2010

Farmville, 1963: The Long Hot Summer

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Abstract
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Keywords
Farmville, Prince Edward County, school segregation, student strike, Moton High School, Brown v. Board of Education, NAACP, Civil Rights, sit-ins, integration

Disciplines
African American Studies | Education | History | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Social History | Women's History

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Chapter 3

Farmville, 1963: The Long Hot Summer

Jill Ogline Titus

On July 9, 1963, a reporter for the Richmond Times-Dispatch informed his readers that black protesters had attempted two sit-ins in the college town of Farmville, the hub of rural Prince Edward County. Obviously shocked by these developments, he termed the events at the College Shoppe restaurant and the State Theater “the first reported Negro movement in this Southside Virginia locality, which has gained prominence in recent years as the focal point of a struggle over the closings of Prince Edward County’s schools.” In this writer’s mind, and perhaps many of his readers’ as well, social movements were synonymous with street protest. In reality, however, the two are not one and the same. The Prince Edward freedom movement did not begin in the streets, but rather in the schools. The 1951 student strike at R. R. Moton High School launched a decade of unprecedented activism on both sides of the color line. In the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling in Brown v. Board of Education, whites dismantled the public school system, pouring their energies into creating a homegrown whites-only private school system. African Americans, with the help of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), challenged the county’s actions in court, scoured the region for new black voters, and developed grassroots community schools to temporarily educate their children.

The July sit-ins emerged from an already vibrant climate of protest, yet the Times-Dispatch reporter was right to see in them the emergence of a new pattern of resistance in Prince Edward. Much of the nation experienced new heights of racial confrontation in the summer of 1963. Byron de la Beckwith murdered NAACP Field Secretary Medgar Evers in Jackson, Mississippi. Mass protests—and violent reaction—exploded in Birmingham, Alabama. More than 200,000 people converged on Washington, D.C., for the March on Washington. And in Prince Edward, teenagers once again took control of the freedom movement, staging daily street demonstrations. The local NAACP chapter supported the protests, calling for a boycott of county merchants to remain in effect until the reopening of the schools. Law enforcement officials arrested nearly fifty people throughout the course of the summer, and casual conversation between blacks and whites all but disappeared. Teenagers decried what they considered the older generation’s “inability to move,” and subtle divisions in the black community came sharply into focus.

As the demonstrations intensified, an increasing mood of militance swept the teenage population. Many young people acknowledged feelings of anger and
resentment toward the older generation, criticizing their elders for not doing enough to challenge white supremacy. Some walked the picket lines with their parents’ blessing—or even company—while others defied parental authority to participate. Those who marched explained when interviewed that the demonstrations would “make the whites take notice,” that they enhanced black “togetherness,” and that they evidenced willingness to “fight for our rights.” Motivation to join the protests came from different directions. Most of the teenage picketers listed opening the schools as their primary concern. But forcing an opening of new jobs to African Americans ran a close second. Protesters hoped to soon see blacks working in Farmville businesses, in restaurants, construction, teaching, and medicine, and in shipping and transportation. Others joined in hopes of securing increased wages for jobs they already held, of stemming the flow of young people from the county (noting that the exodus of teenagers made remaining in Prince Edward tedious), and of achieving the broader goals of “freedom” and “equality.”

While the Prince Edward story is largely a tale of courtrooms and classrooms, the 1963 demonstrations reveal the convergence of courtroom strategies and direct action tactics that characterized so many school desegregation campaigns. The secondary issues addressed through the pickets—discriminatory hiring practices, economic inequality, and the daily humiliations of Jim Crow—rose to the surface because the crusade for equal education had already tilled the ground for protest. While the ins-and-outs of the Prince Edward legal proceedings were serpentine indeed, local blacks did not suffer in silence, passively waiting for the courts to invalidate the school closings. On the contrary, local residents opposed to the lockout, both black and white, organized for action. The street demonstrations of 1963 brought the battle to topple white supremacy into the stores, churches, and restaurants of Farmville. The fact that these actions ultimately proved unsuccessful in reopening the public schools does not take away from their importance. The organizing efforts that produced the demonstrations served as a vehicle for the development of a new political consciousness, and prodded federal officials to provide a temporary educational program the following fall. It was not the reopening of the schools, which finally arrived in 1964 with the Supreme Court decision in Griffin v. County School Board of Prince Edward County that permanently changed life in Prince Edward, but the civil rights struggle itself.

Concentrated demonstrations began in late July, under the leadership of two young ministers, Rev. J. Samuel Williams, Jr. of Levi Baptist Church and Rev. Goodwin Douglas of Beulah A.M.E. Church. Williams and Douglas made extensive use of the networks of the black church to recruit volunteers. Both were respected figures in the community, links between the young people and the older generation. Many teenagers knew Williams, a veteran of the 1951 Moton High strike, as a former classmate of their older brothers and sisters, and were quick to rally to his side when he proposed demonstrations. Having recently returned to the county after a stint in the U.S. Army and several years at Shaw University, Williams was no stranger to direct action. During his Shaw
years, he had led demonstrations in the streets of Raleigh, North Carolina, and attended the famous 1960 sit-in conference that birthed the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, one of the decade’s most influential civil rights organizations.

Though relatively new to Farmville, Douglas, a native of the West Indies, was intimately familiar with the situation in the county. As a student at Kittrell Junior College, an A.M.E. school near Henderson, North Carolina, he had roomed with a Prince Edward student finishing his high school education at Kittrell. Thanks to agreement between the college and a group of Prince Edward ministers, fifty-five Moton High students paid half-price tuition to study in the College’s high school department. Touched by their story, Douglas became a friend and mentor to the Prince Edward group, and upon graduation, accepted an assignment to Farmville’s Beulah A.M.E. Church. As a student, Douglas was an activist. A yearbook picture of the Kittrell NAACP chapter shows him at the front of the group, clutching a hand-lettered sign reading “Freedom Now.” He came to Farmville determined to nurture street protest.

Sam Williams returned to Prince Edward unsure whether his neighbors were ready for direct action. But throwing himself into voter registration work, he traveled back and forth across the county, finding “there was more determination among the people than I thought.” Buoyed by his success raising registration within his congregation to 100%, and frustrated with Farmville merchants’ continuing refusal to accede to the Prince Edward NAACP’s requests for new hiring and seating policies, he proposed a street campaign. Rev. L. Francis Griffin of First Baptist Church, the tireless leader of the Prince Edward struggle—often termed “Virginia’s Martin Luther King”—agreed.

As word of the planned demonstrations spread amongst the young people, it motivated many of those boarding outside the county to continue their education. Several participants in the American Friends Service Committee’s Emergency Placement Program, which placed Prince Edward students in integrated public schools outside Virginia, wrote home to ask permission to participate, or simply to request more information. A girl residing in New Bedford, Massachusetts, wrote her mother that “it is for us and we should help fight for it.” When mass protest broke out in late July, two of the four youth leaders—Leslie Francis (“Skippy”) Griffin, Jr. and Carlton Terry—approached the demonstrations with first-hand experience of life outside Prince Edward, aware that the dictates of Jim Crow were not universal.

According to Jean Fairfax, who oversaw the Placement Program in her role as AFSC Director of Civil Rights Programs, “Many of our kids became actively involved in the demonstrations. . . . I think being away gave them a little bit of distance and a different perspective, and many of them were in communities where black people were activists.” While Skippy Griffin’s decision to participate was undoubtedly much influenced by growing up with an activist father, Carlton Terry had little exposure to street protest until the AFSC Placement Program placed him in the Massachusetts home of an NAACP official. His experi-
ence outside Prince Edward County helped give him the confidence to take to the streets.

The first two attempts to gain access to segregated spaces within the community—the State Theater, the College Shoppe, and lunch counters at J.J. Newberry's, Southside Sundry, and the Owen-Sanford Drug Store—involved students from Hampton Institute and Virginia Union University. Near the end of July, a team of SNCC workers consisting of veteran staffers Ivanhoe Donaldson, Roland Sherrod, and Gladys Giles arrived in the county to train participants for sustained direct action. On July 25, sixty teenagers poured into the streets of Farmville. Carrying signs calling for open public schools and equal employment opportunities, they paraded up and down Main Street for an hour and a half and staged a sit-in in front of the town's shopping plaza. Their message—requesting black customers not to buy where they couldn't work and holding business owners responsible for the stalemate in the county—in infuriated many white passersby. Before breaking for the day, they gathered in a large circle outside Griffin's First Baptist Church to chant "Old Jim Crow has got to go."

Things heated up even more the following day, which focused on challenging segregation in common spaces of commerce and entertainment. Fifty teenagers again marched with pickets for an hour and a half, while twenty-six others attempted sit-ins, stand-ins, and try-ins (trying on merchandise) at five downtown stores, three restaurants, and the State Theater. The groups targeting the College Shoppe and Chappell's Fountain encountered locked doors, and proprietors asked those at Rhue's Diner and Southside Sundry to leave. The only two successes came at the two department stores—Baldwin's and Leggett's—where clerks allowed protesters to try on clothing.

The weekend brought thirty-three arrests. A mass parade of some 125 people marched silently through the shopping district Saturday morning, evenly spaced to allow shoppers to enter and exit stores. Police arrested ten picketers gathering in front of the College Shoppe before they had an opportunity to begin a sit-in, and charged them with loitering. The five adult participants—Angela Neverson, Kitty Johnson, Grace Poindexter, Melvin More, and Rev. Richard Hale of St. James A.M.E. Church—were later convicted, and received twenty-five dollar fines and thirty-day jail sentences. After the arrests, the county sheriff's office closed the streets of Farmville for two hours.

Though such scenes were commonplace across the South that summer, Prince Edward whites were unprepared for such a public act of defiance. Three years earlier, J. Barrye Wall, the segregationist publisher of the local paper, The Farmville Herald, had bragged that, "There has been no trouble with the NAACP in Prince Edward, such as sit-downs, wade-ins, and kneel-ins." Many whites were genuinely surprised to find their black neighbors in the street. Bubbling tensions came to a head Sunday, July 28th when demonstrators confronted what Martin Luther King, Jr. once called "the most segregated hour in America."

Teams fanned out to four white churches: Johns Memorial Episcopal, Farmville Methodist, Farmville Baptist, and the Wesleyan Methodist Church.
Though organizers did not publicize the plans for organized "pray-ins," many whites anticipated the arrival of the demonstrators. Some approved, including those who called Griffin the night before to let him know that Johns Memorial’s service would begin at 10:00 a.m. The majority did not, adjusting their service times in order to deny protesters admission. The seven teenagers and one adult who targeted Johns Memorial were grudgingly admitted. The county’s most outspoken white dissenter, Longwood College’s Gordon Moss, a parishioner, welcomed them into his pew. In the weeks following, however, the Johns Memorial vestry passed a resolution barring blacks from all “regular” church services. The Bishop protested, traveling to Farmville to encourage members to reconsider this policy, but the vestry stood firm.\textsuperscript{13}

At a few minutes before 11:00 a.m., the protesters turned away from Farmville. Methodist and Wesleyan Methodist joined those assigned to Farmville Baptist on the church steps. American Friends Service Committee staff member Ruth Turner, an African American Ohioan, approached an usher to inquire about the service time. The usher nodded down the street toward First Baptist, insisting, "You people are not coming in here. You have your own church." Denied entrance, the protesters proceeded, in Sam Williams’s words, to “have church on the steps.” Williams led the group in prayer, and the demonstrators sang several songs, including "We Shall Overcome," "Let Us Break Bread Together," and “This May Be The Last Time."\textsuperscript{14}

At this point, an usher emerged to threaten the protesters with arrest. When no one budged, the Board of Deacons called the police, who hurriedly led Williams away. Remaining protesters launched into a medley of freedom songs, going limp when police approached them, forcing the officers to carry them away on stretchers. Officers transported all but two to the county courthouse, where they were charged with violating one of Virginia’s oldest statutes, disturbing the public worship of God. Those over eighteen were informed of their bond ($1,500 for the women, $3,000 for the men), and placed in a jail cell. Officials released the juvenile protesters into their parents’ custody.\textsuperscript{15}

The adults—Williams, Turner and her sister Patricia, SNCC’s Ivanhoe Donaldson, and Bessie Reed and Frances Hayes, both veterans of the AFSC Placement Program—were decently treated at the jail. Their cells had no mattresses, but they received food and upon request, ice water. But when NAACP lawyers S.W. Tucker and Henry Marsh, who handled the majority of legal matters related to Prince Edward, dropped by, tensions flared. Tucker and Marsh’s summer clerk, Fred Wallace, a black Harvard Law student, became separated from the rest of the group, and ran into difficulty with the sheriff’s deputies. He was arrested and charged with assault and battery.\textsuperscript{16}

The Prince Edward County Jail was full to bursting. Fearing a mass protest around the building, Circuit Court Judge Joel Flood took a cue from Albany, Georgia’s Laurie Pritchett and issued an order making the jails of eight nearby counties a temporary part of the Prince Edward correctional system. Deputies—some bearing no other identification than handmade POLICE badges—quickly transported the prisoners to the Lunenburg County Jail, refusing to answer their
questions as to where they were being taken. As the car transporting Sam Williams moved up Main Street, a black woman sitting on her front porch caught a glimpse of the minister’s face, and immediately alerted Griffin.17

Upon arrival in Lunenburg, the demonstrators were dragged from the car and dumped in cells barred by heavy iron doors. From Sunday evening until late Tuesday night, the female prisoners played cards, read, talked, and sang. Some of the Lunenburg officers found their singing amusing; others did not. Members of the group adapted the song “We Shall Not Be Moved” to indict the governor, mayor, sheriff, and deputy sheriff. According to Ruth Turner, Deputy Sheriff Ryder enjoyed the verse than ran, “Deputy Sheriff Ryder, he shall be removed, just like a pile of garbage in the alley,” so much that he requested it several times. The sheriff, however, threatened to remove the group’s mattresses if the singing did not cease. When it continued, he confiscated the two male protesters’ bedding.18

Some adult leaders felt that the arrests were ill-timed—after all, they removed twenty-three demonstrators from the picket lines at the height of the campaign—and that the charges themselves suggested a certain irreverence on the demonstrators’ part. A few days after her release, Turner herself reflected that, “We would possibly have been arrested under a number of circumstances on Sunday morning; it was probably an unwise choice to have created the situation which was the precipitating one.” At the time, Jean Fairfax agreed. As the years passed, however, Fairfax reevaluated her own position, commenting in 2005 that:

I felt that the sit-in at the churches probably diverted attention from what the real issues were ... I don’t agree with that now. I think you take on whatever institutions are part of the problem and the churches were part of the problem. And I’m very glad that the students did that, although at the time, I had some questions about it.19

The white churches’ abdication of their responsibility to frame the school situation as a moral issue made them complicit in the county’s system of white dominance. Protesters could hardly take direct action against the power structure without challenging the churches’ practices. Yet in a conservative community, a “disturbing the worship of God” charge probably alienated some observers who might have respected a silent vigil. In hindsight, a push for admittance to each church blended with a silent protest outside those refusing entrance might have proven a better strategy, but given the level of resistance in Prince Edward, the results may have been the same.

The county court handed down its verdict against the protesters in September. All six received $100 fines. Donaldson and Williams received twelve months in jail (with six suspended), Bessie Reed, Patricia Turner and Frances Hayes received terms of six months with the entire term suspended, and Ruth Turner received a six-month sentence with five suspended. All of the defendants appealed. Their lawyer, S.W. Tucker, ingeniously circumvented the civil rights
question through a complicated contention that the state statute violated the establishment of religion clause. He argued that in order to find the defendants guilty, prosecutors would have to make a determination as to the existence and nature of God, a clear violation of the First Amendment. The cases came before the Prince Edward County Circuit Court on November 19, 1963, the same day as Fred Wallace’s appeal. Wallace, originally charged with a felony count for allegedly cursing and kicking Deputies P.F. Gay and J.W. Overton, was convicted by the lower court on three misdemeanor charges instead and sentenced to a $400 fine and six months in jail. 

Though some adults did not endorse the arrests at Farmville Baptist, their disapproval did not hobble the movement. A mass meeting that night at First Baptist drew between 400 and 500 people. Picketing and try-ins continued throughout the following week. On Wednesday, July 31, activists attempted to sit-in at Chappell’s and the College Shoppe, but met roped-off counters. When town officials denied demonstrators’ request for a parade permit on August 3, the young people defiantly proceeded as scheduled. Police immediately arrested twelve picketers, including Rev. Goodwin Douglas, for parading without a permit. The court sentenced Douglas to ten days in jail and released the juvenile picketers into the custody of their parents under $1,000 bonds, on the condition that they observe a 10:00 p.m. curfew and practice good behavior. Yet the arrests failed to dampen young people’s enthusiasm for the protests. As August wore on, more young demonstrators continued to join the ranks to replace those sidelined. Roles were carefully assigned based on temperament, with the more volatile participants often drawing sign-making and lunch preparation duties.

Everett Berryman, Jr. was fifteen that summer. One of the few teenagers with access to a car, he shuttled participants from the western part of the county into Farmville each morning, walked picket lines, and participated in a sit-in at the J.J. Newberry’s lunch counter. “It was an exciting time,” he recalled in retrospect, yet remembered wondering at the time “why I have to go through all this to do what is normal for white people.” Berryman encountered little hostility on the picket lines, but felt distinctly awkward entering J.J. Newberry’s, sure the group would not be served. To his surprise, the wait staff brought the demonstrators coffee, which upon tasting proved to be full of salt. The group remained seated, without harassment, for approximately twenty minutes. When they left, staff removed the counter stools, quietly eliminating both the potential for violence and the threat of further action.

Lunch counter sit-in attempts failed across town on August 12, although participants did succeed in standing and eating at one place. When Neil Sullivan, Superintendent of the recently formed Prince Edward Free School Association, a one-year, privately financed school system, arrived in Farmville on August 26th, the picket lines were well-organized and orderly, with new shifts marching at designated times from First Baptist to relieve those ready for a break. He noted the picketers’ “determined and confident expressions,” and jotted down an impression that the majority of their hand-lettered signs bore messages related to education, such as: Free Public Education is our inalienable right... Four
years on the street is four years too long. . . . Why take it out on innocent Negro children? . . . Integration is the law of the land, but not in Prince Edward County. . . . We aren’t dropouts. We are lockouts. . . . 23

Throughout her time in Prince Edward—when not in jail—Ruth Turner interviewed black teenagers from across the county, often asking their thoughts on the demonstrations. The majority of her interviewees strongly supported the picket lines. Many expressed significant frustration with the older generation’s response to the crisis. A seventeen-year-old who had spent the previous three years in an integrated school in Baltimore considered many of the older folks so accustomed to segregation that they assumed “the white man is going to do what he wants to anyway,” an attitude that sapped their spirit to fight. Though initially fearful of arrest, he joined the demonstrations at Sam Williams’s encouragement, and subsequently found himself unafraid when arrest came. His commitment to the demonstrations sprang from a desire to reopen the schools on an integrated basis, “so that children can get to know for themselves what white people are like instead of being influenced by older people.” 24

Some teenagers were quite sharp in their criticisms. Carlton Terry insisted that the schools would have reopened before 1963 had blacks launched an immediate protest in 1959. “The older people just don’t want to move,” he complained to Turner. “They think they are living just fine.” A fifteen-year-old who spent three years outside the county lamented that “Negroes won’t do anything, they are even scared to put their names on paper because they might lose their jobs.” Nevertheless, he remained hopeful that the growing spirit of confrontation might encourage some older blacks to take action “to get the white man off their backs.” 25

The generation gap profoundly strained relationships in the county that summer, as it did in other movement communities. While some teenagers recognized the older generation’s reasons for avoiding direct confrontation, others ridiculed their elders as cowardly Uncle Toms. Unlike their comrades in Mississippi, white authorities in Prince Edward did not imprison juvenile protesters or sentence them to terms in reform school. Rather, they released them into the custody of their parents on $1,000 bonds, confident that a substantial increase in the size of the police force and a change in the town picketing code would prevent them from returning to the streets. Rather than assaulting demonstrators, authorities focused on finding legal and bureaucratic avenues to circumvent protest.

The low levels of physical violence that characterized the Prince Edward struggle did render street protest less immediately dangerous than it was in much of the South. Everett Berryman remembered local police officers taking a far less adversarial stand than their colleagues in the Deep South, at times even halting traffic so picketers could cross the street. “Virginia has always been a gentlemen’s state,” he noted. Berryman and his compatriots were well aware that local officials cared more for the state’s image than the welfare of the protesters, but welcomed the protection nevertheless. Older residents knew their white neighbors well enough to anticipate other avenues of retaliation. As heads of
household, adults recognized their economic vulnerability in a white-dominated society. They feared the real power their white employers had over them. Nineteen-year-old Frances Hayes blamed the low levels of adult participation on the fact that “they work for the whites and don’t want to be involved.” Many willing to take other actions in the struggle drew the line at so explicitly flouting the Virginian traditions of subtlety and indirectness.

Though many Prince Edward teenagers worked full-time and bore significant financial responsibility for supporting their families, their young ages shielded them from some of the repercussions adults would have endured. Some employers accepted their young workers’ involvement in the demonstrations, either attributing it to youthful rebellion or ruefully acknowledging the fact that they did not possess the leverage necessary to demand their withdrawal. Others, however, fired teenage workers over their participation in the struggle. The majority of those let go, however, secured new positions more easily than unemployed adults.

Some parents gave their blessing to their children’s activism, or joined them on the picket lines, either already inclined toward protest or won over by reasoning such as that offered by a fifteen-year-old who reminded his grandmother that “we will live here after you are gone.” Others, anticipating the repercussions that might follow, flatly refused to allow their children to participate. Some teenagers found ways around their parents’ disapproval, such as a sixteen-year-old girl who moved in with an older brother after her mother told her “that if I got in jail, she wouldn’t come and get me.” But Prince Edward, like many rural areas, was a place where parental authority was not often flouted, and the majority of teenagers whose parents refused their permission remained on the sidelines.

Most Prince Edward whites, even some self-described moderates, recoiled from the use of economic warfare, condemning street protest as uncivil and threatening. Many predicted a riot. At the June 17th County Board of Supervisors meeting, local officials recommended forty-nine men for appointment as part-time deputy sheriffs, in a county that had heretofore employed four men in the sheriff’s office: three deputies and Sheriff James Clark. Officials added eighteen more in July and an additional ten in August.

Aware that the State Compensation Board might not approve all their nominees, the Supervisors accepted Clark’s request that the local governing body pay those not approved if their employment became necessary. Clark made regular use of his expanded force, and by the beginning of August, the Supervisors owed forty-seven deputies amounts ranging from $1.85 to $36.43. At its September 3rd meeting, the Board approved payment of $736.27 to fifty-four of Clark’s men. The sheriff was not the only county official to cast around for outside assistance. Prince Edward’s Commonwealth Attorney, Frank Nat Watkins, pled with Virginia governor Albertis Harrison to allow the state Attorney General’s office to help him prosecute the mushrooming number of court cases coming out of the streets of Farmville.

Noting that “the tempo of harassment of the citizens of Prince Edward County and the State of Virginia is increasing day by day,” that most of the men
working as policemen had little experience in law enforcement, and that he himself had been working 12-15 hour days, he begged the governor to provide him an attorney experienced in civil rights cases. "The laws we are trying to enforce," he stressed, "are not those of the Town of Farmville nor the County of Prince Edward, but State Laws." As members of the enormous police force patrolled the tense streets of Farmville throughout the hot days of July and August, many marched beside large dogs. Despite her extensive experience in Mississippi, commonly viewed as the movement’s epicenter of police violence, Jean Fairfax commented that "it was the first time I ever saw dogs. . . . In all the time I spent working across the South, this was the first time I came up close to dogs."30

Albertis Harrison was no friend of civil rights reform. Not long after receiving Watkins’s letter, he condemned the pending Civil Rights Act of 1964 as an attempt to "pillory the states for the actions of private citizens who are exercising their right to discriminate." But nevertheless, he refused to intervene in Prince Edward, refusing Watkins’s request for assistance from the state Attorney General’s office, and dismissing his indirect appeal for National Guard troops to patrol the streets of Farmville. In reading this exchange of letters, one gets the sense that Harrison, segregationist that he was, may have been beginning to find the seemingly unending crisis in Prince Edward tiresome.31

When Free School classes began on September 16th, the vast majority of picketers returned to school, and the demonstrations ground to a halt. Blacks took pride in what they had accomplished: the hiring of Mattie Scott as Safe-way’s first black cashier, and the collapse of color barriers at several local eating establishments. In October, the Farmville Town Council approved a new ordinance requiring groups planning to picket on town sidewalks to state their reasons for demonstration in their request for a parade permit. Interpreting the measure as an outright effort to intimidate black protesters, Griffin immediately registered a protest with Mayor Billie Watkins. At the Council’s next meeting, he presented a 150-signature petition requesting relief from discriminatory practices. Threatening that “continued procrastination on the part of political and business leaders will inevitably result in the Negro community resuming demonstrations which will be a strain on the meager resources of our community,” Griffin laid out five demands. The first called for establishing an interracial committee committed to seeking the enactment of a public accommodations law. Petitioners also demanded the appointment of blacks to municipal government positions, an across-the-board end to discrimination in hiring, and larger earmarks for improving black residential areas.32

Watkins protested that town officials “have no authority to dictate to business on their employment policies,” and could not reasonably meet the employment demands. On the matter of distribution of municipal revenues, clearly a town government issue, he insisted that local officials had always maintained a color-blind policy in allocating funds. In the face of such a blatant lack of cooperation, protesters chose not to press the issue. The moment for resumed demonstrations passed. Perhaps Griffin had always intended his threat as a bluff. Or
perhaps, with the children back in school, even only temporarily, the combatants
needed a break. Given that most of the picketers were teenagers, the majority of
whom had been out of school for years, it makes sense that they would choose to
focus on their studies rather than indefinitely continuing street protest. 33

Attention shifted from the streets back toward the courtroom, where on May
25, 1964, the Supreme Court of the United States finally issued its decision in
Griffin v. County School Board of Prince Edward County, invalidating school
closings as an avenue for circumventing Brown v. Board of Education. While
the ruling set the stage for the Court’s more controversial decisions of 1968-
1971, which struck down the “freedom of choice” escape clause adopted by the
majority of school boards confronted with desegregation suits, it did not imme-
diately bring equal education to Prince Edward County. Local government offi-
cials employed every weapon in their arsenal to ensure that the newly reopened
school system remained segregated, impoverished, and academically substan-
dard. The Prince Edward public schools did not take their first steps toward re-
covery until the early 1970s.

This pattern of continuing resistance to desegregation, even in the face of a
second Supreme Court decision, highlights the importance of remembering that
Prince Edward blacks did not passively wait for a court decision to deliver them.
Without jeopardizing the campaign in the courts, they pursued other avenues to
freedom, including street protests, community organizing campaigns, and the
ballot box. They built a new political consciousness, put segregationists on the
defensive, and destroyed white illusions of black “contentment,” all with an eye
toward the future. As Everett Berryman recalled, “It was just what we had to do
to get to where we needed to go.” 34

Notes

1. “Two Sit-Ins Attempted in Farmville,” Richmond Times-Dispatch, 9 July 1963,
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3. Number 6, Interview with Ruth Turner, 1963 Box, Folder 38558, Prince Edward
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Number 12, ibid; Number 7, ibid; Number 8, ibid; Number 9, ibid; Number 15, ibid.

4. Bob Smith, They Closed Their Schools: Prince Edward County, Virginia, 1951-
Martha E. Forrester Council of Women, 1996), p. 231-235; J. Samuel Williams, Jr., In-
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5. Smith, 170; My High School Years in Junior College: Moton School and Kittrell
Junior College, (Farmville, VA: Moton Museum, 2008), p. 30, 34, 37; Lacy Ward, Jr.,
Interview with Author, 12 June 2009, Farmville, VA.
6. Smith, *They Closed Their Schools*, p. 231-232; Williams interview; Edward H. Peeples Interview with Author, 29 June 2006, Richmond, VA.


8. Fairfax interview; Smith, *They Closed Their Schools*, p. 233.


12. J. Barrye Wall to Watkins M. Abbitt, 12 September 1960, Box 1, Closing of Schools Folder, Watkins M. Abbitt Papers, Boatwright Memorial Library, University of Richmond.

13. Ruth Turner to Fairfax, 2 August 1963, 1963 Box, Folder 38544, PEC Collection, AFSC Archives; Nancy Adams to Fairfax, 4 May 1964, 1964 Box, Folder 38578, ibid.

14. Turner to Fairfax, 2 August 1963, 1963 Box, Folder 38544; Williams interview.

15. Turner to Fairfax, 2 August 1963, 1963 Box, Folder 38544.

16. Ibid.


19. Fairfax to Turner, 9 August 1963, 1963 Box, Folder 38544, PEC Collection, AFSC Archives; Fairfax interview.


22. Berryman interview.


24. Number 21, Interview with Ruth Turner, 1963 Box, Folder 38558, PEC Collection, AFSC Archives.

25. Carlton Terry, Interview with Ruth Turner, ibid; Number 30, ibid.
26. Berryman interview; Number 21, Interview with Ruth Turner, 1963 Box, Folder 38558, PEC Collection, AFSC Archives.

27. Number 30, Interview with Ruth Turner, ibid; Number 6, ibid.


29. Ibid, 6 August 1963; ibid, 3 September 1963; ibid; Frank Nat Watkins to Albertis S. Harrison, Jr., 30 July 1963, Box 9, Racial – July/August 1963 Folder, Executive Papers, Albertis S. Harrison, Jr., Governor’s Office Record Group, Library of Virginia.

30. Watkins to Harrison, 30 July 1963; Fairfax interview.


34. Berryman interview.