The Gravity of Segregation

JOHN EGERTON

Photo Credit: Photo courtesy of the Charlotte Observer

BIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

JOHN EGERTON

John Egerton is an independent journalist and nonfiction author who lives in Nashville, Tennessee, and writes broadly about his native South. Born in Atlanta in 1935 and raised in Kentucky, where he got his formal education, he has also lived in Florida, Virginia and Texas. His books and articles seek connections between historical and contemporary Southern people, places and events. His aim is to discover and interpret the positive and negative forces that for centuries have given this complex region its distinctiveness. Among his books are: *The Americanization of Dixie* (1974), *Generations* (1983), *Southern Food* (1987), and *Speak Now Against the Day* (1994), for which he received the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award.

The Gravity of Segregation

I first encountered Oliver and Linda Brown on a warm and sunny Tuesday morning, the 18th of May 1954, but they made no impression on me at the time. It was near the end of my college freshman year in Kentucky, my home state, and I had just picked up a copy of the Louisville *Courier-Journal* to read over breakfast at the campus cafeteria. A bold banner headline quickly grabbed my attention: SUPREME COURT BANS SCHOOL SEGREGATION. Beneath it, a long story and three sidebars detailed the high court's ruling against state laws segregating the races in public schools. I scanned the report quickly, thinking it must be important to take up so much space. And then, after a couple of minutes, I flipped back to the sports section, eager to learn more about a British athlete who had just run a mile in less than four minutes.

The precise date of that newspaper story has long been firmly fixed in my mind—not because it had any impact upon me then, but because of subsequent events. Not even Thurgood Marshall, pictured on the front page with his fellow attorneys in a victory pose on the steps of the Supreme Court Building, was remotely familiar to me, much less anyone named Brown. Years would pass before I knew enough to appreciate the role played by Marshall, the Rev. Oliver Brown, his wife, Leola, and their daughter, Linda, in the case called *Brown v. Board of Education,* decided by the U.S. Supreme Court on May 17, 1954.

When she was a 7-year-old in 1950, Linda Brown had been refused admission to the second grade at an all-White public school located just a skip and a hop from her family's home in Topeka, Kansas. Her father was advised that she should return to the all-Black school where she had attended first grade the year before. (Kansas law expressly permitted local school authorities to assign White and Negro children to separate schools.)

Oliver Brown, a minister by calling and a railroad welder by trade, had anticipated his daughter's exclusion. He was one of more than a dozen parents soon to be joined in a complaint filed by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (more precisely, by the Legal Defense Fund of the NAACP) against the Topeka Board of Education, seeking an end to so-called "separate but equal" segregation in the city's public schools.

It was alphabetical happenstance that put the name Brown at the top of the list of Topeka plaintiffs. Then, in December 1952, it was a choice made by the Supreme Court itself that placed the Kansas case first on a list with four other school segregation cases (from South Carolina, Virginia, Delaware, and the District of Columbia) to be consolidated on appeal from the lower courts. And so, by that unlikely chain of events, the most significant judicial decision of the 20th century and one of the most consequential in the history of the United States—*Oliver Brown et al., Appellants, v. Board of Education of Topeka, Shawnee County, Kansas, et al.*, more familiarly known as *Brown v.*

Board, or simply as *Brown*—got its name from the arbitrary exclusion of a round-faced little schoolgirl in pigtails named Linda Brown.

That Brown.

In the same sense that Malcolm X once said, "The South is anywhere south of the Canadian border," Kansas was in the South in 1954, and so was Delaware. For that matter, so were places like Chicago and Boston, where *de facto* school segregation mirrored the *de jure* patterns of Atlanta, New Orleans, and the rest of the South. There are important differences, to be sure, between the force of law and the currents of custom. But in the end, a rose is a rose is a rose, segregation is segregation, and "separate but equal" is a myth, if not an oxymoron.

Now, a half-century down the road, urban racial isolation is less pervasive and intractable in the South (i.e., the 11 Confederate states that rebelled against the Union in 1861) than in the North (meaning all the others that make up the United States). That may be cold comfort to the tens of thousands of minority and poor children still trapped in dead-end schools across the South, but it is nonetheless a fact worth noting, if only to underscore the point that racial segregation and discrimination reveal an *American* character flaw—not just a Southern one—and its shadow has blocked the way to "a more perfect union" for the past four centuries.

If there are regional differences in the density of school segregation now, they are relative—more a measure of degree than kind. No one in New York City or Philadelphia or Los Angeles any longer talks seriously about desegregation, nor do they in Dallas or Miami. So many White middle- and upper-class families have opted out of the system that the schools and neighborhoods they once populated and dominated have been dramatically reconfigured by successive waves of African Americans, Latinos, Asians, Middle Easterners, and others locked in a perpetual struggle for survival.

Racial integration in America, particularly as it is illustrated in the public schools of the early 21st century, is widely regarded as an incomplete or unsuccessful experiment, even by many citizens who have steadfastly favored it. On the day *Brown* was decided, Thurgood Marshall, the lead attorney for the LDF (and later the first Black justice on the Supreme Court), predicted that segregation would be completely eradicated from the nation's schools within five years. One deeply conservative Southern newspaper, the Richmond *Times-Dispatch* (later to exhort open defiance of the court), wished editorially that the court would "fix, say, a 10-year period, and permit the states to integrate 10 percent of their schools a year." Not five or 10 but 50 years later, in 2004, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor (the first female member of the court), writing for a 5-to-4 majority in a case upholding limited consideration of race in college admission decisions, speculated that, in another 25 years, affirmative action of that sort "will no longer be necessary."

All of which begs the question: If *Brown v. Board* has not eliminated school segregation in all this time, can it justifiably be called "the most significant judicial decision of the 20th century, and one of the most consequential in the history of the United States," as I characterized it above, or was it just another well-intentioned but misguided social experiment, a light that failed?

I gladly leave to my learned colleagues in this collection of essays the task of addressing the legal, political, and educational consequences of *Brown*. My aim is to affirm the great and lasting significance of the decision by focusing on its cultural and social impact. For it is in this realm, I believe, that every person with a stake in America, from the richest and most privileged to the undocumented workers crossing the border each day, is a direct beneficiary of the Solomonic wisdom of *Brown v. Board*.

OPENING A LONG-LOCKED DOOR

Although the *Brown* decision was focused exclusively on discrimination in public education, the main scenes of civil rights conflict in the South between 1954 and the mid-1960s were not played out in the schools but in the streets, where throngs of protesters demonstrated for such reforms as equal access to public accommodations and recognition of full political rights, including the right to vote. True, there was Little Rock in 1957, and there would be some dramatic stands in the "schoolhouse doors" of colleges and universities, but widespread, violent clashes at elementary and secondary schools would not dominate the civil rights picture until the busing controversies of the 1970s.

With the benefit of hindsight, this anomaly seems both less puzzling and more significant than it once did. Simply stated, *Brown* opened a door to the U.S. Constitution that had been locked for 48 years. And though it was ostensibly opened to benefit schoolchildren, all manner of aggrieved citizens rushed through first. *Brown* overturned the court's 1896 interpretation of the "equal protection" clause of the 14th Amendment by declaring that "separate but equal" schools for Whites and Blacks were "inherently unequal."

The 1954 court , under Chief Justice Earl Warren, cited unconstitutional behavior in the five school districts at the bar (and, by extrapolation, in many others) , but it prescribed no remedy until a year later, in May 1955. That order, known as *Brown II,* laid out no guidelines or deadlines other than a vague directive that segregated school systems must proceed "with all deliberate speed" to end the practice. What that phrase meant to educational institutions was a complex question that would be debated for years. But for African Americans in need of a rest room or a drinking fountain or a cup of coffee or a ballot in the segregated South, the answer was abundantly clear: "All deliberate speed" meant equal protection of the law to them—*now*. To enraged White supremacists it meant—just as emphatically—*never*. And thus, the battle was quickly joined—in the Montgomery bus boycott starting six months after *Brown II* and in all the skirmishes that followed until Congress passed major civil rights legislation in 1964 and 1965.

The five school systems sued by the Legal Defense Fund, going back to 1948, were under the closest scrutiny until *Brown II* was handed down seven years later. Throughout that time, as they were engaged in an intense campaign to persuade the Supreme Court not to outlaw segregation, the five could only watch with envy as other districts engaged in the same inequitable practices drove blithely on, like freeway speeders dodging a trooper's radar gun. Only Topeka and the other four were issued citations—and even they were kept waiting for a year to learn what the court would require as a remedy.

In the border states outside the Old Confederacy

(Kansas, for example), some school systems responded by making small adjustments promptly, when that could be easily accomplished, but stalling for time on everything else. Of the *Brown five,* only Topeka would make substantive changes on its own initiative; the others simply turned matters over to their attorneys. In the 11-state South, only a scattered few school districts with small numbers of Black pupils would permit any racial reassignments at all without further litigation.

Before the 1950s ended, it was clear that the pace of school desegregation would be glacial, preceded by a tedious cat-and-mouse game in the lower courts. That would become the pattern almost everywhere, in and out of the South. Five years after *Brown I,* all but 3,500 of the South's 2.5 million Black schoolchildren were still in totally segregated schools. On the 10th anniversary of the ruling—a few weeks before President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the historic Civil Rights Act of 1964—barely more than 1 percent were attending schools with Whites. Veteran education reporter Benjamin Muse succinctly described this period of relative inaction in the South as "10 years of prelude," and wrote a book about *Brown* using that phrase as his theme and title. In the North's biggest cities, meanwhile, the deepening isolation of racial and ethnic minorities in ghetto schools was a somber reality with a forlorn air of permanence clinging to it.

Much of significance racially happened outside the schools in those years. Sit-ins and wade-ins, freedom rides, voter registration drives, riots, arson attacks, bombings. Police dogs and fire hoses in Birmingham. Premeditated acts of terrorism that claimed the lives of activists and innocents in several states. *Brown v. Board* may not have done much to change schools at that point, but it had lit candles of hope among the millions of African-American citizens whose dream of freedom was finally taking root. "There is nothing more powerful," Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "than an idea whose time has come."

TONE DEAF IN THE WHITE SOUTH

If it were in my power to do so, I would roll back the clock to, say, the halfway mark of the 20th century, when the South and the nation, so recently victorious in a liberal war against master-race fanatics, could have seized the moment to break free from the shackles of racism but did not. Armed with the benefit of foresight into the racial crises and tragedies that were about to befall us, I would then ride out like a teenaged Paul Revere, or Chicken Little, to stir the people to action while there was still time.

Such a fantasy evaporates into thin air when I recall that visionaries were out there warning us in those days, but they were ignored, if not threatened and silenced, by the culture of White supremacy that dominated the founts of power in Southern society—local and state governments, the Democratic Party (there being virtually no Republicans), monied interests, the press, churches, universities. There were people—not legions, but scores, maybe hundreds—who spoke and wrote about what we have come by the hardest to recognize as pragmatic, common-sense truth: You cannot have a vibrant, free, open, productive, safe, democratic society—and have legalized racial segregation at the same time.

In the two decades before 1950, as the South suffered inordinately from depression and war, it spawned

some eloquent and courageous prophets of social reform. They were set apart from others and from each other in many ways—by race, class, and gender; by age and education; by religious persuasion; by their visibility or anonymity; by their rural and urban habitats in every state of the region. If there was one common thread that bound them, it was a deep and abiding commitment to racial equality. Long before *Brown*, they offered us a glimpse of liberty and justice for all. An honor roll of their names would be altogether appropriate here, but a few at random will perhaps suffice to illustrate and emphasize what could be seen, heard, read, and debated in the South—if you were in a receptive mind—a decade and more before *Brown*.

Lucy Randolph Mason, a Virginia blueblood whose ancestors included two of the nation's Founding Fathers, won rights for White and Black workers through the labor movement. Mary McLeod Bethune, the 17th child of former slaves in South Carolina, became a force for change in the New Deal and founded a college in Florida. Aubrey Williams, son of an Alabama blacksmith, worked tirelessly in Washington and the South to defend and promote the rights of the rural poor. Benjamin Mays, educated at a New England liberal arts college, returned to his native South as an eloquent champion of Negro rights and used the presidency of Atlanta's Morehouse College as a platform for promoting interracial cooperation.

And if these four individuals are not enough, many others could just as readily be cited. Among them: educators Frank Porter Graham of North Carolina and Charles S. Johnson of Tennessee; writers Zora Neale Hurston of Florida, Lillian Smith of Georgia, and Margaret Walker of Mississippi; Congressman Maury Maverick of Texas; journalists John Henry McCray of South Carolina and Thomas Sancton of Louisiana; social activists Virginia Foster Durr of Alabama and Charlotte Hawkins Brown of North Carolina; radicals Claude Williams and H.L. Mitchell, who organized the poor in Arkansas; Myles Horton and Howard Kester, who undertook similar missions in Tennessee; and John Preston Davis and Don West, who did the same elsewhere in the South. One and all, they were native Southern advocates of a new day of political and social equality. All actively and openly worked for that cause well before the end of World War II, a decade or more before *Brown*.

The evidence is beyond dispute. The White South was warned repeatedly, but it was tone deaf to the alarms. Speaking as one among them who was 15 years old in 1950, I sleepwalked through high school and a year of college and then took basic training in the desegregated U.S. Army in the fall of 1954—the year of *Brown*—before it finally dawned on me that segregation was unfair, impractical, indefensible, and simply wrong. I was almost 20 by then. If there was a Paul Revere within me, he must have been hibernating.

Putting Linda Brown, her parents, and the others they have come to symbolize into this historical context adds another dimension to their story. When the nine justices reached their unanimous conclusion in favor of the plaintiffs in *Brown v. Board*, Thurgood Marshall and his mentor, Charles Houston, had been chipping away at the legal armor of segregation and White supremacy for more than two decades. So, too, had some Southern-born leaders of the NAACP and other Northern-based organizations—James

Weldon Johnson, Walter White, and A. Philip Randolph, to name three of the most prominent.

Lest we forget, *Brown* reversed *Plessy v. Ferguson,* the Supreme Court's 19th-century opinion that had chiseled segregation into the stone tablets of federal law by sanctioning the "separate but equal" chimera. In a sense, *Brown* picked up where Reconstruction ended in 1877 and restarted the quest for racial justice that Abraham Lincoln acknowledged in 1860—and gave his life for in 1865. Long before that, Black men and women, slave and free, sacrificed their lives in numbers beyond counting, steadfastly determined to break the shackles of White imprisonment and claim their rightful stake in a forbidding new homeland that, though not of their choosing, had already been paid for in blood, sweat, and tears by their African forebears.

Brown v. Board did not just pop up like a spring flower one day in May. It was a long time coming, and those who were paying attention saw its approach from afar as the nation backslid from emancipation into legalized segregation, a more sophisticated form of enslavement.

Brown was about much more than school admissions, too, as important as that was. It brought into focus the fundamental issues of freedom and equality in a democratic society. In essence, *Brown* became a primary vehicle for changing the course of American history.

It was also about much more than Topeka. Maybe Topeka had come first on the docket because it was the easiest nut to crack. The Delaware case and another from the District of Columbia (to be bracketed with the others in 1955, in the remedy phase of *Brown*) had their own complex particulars to be sorted out. But the two cases most illustrative of ingrained racism, and the two most volatile, percolated up from the heartland of stubborn White resistance in the rural South.

Linda Brown and some of her classmates enrolled in previously all-White schools in Topeka in the fall of 1954, a few months after *Brown I.* The school system simply acceded to the court's opinion and, without waiting for the remedy phase, opened its elementary schools to all children, as it had done at its junior and senior high schools some years earlier. There were no threats, no protest marches, no acts of violence. It was all rather routine and anticlimactic.

However, in Farmville, Virginia, and Summerton, South Carolina, very different scenes unfolded leading up to May 17, 1954. The aftermath, too, would stand in stark contrast to Topeka.

OF MINISTERS, CHILDREN, AND COURAGE

The seed of *Brown* is buried deep in the sandy loam of Clarendon County, a sprawling rural jurisdiction about an hour's drive southeast of the South Carolina state capitol in Columbia. It was planted there by Joseph A. DeLaine, a college-educated minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church who preached twice on Sundays and taught school during the week. In the summer of 1947, DeLaine asked the local school board chairman in the town of Summerton to provide a school bus—just one bus—to transport some of the district's Black children. The chairman said no and insulted the minister for even asking. Seventeen of every 20 students in Clarendon District One were Black, but the tiny minority of White kids got two-thirds of the budget—and all of the

buses. The Black children had to walk to school, some as far as seven miles.

Rev. DeLaine took up a collection and bought an old bus, but it broke down a lot and the school board wouldn't even supply gas. He appealed to the state superintendent of schools and to the federal district attorney, but to no avail. Then he asked the NAACP office in Columbia for help, and in March 1948, DeLaine and Levi Pearson, a farmer in one of his churches, cooperated with a civil rights attorney in a federal suit—*Pearson v. Clarendon*—against the school board. It was dismissed on a technicality. A year later, DeLaine and Pearson met with Thurgood Marshall, who told them they would have to do three things: get lots of plaintiffs, stick together, and stay the course. About 300 Black citizens subsequently met in Summerton (population: 900) and told DeLaine that if he would lead, they would follow. Seeing no other way, the unassuming preacher-teacher, then in his late 40s, reluctantly accepted the call.

That was the seed: one weary middle-aged man, chosen by his friends and neighbors to stand up for them. He would lose his teaching job, he knew. There was no telling what else it would cost him, so he tried not to think about it.

By November 1949, DeLaine had emboldened a substantial number of Black citizens to join him in signing a formal complaint against the school board, and attorney Marshall came down from New York to file the suit in the Charleston court of Federal District Judge J. Waites Waring. It was titled *Briggs v. Elliott* (first-listed complainant Harry Briggs, a navy veteran who worked at a filling station in Summerton, against R. W. Elliott, the school board chairman who had crudely rebuffed DeLaine's plea for a bus).

The inspiring story that begins with J. A. DeLaine's modest request in 1947 and ends (or turns a corner) with the *Brown* decision in 1954 has been related in detail elsewhere—most notably by Richard Kluger in *Simple Justice*—and needs no retelling here, except to reinforce a few salient points.

One is about courage. J.A. DeLaine and his Summerton companions, whose names were on the federal lawsuit, paid dearly for daring to challenge the citadel of White power in Clarendon County. They lost friends, jobs, credit, even homes. DeLaine and Briggs eventually left the county for their own safety and never returned there to live, though their longing for the physical place would endure until they died. A similar end came to Judge Waring, whose generations-deep roots in Charleston were not sufficient to protect him from the wrath of his White contemporaries after he rendered his opinion that "separate but equal" was a charade.

It is humbling to think of such quiet and selfless sacrifice. The heroic contributions of these men, sad to say, are still largely unheralded. I find myself wishing the title case in the *Brown* quintet had been *Briggs v. Elliott*, or *DeLaine v. Clarendon County*.

A second point concerns truth and consequences. In the Clarendon case, the ruling White minority might have fared better had it been willing to offer the Black majority any semblance of equity in leadership roles, funding, facilities, and faculty positions (not to mention buses). Ironically, the school board's blatant and unyielding display of willful discrimination virtually assured its defeat in federal court and hastened the day when the rule for allocating resources would be based on simple fairness, not skin color. The losers

in Clarendon were not the first rabid defenders of segregation to contribute materially to their own demise, and they would not be the last.

Which brings us to this final point—a truism, to wit: All too often in the South, it seems to turn out that even when we win, we lose. On the 50th anniversary of *Brown*, a mere 25 or so White students were enrolled in the schools of Clarendon District One—a barely visible remnant among their more than 1,000 Black classmates. The district had managed to evade even token desegregation for years. Then, in 1965, a private academy for Whites was established in Summerton. It was still operating in 2004, with an enrollment of about 275—including a barely visible sprinkling of Black students. Even if all the district's students attended the same schools, Blacks would comprise a majority of about four to one. As it is, the White minority and the Black majority are almost as segregated in the schools today as they were when Joseph DeLaine dared to bring up the subject 57 years ago.

Writing from Summerton for *Education Week* in January 2004, reporter Alan Richard said, "Here in this birthplace of the school desegregation movement, integration has failed. . . . black and white students in Summerton mostly do not mix."

Nearly 400 miles up Interstate 95 toward Richmond, and west into the verdant agricultural region Virginians call Southside, a somewhat different story unfolded in Farmville, the seat of Prince Edward County. It started, all too familiarly, with a gross display of negligent inequity under the cloak of separate-but-equal segregation. Like Clarendon and Topeka, Prince Edward would have its pivotal and iconic figures leading the way to change. When the heat was on, two in particular would loom larger than life: Barbara Rose Johns, a 16-year-old junior at all-Black Moton High School, and the Rev. L. Francis Griffin, a 34-year-old Baptist minister and founder of the local NAACP chapter.

Where Oliver Brown was a workingman who preached on the side, Francis Griffin was a preacher and activist, both full-time jobs. Where J.A. DeLaine was unostentatiously fearless, Griffin let it all hang out. He had knocked about the South as a teenager, fought in Europe during the war, been to college, married, and entered the ministry. In 1949, when he answered a call to succeed his father in the pulpit of Farmville's First Baptist Church, the largest Black congregation in Prince Edward County, Griffin felt secure enough to speak out aggressively about the climate of White paternalism and discrimination he routinely encountered. (Later, in the thick of battle, when some in his congregation wanted to fire him for being too radical, he thundered from the pulpit that he was prepared to sacrifice all that he had "for the principles of right," and he called for a show of hands by those who wanted him to remain. The result was reported later as a unanimous vote of confidence.)

In April of 1951, Griffin was ready for action when a racial controversy arose in the public schools. Moton High, built in 1939 for 180 students, was bulging at the seams with 450, and classes were spilling out into a string of slum-like shacks thrown up on the grounds. The White high school, in contrast, was adequate in most respects. Years of empty promises had rendered the status quo permanent. Barbara Johns, a thoughtful and tough-minded young woman with an air of grace under pressure, sensed the growing frustration and anger among her classmates, the faculty, and other adults, Rev. Griffin among them. She decided on a daring

plan to shake things up.

One morning after the principal had been summoned to town by a caller, Johns calmly sent a team of collaborators around to every classroom with notes "from the principal" announcing a brief assembly in the auditorium at 11 o'clock. When everyone was gathered (including two dozen faculty), the stage curtains parted to show a group of students seated, and their leader at the podium. Johns worked her way up to an impassioned speech about the deplorable condition of their school, exhorted the students to stick together even if threatened by higher authority, and then led the entire assembly (except the teachers, who had already left) in a walkout that would last, she declared, until a new school was started or the Black and White schools were merged, whichever came first. Another seed of *Brown* had been planted.

In the uproar that followed, Rev. Griffin advised the student strike committee to meet with NAACP attorneys; the Moton principal was fired by the all-White school board; the parents of Barbara Johns, fearing for her safety, sent her to live with her favorite uncle in Montgomery, Alabama (where, as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, he was the predecessor of Martin Luther King Jr.); and a lawsuit was filed in federal court against the Prince Edward school board on May 23, 1951. A student named Davis topped the alphabetical list of plaintiffs, so the case was titled *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County*. A better name would have been *Barbara Rose Johns v. Prince Edward*. She was, throughout, as serene and undaunted as Joan of Arc, taking the world on her shoulders-and she prevailed.

The aftermath of the lawsuit (which, for the record, was decided in favor of the school board by a unanimous vote of a three-judge panel in Richmond) was to be the most eventful and dramatic of any in the *Brown* cluster of cases.

When *Brown* overturned the lower-court rulings in Virginia and South Carolina, it put these two pervasively segregated and discriminatory systems under an intense public light, but they did not yield an inch. Prince Edward fought on in the courts to stave off any and all desegregation for five more years before it ran out of options. Then, with the complicity (no, the encouragement, if not the insistence) of Virginia public officials, from its U.S. senators and representatives to the governor, attorney general, legislature, and local leaders, Prince Edward County bought into a cockeyed legal theory of avoidance called "interposition and nullification"—a sort of invisible shield designed to protect a state's rights from the reach of the federal government. Far from being a defensive stance against an imagined horde of invaders, this coordinated act of "massive resistance" was more like a warning shot across the bow. Then, in the fall of 1959, Prince Edward dropped the other shoe: It shut down its entire school system rather than submit to the desegregation order of the U.S. Supreme Court.

For five years, there were no public schools in Prince Edward. A private school for Whites, called Prince Edward Academy, opened immediately in makeshift quarters (after the school board was prohibited by the courts from "loaning" its padlocked public facilities), and most of the county's 1,500 White children—those who could afford the tuition—were enrolled. All the rest, including 1,700 Black students and their teachers, were left to fend for themselves.

Those dreary years of spiteful and self-destructive

denial of education had some surprising high points and silver linings, as Americans reached out from all across the country to offer various kinds of help to the abandoned children of Prince Edward. Finally, in 1964, the slow-grinding wheel of the law caught up to the county and its defiant overseers in Richmond and Washington, and the public schools were reopened. About 1,700 Black students and no more than a dozen Whites showed up for class.

Fifteen years later, in 1979, the Black enrollment remained virtually unchanged, but the number of Whites had risen to 600, and Prince Edward Academy showed a corresponding drop-off in its student body. Things were better in many ways, Francis Griffin told a visiting reporter, but he was still wary and filled with mixed emotions: "My hope is with the young. With the older generation, things are the same as always—they haven't been affected by any of this, not really. . . . We're marking time and resting on our laurels, white and black."

As for the future, Griffin offered this: "Unless something drastic, such as an economic crisis, forces further change, I don't see things being much different in another 20 or 25 years than they are now. In essence, there's a new status quo . . . the lines of separation still exist . . . but it's a cold war now, and I look for it to go on."

A postscript to the Prince Edward story-in some ways the least promising of all the cases in the wake of *Brown*—turns up evidence to the contrary. In 2004, the county system enrolled approximately 1,600 Blacks and 1,200 Whites in three schools—elementary, middle, and high school, all on a 135-acre campus just outside Farmville. Bus service is available to all. More than half the student body qualifies for meal support (a correlative with low-income status), about half the faculty have graduate degrees, and 70 percent of high school graduates go on to college.

Conventional wisdom suggests that majority-Black, majority-poor student bodies are so inundated with social and academic problems that their chances of success are slim and none—yet here is a successful school system that was not even on life support 40 years ago. Starting from scratch with an almost all-Black core of students, it has doubled in size, vastly expanded and improved its curriculum (adding, among other things, four foreign languages and a career/technical program in 14 fields), regained its accreditation, rebuilt its physical plant, and gained almost as many White students as it lost to the "seg academy" years ago. "This is a broad-based, high-quality, racially integrated school system," says Superintendent of Schools Margaret Blackmon proudly. "It has come a long way."

MIXED REVIEWS, MIXED RESULTS

Notwithstanding the late-coming but altogether heartening news from Prince Edward County, school integration in the South and across America over the past half-century has yielded mixed results and mixed reviews—no puns intended. As Whites have fled in droves to sanctuaries in the suburbs or the private sector, city schools have become, if anything, even more racially isolated than they were in, say, 1980.

It took the South about 35 years, from the mid-1950s to the late 1980s, to go from zero to 50—from no integration at all to a half-finished job. Since then, desegregation of the region's school systems has slowed to a crawl, and in

some urban districts, the hard-won gains have begun to erode. For all practical purposes, there is hardly a discernible difference now in the racial imbalance of schools in the South and North.

The heavy influx of immigrants in recent years has greatly complicated the desegregation process in some Southern school systems by raising new cultural and linguistic barriers. Spanish-speaking students in particular are facing ever-greater isolation as their numbers increase; already, the size and density of Latino communities within some Southern cities is resulting in segregated schools.

Meanwhile, the constituency for school integration, once clustered around African Americans and liberal Whites, has diminished to a scattered remnant. As one city school superintendent remarked to his colleagues at a conference recently, "The only people in favor of integration these days are the urban poor, people who can't afford to move out—and by definition, they don't have the clout to be an influential force for racial and economic diversity."

If Thurgood Marshall were alive today, he probably would feel a keen disappointment that segregated schools still exist in such numbers across the United States. In fact, long before his death in 1993, the retired Supreme Court justice—the one person above all others who could fairly be called the father of *Brown*—had already seen abundant evidence that his 1954 prediction of a quick cure for segregation was far off the mark. Racism in all its myriad forms had proved to be as deep-seated and tenacious as cancer.

In a legal career that was studded with memorable triumphs (as well as some painful defeats), Marshall developed an equanimity that served him well in all seasons. When the exhilaration of victory in *Brown* was followed by the sober realization that it was only one battle, not the war, and the fight would have to continue, Marshall quietly left the dubious art of prognostication to economists and weather forecasters, and went back to doing what he did best: defending the rights of the voiceless, the stigmatized, the disadvantaged, the poor, the fall guys in an over privileged society. His gospel throughout, as both an attorney and a judge, was the U.S. Constitution, and especially the Bill of Rights. It served him well, and he reciprocated with an undying commitment to the spirit of equality that is the great document's bedrock.

As I read it, the post-*Brown* history of educational opportunity in America—and of social change in general—not only vindicates Justice Marshall but supports the argument that the unanimous and moliminous Supreme Court decision in 1954 has been and remains at least as significant in the nation's life outside the schools as in them.

A glance back at the South's schools as they were before *Brown* provides abundant evidence of the ruling's permanent impact. (We will leave the dense and pervasive *de facto* segregation of the North for critical review and evaluation at another time.) After almost 60 years of "separate but equal" delusion, there existed in each of Southern states two sets of public schools—one for Blacks, grossly unequal in most respects to the other, which was exclusively for Whites. Since the states themselves were too poor to finance one competitive education system, let alone two, the inevitable result was that White schools were as disadvantaged vis-à-vis schools in the North as Black schools were compared to Whites.

For a substantial period of time in the first half of the 20th century, the contributions of Northern philanthropies to education in the South—for both races—exceeded that of the states themselves. Old and outdated textbooks, under-trained and underpaid teachers (and too few of them), worn-out physical plants, narrow and shallow curricula, short-sighted governance, chronic funding crises: If these were typical barriers to quality education for Whites (and they were), imagine the circumstances for children in all-Black schools.

No amount of nostalgia for what many Whites and even some conservative Blacks refer to as "the good old days" can smooth over the rough terrain of forced segregation. Inequities were rife at every level, from first grade (there were few kindergartens and no pre-K programs) through graduate and professional schools (and again, the South's colleges and universities, due in part to segregation, had relatively little to offer Whites and practically nothing to help Blacks break into the professional ranks. For example, Meharry Medical College, a privately supported school in Nashville, supplied more than half of all the Black doctors in the entire nation until well into the 1960s).

By almost any measure, post-*Brown* schools in the South are superior to those of the segregation era. It is impossible to imagine how disadvantaged both races would be under the old dispensation. Today, battles are still being fought in almost every Southern state (and others elsewhere) over inequities in teacher pay and in state support for urban versus rural districts. *Brown* (and the 14h Amendment) inspired just such efforts as these. Segregation has not been extinguished, and racism is still alive, but public education in the South delivers better results for a far greater percentage of the region's people than was ever true before the nine justices spoke with one voice 50 years ago.

And even if that were not so, the equity gained in other fields of endeavor would be more than enough to support the argument that *Brown's* greatest legacy reaches far beyond the classroom. The determination of J.A. DeLaine to get a bus for Black schoolchildren in South Carolina and the audacity of Barbara Johns and her classmates to walk out on strike from their separate and unequal high school in Virginia—the sparks that generated *Brown v. Board*—inspired and emboldened other African-American citizens in the South to go and do likewise.

Months after the *Brown II* ruling in May 1955, Rosa Parks sat down in a "White" seat on a Montgomery city bus and precipitated what is generally referred to as the birth of the modern civil rights movement. And a decade later, when the movement was blowing up a hurricane of protest against various forms of racial discrimination in the North and the manifold sins of an escalating war in Southeast Asia, it also spawned tornadoes that would jar other groups to consciousness for years to come. Women, the poor, the elderly, Latinos and other ethnic minorities, the disabled, gays and lesbians, immigrants-all these and more have gained inspiration and tactical ideas from the equal rights movement that *Brown* gave birth to and Montgomery nourished.

The Supreme Court's "one man, one vote" ruling in a case from Tennessee (*Baker v. Carr,* 1962) extended the *Brown* interpretation of equal protection to voting rights and reapportionment. More equitable laws and policies governing access to housing, jobs, higher education, and

health care have followed suit. All around the world in the past 50 years, social movements and even some nation states—the new South Africa, to cite a sterling example—have achieved their own liberty, justice, and equality with the inspiration of *Brown* and the American civil rights movement.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the personal stories behind *Brown* and the movement serve as living affirmation of our highest ideals—models of an elusive American Way that works for all. Learning what ordinary people did to free themselves and light a path for others should bring out the best in every American and nudge us closer to becoming the society that lives now only in our dreams.

Before *Brown*, segregation was like gravity—a dense, pervasive, relentless weight that held a vise-like grip on everything. Those who tried to defy it, victims and perpetrators alike, ran the risk of being crushed. The pull of segregation, of racial isolation and stigmatizing in all its forms, can still be felt in many places, but it is far less powerful than it once was, and sometimes we can fly free of it, whether as individuals, families, communities, or even nations.

In spite of the hazards and uncertainties of contemporary life, Americans come of age garbed in the verbal trappings of a free people. Our mythology, our history, our literature and language are studded with idealistic, anti-gravitational phrases—liberty, freedom, opportunity, justice, equality. These fit our collective self-image as an open, generous, independent, democratic citizenry. In that exalted vision, we avoid and disavow the heavy, binding, restricting language of slavery, bondage, servitude, segregation. No matter what our politics or religion, we all seem drawn to the words and music, if not the real meaning, of the truths we hold to be self-evident.

Brown v. Board of Education spoke to those ideals and to that spirit of even-handed consideration, of basic fairness. The language of the decision itself was not especially eloquent, but its clear intent was to do right by our fellow man and woman, to grant others what we claim for ourselves. In spite of its checkered history as an effective tool to improve education (and, by extension, our lives), its virtues as such an implement far outweigh its vices. As for its contributions to the larger mission of a free society, they are simply vast, and indelible.