

PRESERVING THE HISTORY OF THE INTEGRATION YEARS IN SECONDARY  
EDUCATION IN GEORGIA THROUGH ORAL HISTORY

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On October 13, 1870, a little more than five years after the end of the Civil War, the General Assembly of the State of Georgia passed a law establishing public schools in this state. Section 32 of Title VI on Education stated: "That it shall be the duty of the trustees, in their respective districts, to make all necessary arrangements for the instruction of the White and Colored youth of the district in separate schools. They shall provide the same facilities for each, both as regards school-houses and fixtures, and the attainments and abilities of teachers, length of term-time, etc.; but the children of the White and Colored races shall not be taught together in any sub-district of the State."<sup>1</sup>

With the end of military rule during reconstruction, Governor James M. Smith and the citizens of Georgia regained control of the machinery of government. This return to home rule signalled the beginning of what is considered by some scholars as the most tragic era in the history of black Georgians: an era that historian Rayford Logan characterized as the "nadir". Schools were separate, but far from equal. for the most part, schools for blacks were woefully inferior to those for whites.

The separate but equal doctrine was given greater legitimacy by the United States Supreme Court's ruling in the case of Plessy vs. Ferguson (1896) which said, in essence, that separate accommodations for blacks and whites were permissible as long as these facilities were equal. The spirit of this ruling, which actually had to do with train facilities, was vigorously applied to public education in Georgia, but public school facilities and other support services for blacks in this State were never equal to those for whites.

Interestingly enough, there were schools for blacks in Georgia during this time--the early decades of the twentieth century--that were equal to most of the best schools provided for whites. But these schools for blacks were private and received little support from public funds. These private schools included academies and/or seminaries at Morehouse and Spelman Colleges and at Atlanta University; and schools in Athens and Augusta. Black religious associations in the state, such as the Baptist Convention, provided private schools beyond the primary level in the absence of government support--local, county, or state--in this area. Schools for blacks in Georgia, and throughout the south, were supported in part by the philanthropy of foundations such as those of Andrew Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, George Peabody, John Slater, Julius Rosenwald and Robert C. Ogden.

According to the Henry Allen Bullock in A History of Negro Education in the South, from 1719 to the Present, black education, in transition at the turn of the century, was taking "The Great Detour." Blacks' "most effective source of relief had to operate within the framework of sycophancy. Negroes had to court the favor of influential Whites by advocating the kind of education Whites wanted Negroes to have or by bootlegging the kind Negroes felt their children must have." Bullock further points out that "A convenient excuse for discrimination in the allocation of funds to schools for the respective races

was the concept that the type of education that Negroes needed was less complex and less expensive than that needed by Whites. Temptation was therefore sharpened by circumstance, and the structure of 'Negro education' became consistent with its function."<sup>2</sup> This "mis-education of the Negro" has been explored in greater depth by Carter G. Woodson, founder of the Association for the Study of Afro-American Life and History and the Journal of Negro History. Black and white school communities were color-bound. Not only was the amount of funds allocated to black schools proportionately less than that appropriated to white schools; but the length of the school year was longer for whites than for blacks. for instance, during the 1928-29 school year in Georgia, the school term for blacks was 137 days compared to 158 for whites.<sup>3</sup>

This was essentially the situation in Georgia in 1954 when the United States Supreme Court handed down its monumental decision in the class action case involving the District of Columbia, Clarendon County, South Carolina; Prince Edward County, Virginia; Claymont and Hockessin, Delaware, which were subsumed under Oliver Brown vs the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas: there were two school systems in Georgia--one black and one white. There were 203 school systems for whites--159 county systems and 44 independents. The black statewide school system had fewer units, for there were some counties in the state, specifically in north Georgia, that had no black residents. There were also some counties in the state that did not have enough black students to warrant a separate school system for these students. Often counties with only a few black students paid to have them transported--bused--to neighboring school systems, either county or independent, where they received a Jim Crow education. Lumpkin County is a case in point. This north Georgia county only provided a school for its black students through the sixth grade, after which Dahlonega and Lumpkin County bused these pupils more than twenty miles to attend school in Gainesville.

The real numbers of schools for blacks and whites in 1954 were almost even. There were 1,393 schools for blacks and 1,466 for whites. But the difference lay in the size of the school provided for each race. There were 863 schools for blacks, which employed between 1 [462 schools] and 3[104] teachers, while only 206 schools for whites existed in these categories: 47 white schools employed only 1 teacher and 75 employed only 3. ((There were 116 black schools and 353 white ones having 20 or more teachers.

By 1954 a few measures had been taken in the state to equalize education for blacks. These may be attributed, in part, to the prediction that the Supreme Court would rule against segregation in public education and some school systems made efforts to dissuade blacks from demanding desegregation by raising the standards of the black's schools. But the black teacher was expected to produce results equivalent to the white teacher, whose working conditions were far superior. Black teachers had shorter time to work with pupils; were paid a meager wage; and were given inferior facilities with which to work.<sup>4</sup> These circumstances further describe the educational situation in Georgia in 1954 when the United States Supreme court, under the leadership of Chief Justice Earl Warren, handed down its decision.

Learning of the Court's decision, Governor Herman Talmadge proclaimed that there would be no mixed schools in Georgia as

long as he was governor. In order to implement its decision, the Court, on May 31, 1955, "referred to the district courts the responsibility for determining whether or not school districts were acting in good faith to carry out the steps necessary to open public schools on a racially nondiscriminatory basis with all deliberate speed."<sup>5</sup>

Deliberation eventually ran its course and some reluctant school districts in the South found themselves under compulsory court orders. The United States District Court, in the case of Calhoun vs. Latiner, ordered the desegregation of the Atlanta schools. "Final approval of Atlanta's proposed desegregation plan was given by the court on January 20, 1960, with an order that the plan be made effective on May 1, 1961. And so, on August 30, 1961, the first common school district of Georgia became desegregated when nine [black] students transferred to four Atlanta public schools [Grady, Northside, Murphy, and Brown High Schools] that had previously been all White."<sup>6</sup> In 1969 all segregated schools in Georgia were ordered desegregated by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

Oral histories can be used to recover, and thereby preserve, the history of the integration years in secondary education in Georgia. The first step is to decide on the focus of the study. Will it be on the role of a person or a group in the integration controversy? Will it focus on an agency or involved organization? Will it cover the entire state or will it study a single school system or school?

It is then necessary to research the topic in the written and/or printed records, both private and public. Private records should include letters, diaries, and journals. Public records would include the records of boards of education, local and state; school records, government records of various kinds--state, county, city and town. The records of involved organizations should also be perused. Research in the printed records should culminate with an exploration of newspapers that might have reported facts about the topic to the public.

The record search should reveal the name of persons who have information that would enhance findings from the written records. In order to recover the history of the integration years in Georgia, interviewees should include those who were involved: black and white students; black and white parents; black and white teachers, principals and superintendents; boards of education members; government officials at all levels; members of involved organizations; and media personnel.

In conducting the interviews, procedures such as those outlined in standard oral history handbooks should be followed. Re-interviews may be necessary. As Lawrence Goodwyn and William Chafe of the Duke Oral History project explain, "The body of evidence acquired through the first round of interviews with all available oral sources so alters the researcher's perception of the historical problem he faces that prudence requires he utilize these new insights as a basis for further clarification of information from oral sources."<sup>7</sup>

Often contradictions will emerge as more and more interviews are conducted. They can be checked against written sources. "Often--and particularly in areas of racial tension--the emphasis of an oral interview is not so much contradictory to the written version as it is supplementary. To put it specifically in racial terms, Black sources might emphasize the

importance of a given event that simply is not referred to at all in the large White written record." According to Goodwyn and Chafe, "As a general principle, the appearance of contradiction should be regarded as anything but a 'problem.' Rather, its presence is evidence that the written record was inadequate, that the research underway is worthwhile, and that the additional source material being unearthed is historically useful."<sup>8</sup> Oral history can thus reveal contradictions that more clearly illuminate the history of Georgia school integration. Such research is indispensable in revealing fresh evidence found nowhere in the written records.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Oscar H. Joiner, et al., eds. A History of Public Education in Georgia, 1734-1976 (Columbia, SC: R. L. Bryan Co., 1979), p. 591.

<sup>2</sup>Henry Allen Bullock, A History of Negro Education in the South, from 1619 to the Present (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 87.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid, p. 177.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, pp. 182-3.

<sup>5</sup>Robert H. Brisbane, The Black Vanguard (Valley Forge, PA: Jusdon Press, 1970), p. 244, 247.

<sup>6</sup>Bullock, p. 250.

<sup>7</sup>Lawrence Goodwyn and William Chafe, "Duke Oral History Handbook," unpublished material prepared for 1974 Rockefeller Foundation summer workshop.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.