Brown’s Battleground: Students, Segregationists, and the Struggle for Justice in Prince Edward County, Virginia

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Brown's Battleground: Students, Segregationists, and the Struggle for Justice in Prince Edward County, Virginia

Abstract
The fiddler came to Farmville in 1951, demanding payment for generations of neglect. The largest community in rural Prince Edward County, located at the northern tip of Virginia's Black Belt. Farmville was a segregated town. Privileged white men controlled the banks, the businesses, and the school, as their fathers had before them. Raised in a world defined by the principle of separate and unequal, they reserved the best jobs and schools for whites, congratulating themselves for their generosity in laying aside the leftovers for blacks. Jim Crow set the parameters of life in Prince Edward County, and until 1951 it was a quiet life. But everything changed one April morning. The young people rebelled, overthrowing the community's old model of race relations and setting in motion a chain of events that thrust Prince Edward into the national spotlight.

On April 23, 1951, the student body at Robert Russa Moton High School - the county's only black high school - went on strike. Demanding an expanded curriculum, an end to overcrowding, and increased local commitment to black education, the student immediately sent a letter to the NAACP special counsel in Virginia, asking for legal assistance in their fight for a new school. Oliver Hill and Spottswood Robinson, the pillars of the Richmond NAACP office, were the force behind a massive statewide litigation campaign against the inequality of Jim Crow. Under their leadership, the Richmond office was a beehive of activity, at one time simultaneously pursuing actions in seventy-five different school districts. The two were initially dismissive of the Moton action, but they agreed to make a brief trip to Farmville, fully intending to encourage the students to return to school. [excerpt]

Keywords
segregation, Prince Edward County, Virginia, Civil Rights Movement, Farmville, Moton High School

Disciplines
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Comments
This is the introduction to Dr. Jill Titus' book.

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The fiddler came to Farmville in 1951, demanding payment for generations of neglect. The largest community in rural Prince Edward County, located at the northern tip of Virginia’s Black Belt, Farmville was a segregated town. Privileged white men controlled the banks, the businesses, and the schools, as their fathers had before them. Raised in a world defined by the principle of separate and unequal, they reserved the best jobs and schools for whites, congratulating themselves for their generosity in laying aside the leftovers for blacks. Jim Crow set the parameters of life in Prince Edward County, and until 1951 it was a quiet life. But everything changed one April morning. The young people rebelled, overthrowing the community’s old model of race relations and setting in motion a chain of events that thrust Prince Edward into the national spotlight.

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By 1951, the Virginia NAACP team, like its counterparts in other states, was no longer interested in filing suits to equalize segregated facilities.2 Lawyers instead sought an opportunity to argue that segregation itself was inherently unequal and thus illegal under the U.S. Constitution. Hill and Robinson stood poised to challenge the entire premise of “separate but equal” in elementary and secondary education, but they did not see Prince Edward as an ideal place to launch this effort. Local whites had a reputation for intransigence, and the

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Constructed in 1939 to house 180 students, R. R. Moton High School served 477 by 1950. The “tar paper shacks” so detested by the 1951 strikers are visible on both sides of the building. Though the nicest of the county’s black school buildings, Moton High had no cafeteria or school nurse. (Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration, Mid-Atlantic Region)

lawyers considered black leadership in the county lacking in the combativeness necessary to sustain a lawsuit. They were on the lookout, instead, for a test case from a community with a comparatively deep resource base and a strong history of organized civil rights activism.³

Thus already convinced that there was no less promising place in all of Virginia to wage the fight for equal schools, Hill and Robinson nonetheless stopped off in Prince Edward on the morning of April 25. To their surprise, they found the strikers unwavering in their determination and their parents largely determined to support the children’s actions. Deeply impressed by this unexpected militancy, Hill and Robinson agreed to use the Moton students as plaintiffs in Virginia’s first suit against segregated education. Three years later, Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County⁴ would become one of the five cases immortalized together as Brown v. Board of Education.⁵

Under pressure from a local black women’s group, the Council of Women, county officials constructed R. R. Moton High in 1939 as part of a statewide
attempt to ward off legal challenges to segregation by improving black facilities and increasing access to state resources. But white resistance to spending money on black education ensured that this effort ran out of money long before it could come close to eliminating “separate and unequal.” Built to accommodate 180 students, the school housed 477 by 1950. Instead of expanding the building or authorizing a bond issue to construct a new facility, the all-white school board erected three temporary wooden outbuildings covered with tar paper and resembling chicken coops. They soon came to be known as the “tar paper stacks.” The unheated buildings bred colds. The stoves, cracked from overheating, frequently spewed hot coals, and, as student Edwilda Isaac recalled, “Whoever was closest had to grab it and throw it back in.” John Stokes, one of the strike leaders, remembered visitors taking pictures of the tar paper stacks “to show the people back home how backward we were.” In addition to the stacks, overflow classes met in the auditorium and in a parked school bus.6
Moton High lacked a cafeteria or a school nurse; laboratory equipment was in short supply; and the highest-paid teacher earned less than the lowest-paid instructor at the white high school. Though district officials added bus service to outlying areas in the late 1940s, the small number of secondhand buses proved so inadequate that some riders regularly missed their first class of the day. Across town at Farmville High School—constructed the same year—white students enjoyed locker rooms, a cafeteria, a gymnasium, an infirmary, and a well-equipped machine shop. Despite Moton’s clear inadequacies, conditions in the district’s other black schools were even worse. Fifteen small buildings, valued at $330,000, served a student population of 2,000. All but two were of wood construction, heated by coal, wood, or kerosene stoves, and serviced by outdoor privies. Conversely, the seven white schools housing a population of 1,400 were valued at $1.2 million. All were brick, with indoor toilet facilities and steam or hot-water heat.7

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For nearly a decade preceding the strike, the Moton Parent Teachers Association (PTA), led by Rev. Leslie Francis Griffin, decried the school’s inadequacy. Throughout 1950 and 1951, members appeared regularly before the school board to advocate for a new building. The board responded apathetically, appointing a committee to locate a site for a new school but otherwise failing to pursue the issue. Griffin and John Lancaster, the county’s black agricultural agent, took on the job themselves, tracking down an available spot and negotiating a purchase price. Six months later, in February 1951, the school board finally informed the PTA that the County Board of Supervisors had granted permission for purchase. Board members encouraged Griffin and the other parents to discontinue their attendance at the monthly school board meetings, assuring them that they would be notified when the transaction was completed. By late April, Moton High students were tired of waiting.8

Sixteen-year-old Barbara Johns, the niece of Vernon Johns, a renowned civil rights figure and Martin Luther King Jr.’s predecessor at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, approached several classmates with a plan. She had read of a student strike in a northern girls’ school, and she believed such a strategy might work in Prince Edward. Throughout the early spring of 1951, a group of twenty student leaders labored over plans for what they had dubbed their own “Manhattan Project.” John Stokes, president of the senior class and one of Johns’s lieutenants, noted later that their leader had a quiet, ladylike demeanor, but “once Barbara Johns homed in on an idea, she was like a Sidewinder missile.”9

On the morning of April 23, one of the student leaders lured Principal M. Boyd Jones out of the building by placing a crank call complaining that Moton students were loitering at the local bus station. In his absence, Barbara Johns called an assembly to present the plan of a general strike. Teachers were asked to leave the room. Johns’s grandmother remembers asking thirteen-year-old Joan Johns what her sister had said: “Joan said she took off her shoe and hit it on a bench, and said ‘I want you all out of here.’ Joan said she was afraid Barbara was going to hit someone on the head with that shoe.” Her words electrified the majority of the student body, who enthusiastically adopted the plan. John Stokes, on the stage with Johns, never forgot the power of the moment. “Man, you talk about rocking,” he wrote later. “No one was seated. It was like a heavy thunderstorm in full force.”10

Over the next few days, pupils circled the school grounds with picket signs—most made in the school’s industrial shop—until the county discontinued bus service to Moton. At this point, some students, such as J. Samuel (Sam) Williams Jr., began visiting friends to discourage them from returning to classes.

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A delegation of student leaders visited the superintendent of schools in his office in the county courthouse. Years later, Johns, who passed away in 1991, recalled the visit. "We found in [Superintendent] Mr. Thomas J. McLwaine a timid and evasive person who failed to look us directly in the face throughout the whole session," she wrote. "This gave us courage, however, and we bombarded him with zillions of questions about what his intentions were regarding our school situation. He first tried reasoning (his version), then he threatened us with expulsion, etc., but we refused to give in." Strike committee member John Watson saw McLwaine as "a scared little old man whose world was falling apart around him." His threats that the students' actions could jeopardize their parents' employment merely heightened their contempt for his position. Nine years before four college students sat at a whites-only North Carolina lunch counter, and four years before the Montgomery bus boycott, the R. R. Moton teenagers brought direct action to Farmville.

They stayed out of school for two weeks in a student-instigated protest, organizing meetings with members of the white power structure and independently requesting legal assistance from the Virginia State Conference NAACP. Taking matters into their own hands, these teenagers galvanized a community previously considered an unlikely location for a civil rights struggle. Participant Hazel Davis reflected in 2001 on the transformative power of the strike: "Until the strike, no one ever challenged. You just go along. You don't have the thing within to challenge it; you don't have the means to challenge it." But many participants drew their strength from the more subtle challenges they had watched their parents and teachers offer to white supremacy for years. Adults who resisted paternalism and demanded respect for themselves and their families helped raise young people willing to take to the streets.

Choosing to strike, the Moton students built on a strong tradition of youth activism reaching back into the 1930s. Throughout the two decades preceding the strike, teenage members of NAACP Youth Councils across the country demonstrated against segregated schools, recreational facilities, and workplaces. Young people in mid-twentieth-century America had been conditioned since early childhood to see themselves as forces for positive change in the world, and to believe that it might be their generational responsibility to move out in front of their elders, blazing the way for older people to follow.

The strikers originally went to the picket lines to demand equalized facilities and an expanded curriculum, not desegregated schools. But when Oliver Hill and Spottswood Robinson proposed a desegregation suit, they agreed. The majority, if not all, of the striking students had not initially intended to challenge the fundamental nature of the social structure around them, nor, in Sam Wil-
The first mass meeting with NAACP representatives attracted a thousand attendees and surprisingly little opposition to the premise of suing to end segregation itself. When Executive Secretary of the Virginia State Conference of Branches W. Lester Banks asked those assembled if they would approve whatever action the NAACP deemed necessary to end segregation in the county's schools, the response was overwhelmingly affirmative. Only Fred Reid, one of the more conservative members of the community, rose to speak against the new approach, promising support for an equalization campaign but emphatically rejecting a desegregation suit. Reid spoke for an older model of race relations that had long directed black-white interactions, but by 1951 his voice was in the minority.16

On May 3, 1951, Hill and Robinson petitioned the Prince Edward County School Board to end segregation in the school system. A second mass meeting that evening at L. Francis Griffin's First Baptist Church took the form of a rally, a public declaration that the black community embraced the tactics and the goals of the NAACP, which local whites considered an extremist group. Only one attendee challenged the chosen course of action: former Moton principal J. B. Pervall, who accused Robinson of "coming down here to a country town like Farmville, and trying to take it over on a non-segregated basis." Taking the pulse of the crowd, Robinson dismissed Pervall's accusation. "I don't think we have brought something novel to Prince Edward County," he said, reversing his previous opinion of the local population, "for what you overlook is that this is something the people had been ready for a long time ago."17

Rising before his neighbors, Griffin argued that "anyone who would not back these children after they stepped out on a limb is not a man . . . anyone who won't fight against racial prejudice is not a man."18 The teenagers' actions, the sense of solidarity born at the mass meetings, and the challenge of Griffin's words propelled the community down the road to national notoriety, educational tragedy, and a unique place in history. Griffin, one of the most respected men in the community, stood at the helm of the struggle for the next twenty years.

Looking back on the events of 1951, Sam Williams is careful to stress that no mass organizing preceded Barbara Johns's call for a strike. In order to maintain secrecy, the strike committee was a small one, and the majority of Moton stu-
dent, Williams included, knew nothing of the plan until called into assembly. “I was outside,” he remembered in 2009. “I could take you almost to the spot I was standing, and several students came to me and told me that they needed me in the auditorium to speak out because people were thinking about leaving the school.” Rushing inside, Williams, the son of a schoolteacher, began to plead with his classmates not to leave school. Upon learning, however, that Johns was calling for a strike against inferior conditions, not a mass dropout, he re-linquished his opposition.10

In 1960, Williams became involved with the emerging student sit-in movement. A few years later, back in Prince Edward, he led direct action protests against the discriminatory practices of Farmville businesses. As a veteran of multiple organizing campaigns, he remains surprised at the lack of mass organizing precipitating both the Moton High strike and the 1959 decision to close the schools. According to Williams, “Nobody’s going to tell you honestly that everybody was properly informed of the school strike of ’51 prior to its occurrence. And the same thing is true of the closing of the schools.” In the wake of both decisions, the black community banded together. But would more action have been possible had the structures of organizing been more firmly established?20

By summer’s end, after firing Boyd Jones and failing to renew the contract of a black teacher whose daughter had been a strike leader, county authorities unearthed the once-unavailable funds needed to build a new Moton High School. Efforts that had languished for years suddenly moved ahead at full steam, but a cross-burning on school property and a series of ugly threats against Barbara Johns prompted the teenager’s family to send her to Montgomery to finish her senior year of high school in the home of her famous uncle. The new Moton High, completed in 1953, had all the facilities of a modern high school, including an auditorium, a gymnasium, and a cafeteria. But the quality of education in this state-of-the-art building still did not equal that offered whites at Farmville High School. Textbooks were in short supply. The new library had few volumes on its shelves. Biology classes shared a single microscope. Audiovisual equipment was virtually nonexistent, as were teaching tools such as charts, maps, and globes. Though many of the teachers were excellent, one remembered that district authorities treated the hiring of personnel for the black schools with the utmost casualness, subjecting applicants to only the most superficial of examinations. The other fourteen school buildings (one in use in 1951 was abandoned in 1953) used by black students remained unimproved.21

Nonetheless, white leaders pointed to the new building as a pledge of friendship and a testimony to their “good intentions” toward African Americans.
Given what they believed to be a show of largesse on their part, many were genuinely puzzled when blacks refused to demonstrate proper gratitude by dropping the lawsuit. Such a refusal violated the established norms of controlled race relations. Virginia’s paternalists had historically accepted, or even encouraged, a certain amount of black educational and economic progress, expecting in return deference to white supremacy and a willingness to limit protest to channels deemed appropriate by whites.22

By turning to the NAACP and challenging their neighbors in court, black residents rejected white timetables, demonstrating their determination to chart their own destiny. Angry whites nursed their resentment for seven years. In 1954, the Supreme Court decision in Brown v. Board of Education broadcast Prince Edward’s school situation to a global audience, but the district court issued no direct desegregation orders until May 1959. When the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals finally handed down the long-expected command to desegregate by September, Prince Edward’s Board of Supervisors responded by terminating all funding for the public schools. Understandably shell-shocked, several of the 1951 strike leaders began to question the wisdom of their decision to take a stand. Leslie Francis Griffin Jr. noted in 2004 that his father feared that the young activists held themselves responsible for bringing trouble upon their community. “My father used to say to me, as you become a man, remind them and everyone else that they didn’t start this,” Griffin commented. “This was started because the South had laws which codified what black people could be.”23

White residents knew all about the inequalities in Prince Edward’s school system. They could hardly fail to see the overcrowded and inadequate buildings, the second-hand textbooks, and the almost nonexistent supplies. Unperturbed, they assumed that the resources allocated provided a sufficient education for members of what they considered an inferior population. A stratified and hierarchical society that offered limited employment opportunities to black adults did not rack itself with guilt over inequalities between schools. It never occurred to many whites that black students had a right to the same resources as their own children. When confronted with a court decision that stated otherwise, they closed their schools. They would not reopen for five years.

The struggle in Prince Edward became a barometer for both the depth of black commitment to desegregated education and the intensity of southern white resistance to Brown. Each side dug in its heels, set up its own institutions, and looked to the federal courts for validation of its position. Each hung its hopes upon a series of court rulings that proved to be slow in coming. Outside the county, parties interested in the issues at stake observed carefully. Most

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Americans, however, had other concerns—namely Communism, nuclear war, and the civil rights battles breaking out in their own communities. Despite attention from major civil rights groups and the eventual intervention of the Kennedy administration, the struggle to reopen the Prince Edward public schools played out, for the most part, in the shadows of other stories.

Prince Edward County was the only locality in the nation to close its public school system for five years (1959–64) rather than comply with a court order to desegregate. While school districts across the South temporarily closed a building here or there to block a specific court order, only in Prince Edward did local authorities abandon public education entirely, and with every intention of permanence. Both blacks and whites suffered in the wake of this decision. In prioritizing the maintenance of white supremacy over educating young people to engage with the world, white residents destroyed the institution that has been termed the “cornerstone of American democracy”—the public school. In aggressively pursuing civil rights reform in hopes of creating a better future for their children, African Americans lost even the substandard system that had stood at the heart of the black community for decades.

When the public schools finally reopened five years later—under direct order of the U.S. Supreme Court—county authorities employed every weapon in their arsenal to ensure that the newly reopened system remained segregated, impoverished, and academically substandard. The school system did not begin to recover from its long nightmare until the 1970s. Though the level of education offered in Prince Edward has indisputably improved in the last thirty years, the legacy of the closings has lived on in a generation of parents ill-equipped to help their children attain firm educational footing, thus perpetuating the cycle of damage. In the midst of a mounting retreat from Brown v. Board of Education, and an intensifying national debate over the future of public education, the Prince Edward story, replete with its tortured interplay of race, politics, and educational tragedy, is a cautionary tale for our time. It reminds us that no substitute for a publicly funded, publicly operated school system has ever proven itself able to consistently provide quality education for all children, regardless of their ability to pay.