roanoke World News, May 14, 1959.

commented, “It’s stupid to fight over it. The kids will be all right if parents leave them alone.”²³

By May 1959, Lawson was beginning to file a suit in southwestern Virginia. The first step in doing so was for the rejection of the fourteen transfer bids Lawson had submitted to the Floyd County School Board. Although Lawson spoke publicly about his hopes that the county would simply accept the application, avoiding a court battle, the inevitability of a law suit seemed very certain. The Floyd County School Board received the transfer bids on June 9, 1959.

In response to the reception of the transfers, Floyd County had very limited options. The first option was simply to accept the transfer bids and to have its high schools racially integrated. However, with the massive resistance mindset of the public against such a move, its other option was quite simple. Within the framework of the Commonwealth’s legislation, Floyd County simply passed its transfer applications to the Pupil Placement Board. In fact, Floyd County had done very little to even consider the threat of integration. In the words of Hollandsworth, the chairman of the Board of Supervisors, the county “has not even considered it at all.”²⁴ The threat of the Pupil Placement Board granting the transfers seemed highly unlikely; after all, once established the Board had not granted a single transfer for a black student to a white school.

For Lawson, the rejection of the applications by the Pupil Placement Board in Richmond meant that the path had been cleared to file a federal law suit. Lawson filed the case in the Western District of Virginia Federal Court. By the time the Floyd suit had reached the courts, it was coupled with two other cases, including the integration of

²³ “Private Schools Won’t Work, Some Fear in Floyd,” The Roanoke World News, May 13, 1959.

²⁴ “Floyd School Board Receives Transfer Bids,” The Roanoke World News, June 9, 1959.

public high schools in both Grayson County and the city of Galax, also located in southwestern Virginia. In both of the other cases, transfer applications had also been denied.

Christiansburg Institute and its unique status and facilities were again at the heart of the trial. William H. King, attorney for the Floyd County School Board put the Institute at the heart of the matter: “in being sent to Christiansburg Institute [the students seeking transfer bids] are suffering ‘no irreparable harm’.”²⁵ Judge Roby C. Thompson, presiding over all three transfer cases, saw matters differently: “If it is shown that they are being deprived of their constitutional rights then that is an injury that is irreparable.”²⁶

As Floyd County administrators began to see that the case might not go their way, they once again were able to fall back upon the legislation passed by the Commonwealth. After its first state-provided line of defense, the Pupil Placement Board, had failed to prevent integration within the county, Floyd County was poised to fall back upon another aspect of the legislation: closing their schools. Because the county already approved its school budget appropriations to be delivered on a monthly basis, Floyd County was preparing to shut down its schools if the situation demanded it. J.H. Combs, Floyd County Superintendent of Schools, stated matter-of-factly, “it might be necessary to close the schools until some decisions could be made.”²⁷

The immediacy of desegregation was one of the major areas of contention in the minds of Floyd and Grayson County white leadership. Many feared that if Judge Thompson ruled that the students seeking admission were ordered into schools immediately, it would have adverse effects on the ability of the schools to provide an

²⁵ “No Desegregation Plan in Grayson County or Galax,” The Roanoke World News, September 9, 1959.

²⁶ “No Desegregation Plan in Grayson County or Galax,” The Roanoke World News, September 9, 1959.

²⁷ “No Desegregation Plan in Grayson County or Galax,” The Roanoke World News, September 9, 1959.

education to all students. Jake Fields, chairman of the Grayson County school board stated, “bitterness and ill will [will result from desegregation in this county]. We can adjust to things if we have time.”²⁸ And Combs stated, “[integration] will be a terrific job. We would just have to have some time to work it out.”²⁹

By September 10, 1959, Judge Thompson had made his decision. The headline of The Roanoke World News read, “Floyd, Galax Ordered to Integrate.” Thompson did indeed order the public schools in Floyd County and the town of Galax to integrate. In the case of Grayson County, the NAACP had sought transfer of those students to schools within the city of Galax, a separate political entity. In that case, Judge Thompson stated that, “Action of the defendants in sending colored children... out of their... localities is discriminatory and... violates the constitutional rights of the plaintiffs.”³⁰

The cases in Floyd, and Galax, however, were simple decisions for Judge Thompson. Thompson stated, “You can’t say they [the counties] have been taken by surprise,” and The Roanoke World News explained, “Throughout the hearing [Thompson] made frequent reference to the ‘Five years’ Virginia school boards have had to attack the problem.”³¹ In the five years since the ruling on Brown, southwestern Virginia had made no attempts to desegregate their schools. Instead, southwestern Virginia, like all other areas of the Commonwealth, stood behind massive resistance.

Thompson also, it seems, took into consideration the localities requests for time in helping to prepare schools and to effect student transfers. He did not, however, provide very much time for such decisions to be made. The ruling stated that the localities had

²⁸ “No Desegregation Plan in Grayson County or Galax,” The Roanoke World News, September 9, 1959.

²⁹ “No Desegregation Plan in Grayson County or Galax,” The Roanoke World News, September 9, 1959.

³⁰ “Floyd, Galax Ordered to Integrate,” The Roanoke World News, September 10, 1959.

³¹ “Floyd, Galax Ordered to Integrate,” The Roanoke World News, September 10, 1959.

sixty days in which to make arrangements for the students listed in the suits, meaning those black students within each locality seeking admission, but not included in the court case, would not be allowed. Sixty days provided only enough time for situations to become resolved before the beginning of the second semester in each school division.

In their desperate arguments to prevent school desegregation in their localities, lawyers for Floyd, Grayson, and Galax again tried to use the state's Pupil Placement Board, and the institutions set up by the legislature, to their advantage. In the courtroom, however, the validity and equality of the Pupil Placement Board was brought into question by Oliver Hill, assisting Lawson in arguing the case. He stated to the court that, "[The Pupil Placement Board] has never assigned a Negro to a white school in making over 400,000 assignments."³² This issue, however, was not something that Thompson would rule on, stating, "I don't think the Placement Board could do anything at all in these cases ... (where) there are no colored schools."³³ The concept of the Pupil Placement Board, as well as the other options provided by Virginia's Freedom of Choice laws, were to be challenged later in the 1960's.

With the decision handed down by the Federal Court, the concept of school segregation in Floyd and Galax was struck down. However, it left several important questions to be answered by the communities. Again, The Roanoke World News played a moderate role and recognized the uniqueness of Christiansburg Institute in helping the decisions to be made. The paper's editorial stated, "we feel there is also the important question of, where they can obtain the best education for themselves. Christiansburg Institute, we know, offers several courses which Negroes want and which are not offered

³² "Floyd, Galax Ordered to Integrate," The Roanoke World News, September 10, 1959.

³³ "Floyd, Galax Ordered to Integrate," The Roanoke World News, September 10, 1959.

in Floyd's white school. We feel that this is a vital question which the parents of the Negro youngsters involved in the suits will have to answer."³⁴ This question, of course, would take several years to answer, and, in fact, would not even begin to be answered until later in the next decade, when Christiansburg saw a major decline in its number of students.

The paper also questioned whether or not the counties would indeed fall back upon the state provided defense now that the court's decision had been made. The Roanoke World News stated, "The only alternative to integration in Floyd and Galax is to close the schools."³⁵ The editors argued that it did not make sense to end the public education simply due to the admission of "a handful of Negro students."³⁶ C.E. Hollandsworth, chairman of the Floyd County Board of Supervisors, agreed with The Roanoke World News, commenting, "The counties that have closed their schools have forced their children to lose one year of schooling. I'd hate to see our children do that."³⁷ Schooling within these localities was not shut down, and classes continued. The era of token integration within these school districts, like all others throughout the state, began—except in Galax where a new round of desegregation resistance developed.

Students living in Grayson County attended the high school in Galax under a contract between the local school boards. In a ruling made on September 8, 1960, Federal District judge John Paul ordered, "the court is convinced that under the terms of its contract it cannot say that it will continue to accept white students from Grayson

³⁴ "With School Integration Ordered, What Will Floyd and Galax Do?" The Roanoke World News, September 11, 1959.

³⁵ "With School Integration Ordered, What Will Floyd and Galax Do?" The Roanoke World News, September 11, 1959.

³⁶ "With School Integration Ordered, What Will Floyd and Galax Do?" The Roanoke World News, September 11, 1959.

³⁷ "Grayson Studies School Threat" The Roanoke World News, September 11, 1959.

County into the Galax High School, but will refuse to accept Negro students. It must accept students of both races or neither.”³⁸ In response to this ruling, Galax ordered that the white students it accepted to attend Galax High School be sent home. In doing so, it, “cut the student body in half, emptied a dozen classrooms and left as many teachers with nothing to do.”³⁹ In response to this, and contrary to previous actions in the region pursuing massive resistance, the student body at Galax High School voted “almost unanimously” to allow students of both races to be admitted to its school. According to The Roanoke World News, the push for the re-admittance of Grayson students, both white and black, was supported by nearly 2,000 adults, as well. The Roanoke World News stated triumphantly, “Galax can be proud of itself and especially of its young people.”⁴⁰

With the concept of the uniqueness of Christiansburg Institute being a viable, responsible, and legal alternative to school integration shut out by Judge Thompson, the door was opened for a legal case to be pursued in the other county that was a major contributor of students to the Institute, Pulaski. The cases in Galax and Floyd provided the legal grounds for Judge Thompson to admit black students to white high schools in Floyd. The case, which played out in March and April of 1960 seemed to be a foregone conclusion. Reuben Lawson, Roanoke NAACP attorney, was once again the lawyer for the plaintiffs, 18 students who had previously attended Christiansburg Institute. Lawson

³⁸ Goins, et al. v. County School Board of Grayson County, The City of Galax, et al., 186 F. Supp. 753 (1960). This case was also heard in the Federal Court of Appeals and was upheld.

³⁹ “Galax Shows Mature Judgment,” The Roanoke World News, September 14, 1960.

⁴⁰ “Galax Shows Mature Judgment,” The Roanoke World News, September 14, 1960.

stated, “I see no reason why he would not order desegregation,”⁴¹ clearly basing his opinion on the rulings that Thompson had made not even six months prior.

In Pulaski, as in Floyd, the county had utilized massive resistance via the Pupil Placement Board in an attempt to halt desegregation within its school system. Once again, the Board continued on its conservative course, as Oliver Hill had pointed out in the Floyd case, as an institution that would not assign any black students to white high schools. The Roanoke World News stated, “Pulaski... applications were considered by the State Pupil Placement Board in a hearing in Pulaski in February but the board declined to assign the Negroes to white schools.”⁴² Once the students were shut out by the Pupil Placement Board, the way was cleared by the case to be brought by Lawson and the NAACP.

Reaction to the law suit in Pulaski was very similar to the reaction that arose as a result of the desegregation suit in Floyd County. The Roanoke World News once again brought up the argument that Pulaski was, indeed, extremely vulnerable to such a case, “Without a Negro high school, Pulaski finds itself helpless against integration orders.”⁴³ The integration was, as it was in the mind of Lawson, almost predetermined, “Judging by what has happened under federal court orders in Floyd County and the city of Galax, the integration of Pulaski High School is only a matter of time.”⁴⁴

Before the trial occurred, indications came from the bench that school segregation in Pulaski County was coming to an end. After a meeting with both sides, Judge Thompson declared, “that the plaintiffs have a clear and present right to attend [Pulaski

⁴¹ “Pulaski Desegregation Suit Is To Be Argued on April 5” The Roanoke World News, March 25, 1960.

⁴² “Pulaski Desegregation Suit Is To Be Argued on April 5” The Roanoke World News, March 25, 1960.

⁴³ “Pulaski Integration Inevitable” The Roanoke World News, March 25, 1960.

⁴⁴ “Pulaski Integration Inevitable” The Roanoke World News, March 25, 1960.

High School].”⁴⁵ With the decision becoming clear to many people in the locality, the issue of when the schools would be desegregated again became an issue. Lawson had filed an injunction which would allow the plaintiffs to attend white high schools in Pulaski immediately after the ruling had been made, in the middle of the school semester. As in previous cases, Thompson recognized that such a move would, perhaps, be detrimental to the community, and was willing to give time for such a move to take place. Judge Thompson declared that to send black students in immediately would, “disrupt orderly educational processes.”⁴⁶

The issue of time, however, was also beginning to become connected to the ideals behind token integration, which, at the time were beginning to take hold in localities all across the Commonwealth. One of the great fears of lawyers and of Pulaski officials was that a ruling made by Judge Thompson could apply to all of the black students in Pulaski that were currently attending Christiansburg Institute, upwards of 100 students. More than 100 students attending a white high school would not be considered token integration. Instead, The Roanoke World News declared, “Attorneys for the school board face the job of trying to keep any resulting decision... from being broadened to clear the way for enrollment of the 100 or more Negroes... being sent to Christiansburg Institute.”⁴⁷ For, if they could, the lawyers fighting against integration in Pulaski County could reduce the number of students that would enter into their school system in the following year below the numbers of plaintiffs that were included in the suit. The Roanoke World News stated, “If the school board attorneys can hold the enrollment to the students named in the suit it could keep transfers down to 13 next September. Two of

⁴⁵ “New School Hearing Date Set,” The Roanoke World News, April 2, 1960.

⁴⁶ “New School Hearing Date Set,” The Roanoke World News, April 2, 1960.

⁴⁷ “New School Hearing Date Set,” The Roanoke World News, April 2, 1960.

the plaintiffs are seniors and will graduate in June. Three others are not going to school now.”⁴⁸ Token integration was something that was, at least in the eyes of the World News, a goal worth preserving.

On April 21, Judge Thompson ruled on the case and following *Brown* called for compliance in Southwest Virginia’s schools. Pulaski schools were to be integrated by 14 of the plaintiffs. At the request of Pulaski officials, the transfers would not take place until the Fall of 1960. Judge Thompson, however, provided for the future integration of black students into white Pulaski high schools, something that he had not done in the rulings he had made in Floyd or Galax. The ruling was fought very hard by Pulaski officials, and Howard Gilmer, attorney for Pulaski County stated that Pulaski, “assumes that all Negroes do not want to go to white schools... It would be grossly unfair to the Negro population [to require attendance at a white school].”⁴⁹ Gilmer also argued that by opening the door for all black students to attend white Pulaski high schools, the financial operations of both Pulaski County Public Schools and of Christiansburg Institute would be severely interrupted.

Thompson’s system, however, went against the wishes of the Pulaski officials, and provided a means by which all black students attending Christiansburg Institute could enter into white Pulaski high schools. Thompson ruled that any student wishing to attend Pulaski high schools had only to submit an application prior to March 15 of each upcoming school year.⁵⁰ This move provided for not only the admission of the students named in the suit but also an ongoing opportunity for black students to seek admission

⁴⁸ “New School Hearing Date Set” The Roanoke World News, April 2, 1960.

⁴⁹ “Integration is Coming to Pulaski” The Roanoke World News, April 21, 1960.

⁵⁰ “Integration Is Coming to Pulaski” The Roanoke World News, April 21, 1960.

into Pulaski high schools. Judge Thompson hoped it would clarify desegregation procedures in the county and, “will dispose of this issue once and for all.”⁵¹

The white reaction to the ruling was based in ideas about token integration and what whites thought was good for blacks. The Roanoke World News even stated, for the first time recognizing *Brown v. Board of Education*, that, “Pulaski... actually had no defense in the light of the Supreme Court decisions and decrees.”⁵² The case which had been ruled in *Floyd* had shot down the separate but equal mindset in which Christiansburg Institute played the major role. The World News said, “Never having maintained its own Negro schools under previously existing ‘separate but equal’ principles, [Pulaski County] had not a legal leg to stand on.”⁵³

After rulings had been made in both *Floyd* and Pulaski counties, the future of the Institute was called into question. At a time in which the Institute taught approximately 150 students, the removal of 14 students from Floyd County would seem to be a large blow. However, the transfer of 14 students from Pulaski County, the number admitted under the law suit, and with the potential transfer of all 130 Christiansburg students to white Pulaski high schools, the financial future of the Institute was obviously in danger.

If Pulaski, which, along with Montgomery County and the city of Radford jointly operated the school, was to no longer have students attend, the funding which it provided, nearly 40%, would be removed. Although this was considered by Judge Thompson in his court rulings, the Judge decided that it was not a factor that should weigh into his decision. When asked about the impact that removing 40% of the Institute’s funding might have on the school, Thompson declared that the school’s future appeared to be

⁵¹ “Integration Pace Now Up to Pulaski Negroes” *The Roanoke World News*, April 22, 1960.

⁵² “Integration Hits Pulaski County” *The Roanoke World News*, April 23, 1960.

⁵³ “Integration Hits Pulaski County” *The Roanoke World News*, April 23, 1960.

“indefinite.”⁵⁴ The Roanoke World News weighed in as well, declaring just as negatively, “It is doubtful that the school can continue operation economically after the next school year with Pulaski’s 40 per cent support withdrawn... Montgomery, of course, could not be expected to keep the Institute open for its own Negro pupils alone.”⁵⁵

Montgomery County, then, was surrounded by counties where legal battles had led to the integration of their public schools. Desegregation in Montgomery County seemed to be the next logical step for Lawson and the NAACP to take, as they had already tackled the two surrounding counties. A legal battle was not, however, necessary to desegregate the public schools in Montgomery. Several factors played into the seemingly easy integration of Montgomery public schools. Race relations, as they existed, were, at least in the minds of the counties’ residents, relatively good. The low percentage of black residents, which had a negative impact on the desegregation counties in Floyd and Pulaski due to their lack of a black high school, played a positive role for desegregation in Montgomery. The low percentage did not provide such a threat to white students, if, in fact, black students decided to transfer from Christiansburg Institute. But, the proximity and unique circumstances surrounding Christiansburg also prevented many black students from seeking transfer into white schools – Montgomery County students were not forced to commute 100 miles each way, as some students who were bused in from surrounding counties were. Bi-racial cooperation also played a major role in helping to ease desegregation in the early 1960’s. This factor is partly due to the

⁵⁴ “Integration Pace Now Up to Pulaski Negroes” The Roanoke World News, April 22, 1960.

⁵⁵ “Integration Hits Pulaski County” The Roanoke World News, April 23, 1960.

existence of a major institution of higher education, Virginia Tech, which provided leadership and direction that was not seen in other surrounding localities.⁵⁶

All of these factors added up to a situation in which desegregation did not become a major issue in the county. Desegregation did come, however, to Montgomery County schools, but did not come by the same avenue as it had come into Floyd, Pulaski, Grayson, or Galax. Instead, the Pupil Placement Board, in July of 1961, accepted the transfer applications of two black students and placed them at all-white Blacksburg High School.⁵⁷ Token integration, then, would begin in Montgomery County, but, unlike in its surrounding counties, it was not a major hindrance or problem to residents, white or black, due to the presence of Christiansburg Institute.

Christiansburg Institute continued to exist with a decreased student population and with depleted funds. With the counties that supported it all forced, either through court order, or through the Pupil Placement Board, to integrate their public schools, the future of Christiansburg was uncertain. Many students, however, were wary of leaving Christiansburg to attend token integrated white public schools. At Christiansburg Institute, students had the benefits of extracurricular activities that were not available to them at the integrated public schools. Things such as sports and clubs took several more years to become integrated, and Christiansburg Institute offered all of these to its students. The curriculum and courses offered at Christiansburg were also different than what students could receive at the white high schools. At Christiansburg, teachers were experts in their fields, and, with its industrial heritage, Christiansburg still had a strong

⁵⁶ Tracy A. Martin, Black Education in Montgomery County. Page 139.

⁵⁷ Tracy A. Martin, Black Education in Montgomery County Page 113.

reputation in such trades. These things were not available, and would not become available, to students choosing to transfer from Christiansburg Institute.

In the face of falling enrollment, and, more importantly, falling finances, Christiansburg Institute was closed. The federal Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, acting under Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, provided Montgomery County with a plan to help fully integrate its public schools. In 1965, the Department agreed on a desegregation plan with county officials that included the closing of Christiansburg Institute. The school was allowed to remain open through the 1965-66 school year, but, as news of the school's closing was learned, half of the student body at Christiansburg transferred to their local high schools before the start of the Spring 1966 term.⁵⁸ As a result, 27 students made up the final graduating class of Christiansburg Institute, and the end of a century, from 1866 to 1966, of service to the black community extending for hundreds of miles around the school came to an end.⁵⁹

Amid protest from local black citizens, who had no control over desegregation in Montgomery County and remained at the mercy of Montgomery County officials and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, the grounds and building which constituted the school were auctioned off to the highest bidder. The campus, 8 buildings and 154 acres of land, were auctioned for \$273,774.90. Christiansburg Institute was, indeed, "integrated out of existence."⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Christiansburg [Virginia] Industrial Institute, Historical Documents, 1866-1991, Ms91-033, Digital Libraries and Archives, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. Box 1, Folder 2.

⁵⁹ Ann Swain, in her work on CI and Montgomery County, provides a good overview of the logistics of the school closings, including planning by Montgomery County and Federal HEW officials. It also provides information on several conflicts that existed with teacher transfers.

⁶⁰ James W. Smith and Amanda E. DeHart, *Christiansburg Institute: A Proud Heritage*, (Petersburg, Virginia: Westar Publishing Company. 1991), 72.

Southwestern Virginia, like the rest of the Commonwealth of Virginia, offered few and difficult avenues for the acceptance of black students into their high schools. By pursuing the elements of the Perrow Plan, southwestern Virginia counties acted like all others throughout the state: they left almost no stone unturned in their attempts to prevent integration. Their reasons may have been more complex, connected to their idealization of the separate but equal principle. When integration did occur in the area, it was token, and the fall of the Christiansburg Institute became central to the end of tokenism in the region. Indeed, low black populations and the existence of Christiansburg Institute to educate them provided the citizens of its surrounding counties with a mindset that separate was equal, or in the minds of some, more than equal. The educational opportunities that were available to black students attending Christiansburg are undeniable, but the lack of black high schools in surrounding counties, and the ensuing commute was what would enable Lawson and the NAACP to spark a chain of law suits that would eventually bring integration, although token, into southwestern Virginia. The consequences of such legal action, however beneficial, also led to one of the greatest ironies of the school desegregation movement not only in Virginia, but also throughout the south – the closing of Christiansburg Institute.

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