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Speakers at the “Telling Our Stories” Program
(May 2004)

Front row, from left: Margaret Walker, Joseph Mormon, Wanda Early Fitz. Back row, from left: Theodore Carter DeLaney, Peggy Hays, A. Linwood Holton, Rev. Edward T. Burton, William W. Perry¹

TELLING OUR STORIES: SCHOOL DESEGREGATION IN FOUR WESTERN VIRGINIA COUNTIES

THEODORE CARTER DELANEY

During the spring of 2004, people from Augusta, Rockbridge, Botetourt, and Roanoke Counties gathered in Lee Chapel on the Washington and Lee University Campus to share stories about school desegregation. The event commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*. A generous grant from the Virginia

Foundation for the Humanities made the evening possible as well as much of the subsequent research that followed. Many shared heartfelt stories about segregated schools and desegregation. Some were former students, teachers, and administrators. Their stories were often sentimental and nostalgic; some participants even wept. The most prestigious speaker of the evening, however, was the Honorable A. Linwood Holton, who, as Virginia's newly inaugurated governor in 1970, had voluntarily enrolled his small children in black-majority schools in order to set an example for other citizens of the Commonwealth.

Within a few weeks of this gathering, I began directing three Washington and Lee students in an ambitious oral history project aimed at providing an accurate account of local school desegregation in the independent cities of Lexington and Buena Vista, and the county of Rockbridge, as well as the neighboring jurisdictions to the north and south—Augusta County, Botetourt County, and Roanoke County. These counties were part of the so-called white belt of the state where the black population was less than eleven percent. The City of Roanoke had a significantly larger black population, but I also included it in the study. All of the schools in our survey area had desegregated in 1965 except those in the city of Roanoke, but a federal court order mandated its desegregation in 1970. White citizens had opposed school desegregation in all these jurisdictions, but their actions had been fairly mild. There were no public protests and no violence. Some school districts had very few black residents, and black pupils in those previously all-white schools constituted token integration at best. As a native of

Lexington and a graduate of the all-black Lylburn Downing School that had grades 1 through 12, I knew that the story of desegregation in western Virginia could not rival the trauma of school desegregation at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Yet, the local story needed to be told.

My first set of research assistants were young white women who were in their third year of college. Together we interviewed as many people as possible and asked them all the same questions. Respondents included school administrators, faculty, students, and parents. Most responses were rich, and some were absolutely fascinating. In summary, the interviews suggested that school desegregation had been orderly but far from perfect. There were tensions and ticklish problems; and some have never been resolved. Perhaps the most troubling comments noted the failure of the Rockbridge County School Board to place many black teachers who had been on the faculty of Lylburn Downing School.²

Some white and black male respondents credited football with the smooth transition to racial integration. The not-uncommon response was: "Everything was fine after the black guys started winning football games for us." Conversely, the camaraderie of football players was not contagious and certainly did not extend to girls on cheerleading squads. Most often cheering squads lacked faculty advisers and were self-perpetuating cliques that refused to welcome students who were outside their circle of friends. Professors Hank Allen and Jim Dash are former members of the University of Virginia School of Education who assisted school districts across the Commonwealth with school desegregation. According

to them, integrating cheering squads seemed to be a universal problem.³

Respondents raised many complex issues that demonstrated the merits and fallacies of oral history. Perhaps one of the most perplexing outcomes was that the only respondents who admittedly opposed school desegregation were black. No whites admitted to having the slightest reservations about mixing white and black students in the same classroom. There could only be three possible explanations: First, whites who opposed desegregation had not spoken with us; second, those who did agree to be interviewed had changed their minds during the last forty years and were unwilling to admit to their earlier views; or third, some of the white respondents had been untruthful. Additionally, many respondents displayed either flawed memory or lacked accurate knowledge of political and legal developments pertaining to civil rights during the 1960s.

In addition to oral history interviews, the students assisted me with research of school board minutes in every school district. Depending on the recording clerks for various school districts, the minutes differed in quality. In some jurisdictions only motions and votes had been recorded; in other jurisdictions clerks included highlights from discussions about issues. Most school board minutes were extremely helpful. Perhaps none were more enlightening than those of Buena Vista. In this case the minutes speak more eloquently than any of the respondents in the survey, as the long excerpt below illustrates:

**Buena Vista School Board Meeting
(Including Members of the City Council)**

16 June 1955

The Chairman of the School Board . . . welcomed the members of the Council and other guests, and [reported] . . . a request from the Negro P.T.A. [Parent-Teacher Association] committee for an early meeting with the School Board . . . set [for] June 27. . . . He then [recognized Superintendent F. W.] Kling, who stated that this meeting had been called for the purpose of discussing the recent non-segregation decision of the Supreme Court and its implications for Buena Vista.⁴ He recommended that the Buena Vista School Board advise the State Board of Education, the State Commission on Education, and the Attorney General, that they are in opposition to any move to abolish the public schools and that Buena Vista is ready for integration as soon as the State Board permits it.⁵ He further stated that in his opinion it would be very difficult for Buena Vista to comply with any decision that resulted in segregation by sex or in a three-way system—one for white, one for Negro, and one mixed—and that the state authorities should be advised of this position. The recommendation was not adopted.

Mr. White and Mr. Seay recognized that integration is inevitable and were willing for the integration program to go ahead at the proper time.

Mr. McKee was in favor of waiting to hear what the Negro people have in mind before making any decision, and stated that he would be glad to meet with the School Board and the Negro Committee on June 27.

Mr. Floyd invited the members of the City Council, the City Manager, and the City Attorney to meet with the School Board and the Negro Committee on June 27 for the meeting requested by the Committee of the Negro P.T.A., and said that the newly appointed members of the school board would be invited also.

27 June 1955

The president of the Negro P.T.A. Committee, Richard

Spinner, presented five problems for the board's consideration:

1. That playground equipment be provided;
2. Requested highway signs on Route 60 where school children cross, and also the services of a police [officer] for the afternoon;
3. That the grass on the school ground be kept cut;
4. Requested some improvement in the heating facilities;
5. That the Superintendent visit their school more often.

Mr. Jennings, the City Manager, assured Mr. Kling and the committee that his department would take care of the highway signs, the grass cutting, and placing gravel on the road from Waller's to the school, and would do what he could toward having an officer on duty at the crossing.

Mr. Henson suggested that the School Board, as a unit, visit the Negro school.

Mr. Kling recommended that the School Board assure the P.T.A. committee that the four swings would be repaired; two basketball goals would be set up; a jungle gym provided; that necessary heating improvements and repairs to water line would be made; that the superintendent would visit the school once a month. Motion was made by Mrs. Strickler, seconded by Mr. Cunningham, and passed unanimously that the recommendation be adopted.

A. Committee extended an invitation to the superintendent and board members to visit their regular meetings.

If the School Board asked the black PTA for an opinion about desegregating local schools, they must have directed the clerk not to record that part of meeting. Buena Vista had a unique dilemma: Its demography made it impossible for it to afford racially separate

schools that were equal. According to the 1950 census, the total population of Buena Vista was 5,214 citizens; only 216 were black. Operating a separate school system that was truly equal for fifty students or less was neither practical nor possible. Buena Vista operated a two-room school house as a black elementary school; it bused black high school students to the Rockbridge County-owned Lylburn Downing School in Lexington.⁶ Yet, the school board minutes above illustrate the leadership of a dynamic and progressive school superintendent, white board members who were politically moderate, and black PTA members who seemed primarily interested in making sure that the facilities at the black elementary school were adequate. Unfortunately, the minutes also demonstrate that the School Board regularly dealt with its black citizens at separate meetings. Ironically, they were unwilling to desegregate their meetings even as they considered desegregating classrooms.

This is a book project (to be completed during the 2016-2017 school year) that will incorporate area school-board minutes and other documentary records with reports and the rich accounts provided by respondents in the oral history phase of the project. The thesis of the final project argues that black citizens such as the members of Buena Vista's Negro PTA were energetic and persistent advocates of equal education of their children. In spite of Jim Crow customs prior to 1965, they often swallowed their pride and practiced incredible restraint as they appeared before all-white school boards to plead for better school facilities. They truly believed that good schooling was the way their children could

achieve good jobs and financial security. Like parents everywhere, these black parents wanted their children to have better lives than they had had.



Theodore Carter DeLaney is Associate Professor of History at Washington and Lee University. He holds a Bachelor of Arts Degree from W&L and a PhD in American History from the College of William and Mary. DeLaney is a fifth-generation native of Lexington, Virginia, and a long-time resident of the community. His presentation was given before the Rockbridge Historical Society on July 23, 2007.

ENDNOTES

¹ Margaret Walker's career as school secretary at Lylburn Downing School straddled both its all-black era and its integrated era; Joseph Mormon taught and coached football at the all-black Lylburn Downing School; Wanda Early Fitz graduated from the all-black Lylburn Downing's high school division; Theodore Carter DeLaney, author of this article, is a Washington and Lee University history professor [ed. note: see his biography above]; Peggy Hays taught at Lexington High School when it was all-white and as well as when it was later integrated; A. Linwood Holton Jr. was the 61st governor of Virginia; Rev. Edward T. Burton is a Roanoke pastor; William W. Perry is the former principal of the all-black Rosenwald School in Waynesboro; he was also the associate principal of the integrated Waynesboro High School. The William Perry Elementary School in Waynesboro is named in his honor.

² Lylburn Downing School had grades 1 through 12, and the high school division served all of Rockbridge County. At the time of the 1965 school desegregation, there were sixteen teachers at Downing; only seven remained in the school system after that year.

³ The author's interview with Allen and Dash: These men were retired faculty members of the University of Virginia School of Education who, as experts, assisted school districts all over the Commonwealth with school desegregation. They were extremely helpful, and they told the author that the university had, unfortunately, destroyed all records of their work.