This study explores the post-World War II activism and effort among African-Americans in New Bern, North Carolina to overturn their historic role as second-class citizens. After the North Carolina disenfranchisement law was passed in 1900, which was part of a white-implemented scheme to strip African-Americans of the political rights that they had achieved during the Reconstruction era, African-Americans in New Bern were largely marginalized from the political process. Following a new race consciousness in 1948, many of the disqualified residents were determined to forge strategies to reclaim their political rights as American citizens.

Between 1948 and 1979, blacks in New Bern, with little assistance from whites, determined their own terms and provided their own base of support through local grassroots organizing in order to accomplish their primary goals of equally registering, voting, running, and winning public office. Though the black community in New Bern was anything but monolithic, in the world of politics, it came together as a forceful bloc to battle white supremacy. The result was a form of social and political modernization in which African-American New Bernians were finally able to share in the fruits of democracy as well as to transform their once secondary status in society.

The city of New Bern, and the premier focus of this study, is the county seat of Craven County and is situated at the confluence of the Trent and the Neuse Rivers off of the Eastern coast of North Carolina. Founded in 1710 by Swiss merchants, it is the second oldest town in the state and once served as the capital from 1746 to the end of...
American Revolution. Due to the surrounding rural farmland that was particularly fertile for cotton and tobacco production, Craven County boasted one of the largest slave populations in the state. New Bern, on the other hand, served as an urban escape or refuge for hundreds of slaves both before and after the American Civil War. With a sizeable population in the city in the mid to late 19th century, blacks possessed immense political power through voting and local, state, and national office-holding, making the subsequent decline in their political influence during the twentieth century most relevant and crucial for further study.

To best highlight the African-American political movement in New Bern during the twentieth century, this study takes a focused look at the most viable local organizations to arise while centering on oral histories and personal accounts among the politically active non-white inhabitants. Likewise, this thesis traces the existence of local white attitudes toward black advancement through three common responses, gradual readjustment and both violent and non-violent deterrence, and how each response affected the black quest for first-class citizenship. In spite of any and all impediments, this study argues that African-American New Bernians (over several generations) remained remarkably dedicated to their long-standing aspiration to garner political power in a racially unjust atmosphere.

Above all, this thesis aims to contribute to the existing historiography of the Civil Rights Movement in the South by drawing attention to a locale that was largely detached from the larger struggle in time, place, national exposure, and outside organizational assistance. Over the course of their political quest, black New Bernians were certainly assisted by national legislation such as the 1965 Voting Rights Act, yet the outcome was
primarily up to them as they emerged as the core directors. As this thesis argues, their struggle transcended several common historiographical restraints and thereby offers a different perspective of how local grassroots activism amid the Civil Rights Movement should be chronicled and understood.
RECLAMING FIRST-CLASS CITIZENSHIP: THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN STRUGGLE AND MOBILIZATION FOR POLITICAL RIGHTS IN NEW BERN, NORTH CAROLINA (1948-1979)

by

KAREN ELIZABETH MEDLIN

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of North Carolina State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

HISTORY

Raleigh, North Carolina

2007

APPROVED BY:

_________________________       _________________________
Dr. Michael Allen                        Dr. Walter Jackson

_________________________
Dr. Blair Kelley
Chair of Advisory Committee
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Claude V. Medlin, Jr. and Doreen C. Medlin, for always encouraging me to do my best in all of my endeavors.
BIOGRAPHY

Karen Elizabeth Medlin was born in Charlotte, North Carolina on September 20, 1983. A year later she moved with her family to Raleigh where she has lived since. While in high school, she was offered a track scholarship to run competitively at North Carolina State University. Karen ran for the Wolfpack on both the Cross Country and Track & Field teams for four years. As an undergraduate at N.C. State she majored in history with a social studies education option. In 2005, she graduated Magna Cum Laude and decided to continue for a Master’s degree. In 2007, she received her M.A. in history from N.C. State. Karen will attend post-graduate school at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in the fall of 2007 to pursue a Ph.D. degree. Her ultimate goal is to teach and research American history at the college level.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Above all, I am indebted to various members of the New Bern and Craven County area. This includes Alfred Barfield and the members of the New Bern-Craven County NAACP branch who were present at the meeting on September 11, 2006 at Saint Peter’s AME Zion Church as well as J.T. “Curly” Brazelton, Bernard George, Joseph George, John Harmon, Erving Hickman, Grover Lancaster, Barbara Lee, Julius Parham, Jr., Mary Randolph, Robert Raynor, Jr., Johnnie Sampson, Jr., Ethel Sampson, Bernard White, and Marshall Williams, all of whom provided valuable information about their distinctive role in the history I have written. Without their cooperation this study would not have been possible.

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Last but not least, a sincere thank you goes out to my friends and family for reading over my numerous drafts and for giving positive feedback during this enduring yet enjoyable process.
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“This, Mr. Chairman, is perhaps the Negroes’ temporary farewell
to the American Congress; but let me say,
Phoenix-like he will rise up some day and come again.
These parting words are in behalf of an outraged, heart-broken,
bruised and bleeding, but God-fearing people, faithful, industrious, loyal, rising-people—full
of potential force.”

1901 “Defense of the Negro Race” address of George Henry White of New Bern,
last African-American member of the U.S. House of Representatives
in post-Reconstruction era
Figure 1: Geographic Location of New Bern, North Carolina. (Source: Printed by New Bern-Craven County Chamber of Commerce, found in Statistics Folder, Vertical Files, New Bern-Craven County Public Library).
Figure 1.1: New Bern NAACP Voter Registration Headquarters, date unknown. (Source: Found in folder of interview of Reverend W.G. Hickman, New Bern Oral History Project, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill).
“We couldn’t vote!,” recalled James Delemar, an African-American World War II veteran, who in just three words amply described the commonly shared political experience of his race during the first half of the twentieth century. Among one of the first African-Americans of his generation to successfully register in the New Bern area in 1948, Delemar explained that during his lifetime even “a black man with a PhD degree, couldn’t register. They say, well, he’s not qualified to read the Constitution of the United States.”

Within the black community of New Bern, North Carolina, hundreds of those who attempted to register and vote for local and national elections during the 1930’s and 40’s echoed similar testimonies of unequal treatment.

In order to counteract the overturning of the North Carolina disfranchisement amendment in 1920, which was a racially discriminatory law to prevent black political participation, conservative whites in New Bern and numerous communities across the state effectively implemented shrewd tactics of harassment, intimidation, and stringent literacy tests to make certain that blacks continued to be excluded from the polls. As a result, no more than twenty-five percent of the African-American voting age population in New Bern had either registered or voted in any municipal election between the years 1900 and 1945. Due to the scant black political base during this period, no black man or woman in the twentieth century had ever attempted to run for any elected office in New Bern prior to 1950.

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1 Transcript of Interview of James Calvin Delemar (May 11, 1993), New Bern Oral History Project, Wilson Library, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

2 The records of the voting registration statistics for the city of New Bern between the years 1920 and 1969 have since been purged according to a destruction schedule at the North Carolina State Archives. Although registration numbers during this period do not exist, there is enough evidence in election results to be able to confidently assume that no more than 1 in 4 African-Americans in the city were registered and voting during this time.
In coming years African American organizing and activism lifted many of the political restraints that had made them second-class citizens. During the post-World War II period an increased number of black New Bernians were no longer willing to be ignored, overlooked, or barred from political influence. In 1948, armed with a strong race-consciousness, they formed an organized front ready for battle. Led by the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the political battle they waged was principally targeted at the existing all-white New Bern city council, which for over fifty years failed to represent African-American interests. The original activists in New Bern hoped that their efforts might produce a bi-racial city council in their own lifetime while leading them a step closer towards further inclusion into society.

Facing off against forms of white supremacy, blacks in New Bern successfully fashioned a vehicle of change which tirelessly grew in force with each new registered voter. This study will examine and trace the progression of African-American political power in New Bern, North Carolina from its early formations in 1948 to its height in 1979, while providing a novel look at local grassroots organizing in an area of the South which was largely autonomous of national forces and whose activism extended beyond the common civil rights timeline. The African-American struggle for the franchise in New Bern, though constituting just one strand of the multi-faceted Civil Rights Movement, offers a clear illustration of the power and the capability of a resolute local people.

Like local black activists in cities across the South, those in New Bern focused their energies within their local confines: in the areas which most affected their daily lives and in which they had the greatest likelihood to shape. For African-Americans in New Bern, the vote symbolized a voice and a means to achieve a greater say in city affairs. Local voting power amounted in opportunities for blacks to implement policy within their neighborhoods
in areas such as employment, housing, health care, sanitation, taxes, schools, and equal wages. Likewise, it provided them the ability to share in the process of choosing candidates and their platforms.

The majority of the people involved in the movement for African-American political mobilization were New Bern natives who had been born and raised in the city. Most of the others had migrated or relocated from nearby rural areas in Craven County such as James City, Havelock, and Brice’s Creek. For most of them, their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents had grown up and resided in the county, as well. By way of their family lineage, they were directly linked to the era of slavery and Reconstruction. From the experiences and lessons of their ancestors, they understood that opportunities would not merely be handed to them. Thus, African-Americans in New Bern looked to themselves to generate political opportunities.

For more than thirty years and over several generations, they worked hard to increase their numbers and their local force through church meetings, house calls, door-to-door canvassing, and membership drives. Primarily a church-based movement, Christian ministers were most often the ones found at the front-lines directing and inspiring action among the local black community. Political action did indeed grow as African-American New Bernians forged numerous strategies, placed multiple new leaders into position and, following 1965, began founding their own local organizations. As a result of their combined efforts, New Bern elected Leander R. Morgan as its first black mayor in 1977 and then again in 1979 and 1989.

Within the historiography of the Civil Rights Movement, studies of grassroots activism are anything but new. Historians John Dittmer, Robin D.G. Kelley, and Charles M. Payne have already uncovered that local people, rather than national leaders or national
organizations, actually led and labored the movement. The story of New Bern adds further to this approach to history in that it offers a fresh look into areas of the country that did not receive consistent attention or organizational assistance and that were substantially disconnected from the larger movement. The inhabitants of New Bern were separated, in both time and place, from the nationally-covered cities of Birmingham, Selma, Topeka, Little Rock, and Greensboro, yet were still able to accomplish significant improvements in their civil rights.

Largely untouched by the forces of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Urban League, and the Voter’s Education Project (VEP), which tended to be strongest in the Deep South, the local African-American populous in New Bern was left to rely on itself to create change. Even the local branches of the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) were remarkably isolated from the happenings and activities of national and state branches, particularly in the allocations of funding.

Furthermore, the New Bern movement was not led or directed by outsider icons such as Bob Moses, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr., or H. Rap Brown. National organizations and leaders served purely as impetuses for action, but it was the responsibility of New Bern’s own leaders to charter and direct the movement. In a similar vein, the appearance of federal legislation, such as the Voting Rights Act, served as stepping stones or reinforcement for action, but was not responsible for physically expanding the number of black ballots. In his study of Lowndes County, Alabama, Hasan Kwame Jeffries reasoned that “although the Voting Rights Act unlocked the door to black participation in electoral
politics, it did not open it. This door remained closed until local people pushed it open.”

Though the door had been unlocked to blacks in New Bern, they were forced to continue their battle for political empowerment against the onset of strands of white opposition and exploitation.

In addition to this, the story of the black struggle for political rights in New Bern offers greater insight into the understudied post-1965 story of how southern African-Americans capitalized on the Voting Rights Act. In recent years, scholars have focused their research on the origins of civil rights activism of the 1930s and 1940s, but little attention at all has been paid to the years after 1970. As historian Kathryn L. Nasstrom explains, “both scholarly and popular assessments most often lament a movement in decline and disarray, especially following Martin Luther King's death in 1968.” Meanwhile, “the life stories of activists who worked beyond the sixties” is overlooked and neglected. Though twentieth-century civil rights activism in New Bern during may have developed late (in conventional terms), its momentum continued well past the traditional high achievements of the movement. In contrast to the arguments of the existing scholarship, the movement in New Bern did not become ineffectual after 1968; if anything, it became stronger. Local activism, which was far from peaking, continued to rise into the 1970’s bringing forth further advances. Fortunately, since 2005, scholars such as Jacquelyn Dowd Hall have begun making a case for the “Long Civil Rights Movement” by asserting that its force transcended

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the traditional time line. Likewise, this study hopes to contribute to the trend of lengthening the civil rights narrative past the boundaries of its classical phase.

Ultimately, the case in New Bern suggests a different interpretation of the meaning of the Civil Rights Movement. It demonstrates that the movement was not necessarily dependent on the presence of leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., on organizational assistance from groups such as SNCC, on legislation such the Voting Rights Act, or on the time period in which it thrived. It might be easy to dismiss New Bern’s importance due to its delayed, gradual, and somewhat quiet successes, which historians such as Jack Bass and Walter De Vries have already done by incorrectly concluding that Eastern North Carolina was “bypassed by the Civil Rights Movement,” but this severely limits the scope and understanding of local grassroots activism. Deep within New Bern’s untold history lies valuable moments of civil rights struggle and triumph among a determined local faction. As a result of their own resources, African-American New Bernians claimed a new political power for themselves during the second half of the twentieth century, which through their presence at the polls and within city hall, marked a return to the multi-racial political culture previously seen during Reconstruction in which blacks and whites shared local, state, and national political office.

CHAPTER ONE:

POLITICAL OFFICE TO POLITICAL BANISHMENT

The political powerlessness that African-American New Bernians experienced during the first half of the twentieth century was in stark contrast to the voting strength and office-holding which had once existed in much earlier days. Beginning with Congressional Reconstruction and maturing by the Fusionist Period, blacks had functioned as a strong political force in the city. Comprising a majority of the voting age population during this time, their biggest strength lay in their numbers. The port town of New Bern resided in the predominately black county of Craven, which following the Civil War and the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment had over 3,000 eligible black voters compared to the roughly 1,500 white voters. After receiving freedom from slavery, hundreds of these newly eligible black voters of Craven County escaped the rural farmland to reach the urban oasis of New Bern, further adding to the already numerous free and previously enslaved African-American population.

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8 In 1860, approximately one in four blacks in New Bern was free. (Source: Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 6.)
Free African-Americans in New Bern made their political convictions known beginning as early as 1864 when John R. Good and A.B. Galloway made a trip to Washington, D.C. in an attempt to obtain President Abraham Lincoln’s support for black suffrage. In October 1866, Good and Galloway took further measures to fight for suffrage along with C.D Pierson, and G.A Rue, all members of the State Equal Rights League, as representatives of Craven County at a state freedmen’s convention in Raleigh. The convention, which spanned several days, focused on discussing, among many other disadvantages, ways to overturn African-Americans’ “long and unjust political

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9 Watson, 429.
disfranchisement."¹⁰ In the ensuing months, and after the passage of the Reconstruction Acts, roughly one-thousand black New Bernians capitalized on their newly ensured rights to suffrage by joining and becoming active in Republican Party organizations such as the Republican Association and the Abraham Lincoln League, both of which were meant to mobilize and protect the interests of blacks. For their efforts in support of the party, the Republicans selected three blacks in 1867 as registrars for three of the six city wards.¹¹

Likewise voter registration numbers in New Bern demonstrated black political presence. For instance, in 1882, 203 blacks were registered in New Bern’s fourth ward, whereas fewer than fifty whites were recorded as registered in the years 1881, 1882, or 1884.¹² During and immediately following Reconstruction, African-Americans used their voting strength to elect both black and white Republicans to local and national offices. Most remarkable was the number of black office-holders during this period, which has yet to be matched. From 1872 to 1888, in addition to the election of James E. O’Hara to the United States Congress, six black Republicans were elected to municipal offices in New Bern and seven blacks from Craven County were elected to the state legislature.¹³

Black political strength continued to improve once the fusion of the Republican Party and the Populist Party occurred in 1894. In order to over-power the Democrats, the two parties pulled their strength together throughout the state, including Eastern North Carolina. With Democrats out of the running, blacks in the area had the freedom and the patronage of the Fusionists to vote in even larger numbers and, as a result, held additional offices such as

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¹⁰ Minutes of the Freedmen’s Convention, held in the City of Raleigh on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th of October, 1866 (Raleigh: Printed at the Standard Book and Job Office, 1866), p. 26, North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
¹¹ Watson, 432.
¹² Registration Book for the Fourth Ward of City of New Bern (1881, 1882, 1884), Craven County Board of Elections records, New Bern, North Carolina.
¹³ Watson, 471.
county commissioner, coroner, magistrate, postmaster, judge, register of deeds, and congressman.\textsuperscript{14} The Fusionists were largely responsible for the election of George H. White, one of the most renowned black leaders in New Bern, to the United States House of Representatives in 1895. As White could testify, however, black political influence in New Bern and across Eastern North Carolina would be short-lived. When his term ended in 1901, White would be the last African-American to serve in Congress for over fifty years.

After convening in 1872, the North Carolina General Assembly initiated one of the earliest measures to chip away at the stronghold of black political power in Eastern North Carolina. In order to dilute the voting power of African-Americans in this region, Democratic members of the assembly utilized clever gerrymandering to lump Craven among ten other predominately black Eastern counties into the Second Congressional District, popularly referred to as the “Black Second.” This strategic move severely lessened the numbers of African-Americans who could be elected to U.S. Congress. Once in 1883 and again in 1891, after being dissatisfied with the results of their first drawing, white Democrats within the state legislature reshaped the boundaries of the district to more effectively contain the Republican black electorate.\textsuperscript{15} The boundaries of North Carolina’s second congressional district in 1872 can be seen in \textbf{Figure 3}.

\textsuperscript{15} The Second Congressional District also included the counties of Warren, North Hampton, Halifax, Edgecombe, Wilson, Wayne, Lenoir, Greene, and Jones.
The Democrats’ best attempt to challenge the existence of black political strength transpired in the late 1890’s. By 1898 white Democrats in North Carolina had officially declared a war on “negro domination.” Uncomfortable with sharing power with former slaves, they viewed black political participation as a direct threat to white status and place in society. Their charges were primarily targeted at eastern cities such as Wilmington and New Bern where one could “see negro policemen and negro officers as thick as blackbirds.” In an effort to uplift their “white brethren,” these conservative Democrats campaigned and held rallies to discuss means to remove African-Americans, by force if necessary, from political office. During the Democratic campaign of 1898, Furnifold M. Simmons, chairman of the Democratic Executive Committee and native of New Bern, proudly declared that “North Carolina is a WHITE MAN’S STATE, and WHITE MEN will rule it, and they will crush the party of negro domination beneath a majority so overwhelming that no other party will ever

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16 The Democratic Hand Book, 1898, Prepared by the State Democratic Executive Committee of North Carolina (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton, 1898), 47.
again dare to establish negro rule here.”¹⁷ Such predictions culminated into reality with the ensuing Wilmington Race Riot on November 10, 1898, in which at least nine black men were shot down after groups of white vigilantes led by Colonel Alfred Moore Waddell violently swept the city forcing the mayor and both white and black Republican office-holders to leave town.¹⁸

This momentum carried on into the election of 1900, which witnessed events in North Carolina that, once and for all, solidified the political structure of white supremacy and guaranteed the removal of blacks from full political participation. Following the November 1898 election, which restored Democratic control to North Carolina, Democrat Charles B. Aycock was elected as North Carolina’s governor in 1900.¹⁹ In the same year, the disfranchisement amendment, which was first formulated by Democrats and Populists in the General Assembly in 1899, was voted on by the people of North Carolina and ratified. Despite appeals by black legislative leaders, such as Isaac Smith of Craven County, to kill the legislation, the bill still appeared on the ballot.²⁰ In New Bern, due to white armed intimidation, violence, and ballot fraud, the amendment disfranchising blacks passed by over 1,600 votes. An onlooker in New Bern recalled that he could “not blame the Negroes for not voting” since it might have cost them their lives.²¹ The outcome of the Wilmington riot, which occurred approximately 80 miles away, resonated too close to home for blacks in New Bern. A political cartoon regarding the Disenfranchisement Law can be seen in Figure 4.

²⁰ Edmonds, 180.
²¹ Gilmore, 124.
When the legislature passed the disfranchisement amendment they added two new features as requirements for registering and voting in North Carolina, a literacy test and a poll tax. Though the amendment used race-neutral language, it was clearly intended to limit the political influence of blacks who made up the majority of the state’s poor and unlettered. To pass the literacy test, all applicants had to be able to read, write, and interpret any section of the Constitution. This was a significant blow to African-American voters since in 1900 fifty-three percent of blacks in North Carolina over the age of twenty-one were listed as illiterate. Comparable numbers were found in Craven County where forty-eight percent of the black voting age population was recorded as being illiterate. The poll tax was similarly demanding for blacks given that most might have to use anywhere from one-half to three-

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fourths of their weekly income in order to vote. To make sure that illiterate whites were not excluded, a grandfather clause was incorporated into the amendment making eligible all those who descended from an ancestor who was entitled to vote on January 1, 1867 or prior. So long as they paid a poll tax, those who qualified under the grandfather clause were given until December 1, 1908 to register in accordance to the terms of the educational requirements.\(^{23}\)

Records of African-Americans who attempted to vote in New Bern when the amendment took effect in 1902 do not exist, but it was likely that few were either capable or willing. Historian Richard Valelly explained that disfranchisement, which by 1908 had been introduced into all eleven states of the former Confederacy, “decreased turnout [due to the] enormous and paralyzing increase in the cost to an individual voting. The new system required from voters genuine material sacrifice, psychological stamina in the face of official screening processes, and disciplined preparation for registration in the form of record keeping.”\(^{24}\) The success of disfranchisement in New Bern is evidenced in the earliest available registration records of 1913.

In the city’s fifth ward, which included the main streets of Pollock and Broad, ten “colored” voters were registered to vote compared to one-hundred and fifty four “white” voters, according to the 1913 New Bern voter registration book. While the occupations of registered whites were recorded as primarily blue collar jobs such as fisherman, painter, mail carrier, machinist, blacksmith, or no occupation, those of their “colored” counterparts included higher-end jobs, denoting advanced educational levels and sufficient incomes to pay

\(^{23}\) Article VI, Section 4, of North Carolina Constitution, as amended in 1900.

a poll tax, such as doctor, lawyer, missionary, teacher, druggist, and real estate agent.\textsuperscript{25} The other five wards maintained similar registration numbers. From these records, it is logical to assume that registration statistics in 1902 were no better. In the early part of the century, few blacks in New Bern were able to surpass the limitations placed upon their voting rights. Those who could were typically non working-class with some form of connection to whites in power who may have spoken to registrars on their behalf.

The shift to an exclusive, one-party, white-dominated system at the beginning of the twentieth century affected African Americans throughout North Carolina. In the 1890’s, up to eighty-five percent of the total potential black voters in North Carolina were registered to vote, whereas as late as 1948 merely fifteen percent were registered.\textsuperscript{26} More so than threats of violence and intimidation, disfranchisement by means of statute was the most effective and lasting solution to officially putting an end to black voting and office-holding. To borrow a phrase from historian Helen G. Edmonds, the amendment had succeeded in its aims by “reduc[ing] the Negro to a political nonentity.”\textsuperscript{27} This coupled with the 1899 onset of the Jim Crow laws across North Carolina, which legally segregated the races in public transportation and later in all public accommodations, further separated blacks’ hopes from their actual chances of political integration. Despite the fact that the poll tax requirement was repealed in North Carolina twenty years after its ratification, the damage and suppression of the black electorate did not cease as rigorous literacy tests and other individual acts of white resistance continued to be employed. Proof of this was best observed in 1965 when Craven County

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{27} Edmonds, 211.
became one of the forty counties in North Carolina found guilty of voting discrimination thereby laid out by the Voting Rights Act.

The various forms of political participation among blacks in New Bern during the nineteenth and early twentieth century is part of a long continuum of black political aspirations which spanned from Reconstruction to the 1940’s and beyond. Despite forthcoming setbacks in their ability to utilize the franchise, what black New Bernians wanted in 1865, which was to equally practice their political rights as citizens, remained the same and would carry on through future generations into the second half of the twentieth century. With this being said, African-Americans in New Bern did not suddenly become docile and disinterested from the onset of legal disfranchisement in 1900 to the formation of the NAACP in 1948. For many of them, the risks and dangers involved in attempting to challenge the white power structure were far greater than the possible rewards. It was not until World War II that blacks gained an opening to reclaim the first-class citizenship they had once enjoyed.
CHAPTER TWO:
THE BUILDING OF AN ORGANIZED FRONT

On Sunday, November 7, 1948, former Illinois Congressman Arthur W. Mitchell, the first African-American elected to Congress as a Democrat, was invited to address a mass congregation of African-Americans at the charter presentation of the New Bern chapter of the NAACP. The gathering was a chance not only to celebrate but also to inform and potentially encourage the public to become a part of the newly founded civil rights organization. Plans, hopes, and visions to confront racial inequalities in the city of New Bern were conceptualized long before inaugural president L.S. Conway and the New Bern chapter presented its charter at the First Baptist Church; however, not until that day were key organization and a means to effectively wage a battle officially born. In coming years, the branch fought for and spawned advances in important civil rights measures including desegregation, fair employment, equal wages, better hospital and medical care services, adequate housing, and political rights.

The advent of the New Bern chapter of the NAACP occurred in the pivotal era of post-World War II America when expectations among blacks were swiftly rising. It was during this period that total NAACP membership had climbed from 50,000 in 1940 to well over 450,000 in 1946. African-Americans, especially those who fought overseas, had been largely supportive of the war effort and trusted that it would result in a “double V,” or victory at home and abroad. Blacks hoped that if the United States government was willing to fight against Nazism and the persecution of Jewish peoples in Europe, then it would be influenced

to extend its hand to improve race relations in America as well. Black veterans in New Bern shared the same optimistic sentiment.

Delemar, who lived on the outskirts of New Bern, conveyed that after World War II, blacks “definitely wanted a better way of life. We felt that by going to war and getting an honorable discharge that it would be better…” Other local citizens, such as James Gavin, who had friends and family who served in World War II, added that “these [veterans] came back and was telling the guys they went to Paris and the first time they had been places they would be seen as equals. Nobody looked down on them because they had a dark complexion.” The war had transformed the mentality among many blacks in New Bern to look past the limitations of color and to begin seeing themselves as both capable and deserving of achieving equal footing with whites. Thus, following World War II, African-American veterans, including those in New Bern, “returned to the South with a new sense of the proper order of things.”

The growing expectations among African-Americans were influenced tremendously with the emergence of new economic possibilities. World War II had initiated an industrial boom which amounted to a large increase in the building of military bases, especially on the Eastern Coast. The construction of Cherry Point Naval Base in 1941 and Cherry Point Naval Air Depot (NADEP) in 1943, both of which were built in the nearby city of Havelock, provided considerable industrial job training for blacks in New Bern and Craven County during and after the war. Not only did African-Americans receive higher wages than

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30 Transcript of Interview of James Calvin Delemar (May 11, 1993), New Bern Oral History Project, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
31 Transcript of Interview of James Gavin; Part II (October, 20, 1992), New Bern Oral History Project, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
traditional blue collar jobs found in lumberyards, oil mills, and tenant farms, they likewise experienced a slightly elevated status in the social hierarchy as well as improved job security.

This period likewise marked an increase in the number of African-Americans in New Bern who owned and operated successful independent businesses. By the late 1940’s, the area known as Five Points once again became a thriving center of black-owned businesses which included but were not limited to: Five Points Drug Store, the Midway Soda Shop, Dowdy’s Café, Charles Henderson’s blacksmith shop, the West End barbershop, Barker’s Sea Food & Produce, Vail’s Alberta Beauty Shoppe, Bishop Rivers’ Funeral Home, NC Mutual Life Insurance, and Peter J. Kenan’s shoe repair shop. Since the “Great Fire of 1922,” which burned down and demolished over half of the homes and businesses in the black community, African-American individuals were preoccupied with the process of rebuilding. This process was ameliorated by the assistance of black World War II veterans who used their military pay to reopen or run stores in the black business district. As a result, the Five Points area witnessed economic prosperity greater than before.

Despite the sprouting of new possibilities for African-Americans during the post-war period, race relations in the South remained fundamentally unchanged. The majority of blacks were still encountering discrimination and exclusion. After risking their lives to preserve the ideals of democracy overseas, black veterans who returned to the South continued to be subjected to the restrictions of Jim Crow laws. The situation was no different in New Bern and surrounding areas. Delemar testified that even with high hopes, “regrettably when we came back [from the war] it wasn’t much better.”

It was this coupling of rising expectations and discouragement that spurred a commitment among black New Bernians,

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34 Transcript of Interview of James Calvin Delemar (May 11, 1993), NBOHP.
primarily veterans, to form an organized front in order to achieve advancements in their civil rights. The formation of the NAACP in New Bern ultimately bore witness to the increasingly adverse and discriminatory atmosphere in which blacks felt that they were living. It symbolized a bold statement to the white power structure and, as other branches had done, challenged the progressive image of North Carolina which men such as Governor J. Melville Broughton had tried to promote and uphold.35

Undoubtedly, in comparison to other cities in the nation and the state of North Carolina, blacks in New Bern were relatively late in organizing a local civil rights group. Since the 1909 formation of the NAACP in New York City, a derivative of the earlier Niagara Movement, city and county branches quickly began surfacing all across the nation, particularly in the South. By 1948 the NAACP had more than 1,000 local branches, youth councils, and college chapters—half of which existed in the southern region. In North Carolina, the first three branches were formed in 1917 in the leading metropolitan areas of Raleigh, Greensboro, and Durham. Other urban centers in the state chartered NAACP branches close to twenty years before New Bern. As was the case for most towns in predominately rural Eastern North Carolina, the city of New Bern lacked the local university systems, the economic freedoms, and the political opportunities that were enjoyed by blacks in the larger and more urbanized cities. The degree to which blacks in New Bern had been dependent on whites for labor offers the best explanation for its less than hurried establishment of a civil rights coalition.

According to the 1940 United States Census, the chief occupations for African-American males in New Bern included but were not limited to: operative and kindred

35 In a letter written on July 28, 1944, Broughton confidently proclaimed that “no state in the American Union has better race relations than North Carolina.” (Source: Governor J. Melville Broughton Papers, Correspondence, Search Room, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, N.C.)
workers, laborers, and service workers; for African-American females, it was domestic work. Over five-hundred black women or approximately twenty-five percent of New Bern’s black female working population cooked, cleaned, and washed clothes for middle-class whites. African-Americans in New Bern and other eastern communities were among the most economically deprived in the state. With a lack of available education or training like that of the western counties, most African-Americans in New Bern were subject to work for whites in low-paying and unskilled jobs. This allowed little if any freedom or opportunity to openly confront the status quo. As a result, prior to 1948, black New Bernians were generally wary to become active in organizations such as the NAACP for fear of being reprimanded or dismissed by their white employers.

In addition, several downtown employers were known among the black community to be members of white supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). This fact likewise had an effect on the low levels of African-American activism. As historian William Chafe explained, “in order to survive, it was necessary for black people—half of whom worked in service positions—to pay obeisance to the cultural expectations of those who paid their wages.” Knowing that the shared culture among whites who controlled the city of New Bern was largely disinterested in and unsympathetic to the efforts of African-American uplift, blacks chose for decades to remain compliant rather than to sacrifice their paycheck.

In the years following the end of World War II, a new class of blacks in New Bern surfaced who, for the first time, were able to experience economic independence from

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whites. Serving as a catalyst, the war opened up possibilities as well as a means for blacks to organize. Most importantly, it had altered the collective perspective among the oppressed. No longer were blacks as fearful to question or place pressure on whites to remove the racial restrictions which had been placed upon them. In his study of race, class, and power in twentieth-century Norfolk, Virginia, Earl Lewis asserted that “how [blacks] viewed themselves determined the strategies they adopted as they struggled to act in their own interests.”  

39 The same rang true for those African-Americans in New Bern who, due to a new self-perception, were influenced to build an organization to take action on their behalf.

Not all blacks in New Bern, however, were willing to wait for change or further endure inequalities in their native town. Beginning in the late 1920’s and continuing through the latter part of 1960’s, hundreds of discouraged African-American New Bernians fled northward, along with over one million other Southern blacks, to cities such as New York City, Chicago, and Norfolk in hopes for better jobs, better schools, and better race relations. Likely, frustrations among blacks in New Bern were mounting by the era of the New Deal when federal aid under the Emergency Relief and Civil Works Administration allocated more money to a “single sewing room for white women,” than all the projects for African-Americans.  

40 Due to this “great migration,” by the year 1940, blacks were no longer the majority in the city. Black residents numbered 5,839 compared to 5,976 white, which constituted a loss of close to six percent of the black population since 1920.  

41 As noted in Table 1, African-American population in New Bern continued to decrease into the 1950’s and 1960’s. Further

40 Hanchett and Little, 21.
offsetting their numbers in the city were the vast increases in the white population that arose out of a tourism boom following the completed restoration of historic Tryon Palace in 1959.\textsuperscript{42}

Table 1: New Bern’s African American Population (1820-1970)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Year</th>
<th>Total Population</th>
<th>% African-American</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>14,660</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>15,717</td>
<td>41.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>15,812</td>
<td>42.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>11,815</td>
<td>49.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>11,981</td>
<td>52.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>12,198</td>
<td>55.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>9,961</td>
<td>56.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>9,090</td>
<td>64.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>7,843</td>
<td>67.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>6,443</td>
<td>65.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>5,849</td>
<td>65.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>5,432</td>
<td>61.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1850</td>
<td>4,681</td>
<td>58.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1840</td>
<td>3,690</td>
<td>54.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1830</td>
<td>3,796</td>
<td>56.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1820</td>
<td>3,663</td>
<td>59.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The organizational efforts of the faithful African-Americans who remained in New Bern underlined a never-before seen awareness, activism, and dedication to lawfully challenge forms of racism and white supremacy within their local confines. Through the newly formed NAACP, one of their primary goals was to eradicate voting discrimination and help register African Americans in and around the city. Since the early part of the twentieth-century, New Bern lagged far behind other cities in North Carolina in its black political participation. The far more racially-moderate and progressive cities of Raleigh and

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\textsuperscript{42} Tryon Palace has since been a great source of pride and revenue for the city of New Bern. Built between 1767 and 1770, it was originally the first capitol of the North Carolina colony and the home of Royal Governor William Tryon and his family.
Greensboro had a strong tradition of African-Americans voting, registering, and running for office since the early 1930’s. Facilitated by New Deal programs and the presence of labor unions, these cities witnessed an upsurge of the political demands of the black working class. By the early 1950’s, due to successful voter registration drives, both Greensboro and Winston-Salem had black men in positions on their respective city’s board of aldermen.

Despite New Bern’s claim to be “modern, progressive, and friendly,” during the first half of the twentieth century, white registrars in the city were known to utilize extra-legal methods such as intimidation, bullying, and fraud to dispirit qualified blacks from attempting to register and vote. In addition, imbalanced literacy tests were administered to blacks, requiring them to read or recite from memory the preamble of the United States Constitution or possibly the entire Constitution of North Carolina before their names could be added to the poll books. If the response was “unsatisfactory” to the registrar, which was the case more often times than not, then that African-American would subsequently be denied the franchise. The extra-legal methods to weaken and eliminate black voting power were rarely monitored or discouraged and, thus, often went unpunished.

As a result, prior to the emergence of the organization in 1948, most individuals in New Bern’s black community made largely ineffective and unprofitable attempts to register and vote. In an interview that he gave in 1992, Reverend Willie G. Hickman, who helped to charter the Craven-Carteret County branch of the NAACP in 1941 and later the New Bern NAACP branch, explained how common it was for African-Americans in New Bern and

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43 Phrase in quotes found in *The City of New Bern, N.C. Visitors Brochure*, printed by Owen G. Dunn (1940), North Carolina Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
Craven County to be disqualified from registering by white registrars. In a poignant manner, he recounts his attempt to first register in 1940 at the age of 21.\textsuperscript{44}

I went there to [the precinct] to register and when I walked in that store, they all looked at me as if I come in there to break in that store. ‘What do you want?’ I said, ‘I came to register because I want to vote.’ So Joe Hughes…took me out in his car. Wouldn’t even let me stand in there and ask me no questions among those other white folk. Then he said, ‘you know, you have to recite the preamble of the Constitution.’ Well, that was down my line cause I already knew it by heart… [He] said ‘don’t go any further with me!’… [He said], ‘now you have to recite the Constitution of North Carolina.’ I said, ‘I’ll tell you what you do. You give me the book and you recite it...’ He said, ‘no it doesn’t work that way.’ So I couldn’t do it, not the Constitution of North Carolina. So he disqualified me to register.\textsuperscript{45}

In the end, due to a personal connection, Reverend Hickman was allowed to register after the clerk of the Superior Court of Craven County wrote a letter to Mr. Hughes ordering him to place Hickman’s name in the poll books. A year later Hickman claimed to have helped to register five-hundred blacks in rural sections of Craven County and neighboring Carteret County. Successful moments such as these, however, were extremely rare.

Former black activists throughout Craven County spoke of other widespread discriminatory practices whites prescribed during the 1940’s and earlier which included removing the names of African Americans from the ballot if they failed to vote in the previous election, disallowing blacks who registered to buy food in certain grocery stores, or firing black employees who registered and voted. As Reverend Hickman’s case proved, generally it depended on “who you knew and who you worked for if you got to vote.”\textsuperscript{46}

Though the threat of violence was seldom used in and around New Bern, voting was still considered to be a risky practice for any African-American who lived in the South. The sheer potential of violence forced numerous blacks who voted to keep mum around whites.

\textsuperscript{44} Transcript of Interview of Reverend Willie Gray Hickman (December 1, 1992), New Bern Oral History Project, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

\textsuperscript{45} Transcript of Interview of Willie G. Hickman (December 1, 1992), NBOHP.

\textsuperscript{46} Quote by a gentleman during a monthly meeting of the New Bern Branch of the NAACP at St. Peter’s AME Zion Church (September 11, 2006)
In terms of their election practices, New Bern and Craven County were far from being an anomaly; voting denials occurred throughout the nation and often to a much higher degree. In 1948 a black man from Mount Vernon, Georgia was shot and killed by a group of white supremacists after failing to abide by their warnings not to vote in the Georgia state gubernatorial election.\footnote{“Shotgun Blasts Kill Father of 6 who Dared to Vote,” \textit{The Carolinian}, September 18, 1948.} Similar episodes were reported in communities in Mississippi, South Carolina, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Alabama between 1930 and 1950. In North Carolina, blacks in Nash, Catawba, Bladen, Beaufort, Camden, Pamlico, Henderson, Robeson, and Transylvania counties also frequently experienced cases of registration refusal during this period, many of which were brought to legal action by local branches of the NAACP.\footnote{“District Court Warrants Out in Vote Denials,” \textit{The Carolinian}, October 2, 1948.} During the late 1940’s Moore County, which was the site of several voting injustices since 1939, witnessed an African-American led petition against the North Carolina Board of Elections.\footnote{State Board of Elections, \textit{Subject File, 1932-1942}, Search Room, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, N.C.}

In addition to pointing to the recurrent existence of white resistance, the aforementioned cases reveal an increased political activism among Southern blacks who, rather than back down, opted to defend their rights as citizens to equally participate in the democratic process. The formation of the NAACP in New Bern could not have occurred at a more promising time. By 1948, in New Bern and communities throughout the South, the African-American effort to regain the franchise had been aided by the outcome of \textit{Smith v. Allwright}, which four years earlier, had ruled the white Democratic primary election unconstitutional. Though the case centered upon the political exclusion of blacks in the state of Texas, its energy extended all over the South. As a result, post-\textit{Smith} marked a revolution in black political activism. A decade later, four times the number of blacks in the South were
now qualified to vote.\textsuperscript{50} In North Carolina alone, the percent of African-Americans registered rose from 7.1 percent in 1940 to 15.2 percent in 1947.\textsuperscript{51}

Improvements for blacks at the national level were also beginning to be realized in the early months of 1948 when President Harry Truman, expanding upon Franklin D. Roosevelt’s attempts, took a strong stand on civil rights issues. With a desire to appeal to the large numbers of African-American voters who migrated to northern cities during the war years, Truman began by creating the President’s Committee on Civil Rights. Soon afterwards he was successful in pressuring Congress to establish a permanent Fair Employment Practices Committee, an anti-lynching law, an anti-poll tax measure, and to tighten down on discrimination in interstate transportation. In the same year, he also took action to desegregate the United States Armed Services. National legislation, however, proved slow to alter prevailing white attitudes, particular those of southern Democrats, on racial equality.

As more blacks gained greater access to politics in the post-war period, white strategies to resist them intensified. White Southern opposition, which had been mounting since the New Deal era, was clearly reaching a high point by 1948. Echoing sentiments from the white supremacy campaign of the 1890’s, conservative whites fought ruthlessly to keep blacks from participating in the democratic process. Circulation of racist propaganda by politicians like Democratic Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi encouraging the “red blooded white man to use any means to keep the Niggers from the polls” was spreading across the South at an alarming rate.\textsuperscript{52} This period also witnessed the growth of the “Dixiecrat revolt” and the appearance of pro-segregationist presidential candidate Strom Thurmond of South Carolina in 1948. Though Thurmond and the “party for white

\textsuperscript{50} Lawson, 26.
\textsuperscript{51} Black Voter Registration in the South, 1944-1964, Table 1., in Lawson, 81.
supremacy” received only about one percent of the total vote in Craven County, his emergence paved the way for future racist reactionaries, in particular, George C. Wallace.  

Although a gateway to political inclusion had been eased open by Smith and national civil rights legislation, the footwork required to expand ballots would have to be accomplished by locals in each community. Acknowledging this fact, NAACP president Roy Wilkins stated in 1949 that, “we hope to stimulate our branches to special effort[s] on registration, and perhaps will get a man into principal centers, but in the end the job must be done locally.” As Wilkins inferred, the costs of registration drives and other efforts to increase the number of the black electorate had to be paid for by the local branches. With a clear understanding that it was largely up to them, leaders of the New Bern branch attempted to achieve significant strides in empowering local black citizens.

Over the years African-Americans within the New Bern NAACP held multiple meetings and rallies to try and get out the vote, and, as a result, more blacks in this period made an effort to register and vote since 1900 than ever before. Though their presence may have helped, this task was accomplished without the assistance from region-wide field organizers in the CIO, the Southern Negro Youth Congress (SNYC), the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW), or similar civil rights organizations that were responsible for registering thousands of southern African-Americans in the decade following World War II. Nonetheless, in the growing racist atmosphere in which the NAACP was chartered, it was particularly challenging for leaders within New Bern’s branch to convince substantial numbers of local blacks of their potential political power.

55 Exact voting statistics are unknown since both NAACP records and city registration lists from this period have long been lost, but local testimony and state and national trends confirm the veracity of this statement.
In 1950, after two years as an organization, the NAACP had not succeeded in registering the expected number of blacks in the city. This was indicated in 1951 when I.P. Hatch, a funeral director, became the first African-American to run for city office since disfranchisement. In the race for a New Bern board of alderman position, he lost to white incumbent Walter W. Smith 158 votes to 1.\textsuperscript{56} The sole vote which Hatch received reflected not only the lack of political power among African-Americans in New Bern during this era, but it also revealed the lack of possibilities for their political participation.

As before, fear and intimidation kept many away from the polls. This was a persistent problem throughout the South as one CORE organizer in Louisiana explained. “We’ve got to travel many miles, “she said. “Spend much time just talking before we convince one Negro to go to the registrar’s office. In a typical week I contact 150 people, train 60, send 18 to the registrars’ office, and have 9 of them registered.”\textsuperscript{57} In New Bern one of the most difficult tasks was to convince the majority of African-Americans that politics was not just “white folks’ business.” Even if this was accomplished restrictions at the polls continued to keep their names from the books. Voting restrictions, the custom of white political dominance, and an inchoate civil rights organization all combined to significantly delay the potential power of New Bern’s black electorate.

The low number of African-American New Bernians who were politically active in the first few years of the NAACP’s existence should not automatically be equated with failure. Though success was slow to materialize, an important foundation had been built for producing future change. In a primarily symbolic way, the New Bern branch of the NAACP had succeeded in taking its first stab at dismantling the racial caste system while uprooting

\textsuperscript{56} “Record Low Vote Elects New Bern Official Family,” \textit{The Sun Journal}, April 4, 1951.
\textsuperscript{57} Valelly, 190.
the commonly held belief among whites that African-Americans were completely content as second-class citizens. Although the 1940’s were marked with numerous impediments to black political advancement, at the same time, as contemporary historians Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichenstein argue, it was a time of ground-breaking opportunities for African-Americans to organize. The seeds of organization that New Bern activists planted during this era would provide the necessary material for achieving political success in forthcoming years. William “Willie” Vail, Sr., the first Vice-President of the NAACP branch in New Bern, was among many original black leaders who would coordinate successful voter registration drives into the 1950’s and 60’s.

As time progressed, new ideas and strategies were implemented to quicken the pace of black political development in New Bern, but in a changing world in which blacks were gaining equal access to society, a good portion of white southerners found a greater desire to hold onto the traditions and the ways of the “Old South.” New Bern, too, experienced a revival of “neoBourbonism” among many whites whose opposition only heightened as African-American advances continued to be made in the 1950’s. Within this context civil rights leaders in New Bern met increasing struggles to gain political inclusion.

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CHAPTER THREE:
FIRST APPEARANCE OF MASSIVE RESISTANCE

In light of the burgeoning of opportunities for African-Americans, the scholarship that emerged during the post-World War II era was overwhelmingly optimistic regarding the future of Southern politics. In their respective works, historian C. Vann Woodward and political scientist V.O. Key, Jr. assumed with high hopes that the destruction of Jim Crow would result in a biracial coalition in which both whites and blacks might be able to function collectively. Unfortunately, their bright visions were not to be realized as early as they had predicted. Following the ruling of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka in 1954 in which the NAACP and attorney Thurgood Marshall successfully convinced the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn the 1896 ruling of Plessy v. Ferguson of “separate but equal,” was the unofficial ushering in of a massive resistance movement among groups of disgruntled whites. Appalled at the thought of integrating black and white children in the schools, white men and women across the South supported and organized increasingly callous methods to keep blacks separated in all areas of life. In the years to come, while the nation grew even more divided over the issue of segregation, racial harmony in politics, or in any other form, was far from being reached.

The term “massive resistance” was first used by Virginia Senator Harry F. Byrd, Sr. in February 1956 in order to unite whites against the newly proposed school desegregation plan. Following suit, a month later Byrd along with eighteen U.S. Senators and eighty-one members of the U.S. House of the Representatives from states across the South, including

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Democratic Senators Samuel J. Ervin and W. Kerr Scott from North Carolina, signed the “Southern Manifesto,” to publicly announce their dedication to halt school integration. The vigor behind massive resistance was perhaps best illustrated in September 1957 when Governor Orval Faubus of Arkansas frantically called out the National Guard to block African-American students from integrating Little Rock Central High, forcing President Dwight Eisenhower to deploy the 101st Airborne Division. These drastic measures had been spurred during 1955 by the supplemental desegregation case known as *Brown II*, which required that school desegregation occur in Southern communities at “all deliberate speed.”

In spite of the word “speed,” many whites were not quick to allow mingling of the races in any public gathering place. Having grown comfortable with the abundance of signs denoting “white-only” and “colored-only” bathrooms, fountains, theaters, restaurants, and waiting rooms, white Southerners took strong measures to maintain their segregated society. The simultaneous emergence of African-American efforts to integrate additional public accommodations, like that of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycotters in 1955-1956, only further hardened whites’ resolve to prevent the spreading of integration. Fundamentally changing the racial atmosphere, *Brown I and II* introduced the beginning of a “Second Reconstruction” which, like the original, would eventually lead to the legal guarantee of black inclusion into mainstream public life. Intended to slow this process, massive resistance, which was initially focused on freezing school desegregation, evolved into varying forms throughout the South to defend against any outbreak against Jim Crow.

In Craven County, school integration did not officially begin until April 8, 1959 when four high schools were ordered to be desegregated within the next school year. Based on

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North Carolina’s Pearsall Plan, Craven County schools were integrated by token compliance only. First drafted in 1956, the Pearsall Plan shifted responsibility from the state to the discretion of the local boards of education, allowing communities to delay acting on the ruling of *Brown v. Board*. Accordingly, school integration occurred in very small numbers in Craven County. In 1965, six years after desegregation was initiated, African-American pupil integration only amounted to 11.7% there.⁶¹ Ostensibly, whites in Craven were just as hesitant as most other Southern whites to mix the races.

In New Bern, action to desegregate was not taken until after the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Title IV of the act, which strengthened the National Attorney General’s power to bring forth legal action against school boards who failed to comply with the law, likely influenced the cooperation of the New Bern Board of Education. By 1971, full desegregation of the city’s schools had been achieved most peacefully.⁶² In the midst of the era of desegregation, New Bern and surrounding areas of Craven County did not witness the degree of violence and conflict as did other sections of the South, but there was certainly evidence of an underlying resistance among its white inhabitants.

Meanwhile, as desegregation was blossoming, African-American political mobilization in New Bern was likewise growing in force. Following 1955, an influx of ready and willing blacks began appearing at the polls to register and vote. Serving as yet another act of defiance against the Jim Crow social order, the increase in black voters ushered in a new form of massive resistance. White privilege, already slowly deteriorating with the onset of *Brown*, was in further jeopardy as more African-Americans demanded a greater role in local politics. Finding these changes all too unsettling, enough whites in New Bern were

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⁶¹ Ibid.
⁶² Minutes of the Craven County Board of Education, 1958-1971, Craven County Schools Administrative Building, New Bern, N.C.
influenced to put into practice a way to protect their power of control over city affairs. To this aim, New Bern officially switched to an at-large election system in 1959, which, through its design, would severely handicap the political influence of its minority voters.

Based on the events that followed on January 22, 1957, members of the white community were clearly aware of the rise in black political strength. On that day, at a meeting of the New Bern Board of Aldermen, discussions were continued from a month earlier concerning a proposal to redistrict the city’s wards and to alter the method of electing aldermen. Members of the public were also invited to offer their opinions on the proposals which had been made. Of the thirty-eight citizens present, most expressed that they were in favor of changing the boundaries of the wards as well as implementing an at-large election system. Fred Jones, an African-American citizen who came to speak on the behalf of the “colored people,” even approved of the city-wide election. Undoubtedly, Mr. Jones was not in a position to see the future consequences of an at-large election system.

Behind the neutral façade of the proposed election change was a silent yet forceful opposition. In previous New Bern city elections a candidate was assured victory if he or she garnered the most votes within the ward he or she resided, whereas the new city-wide election proposal would require a political candidate to gain the majority of the votes from all of the city’s five wards combined. The implication of such a change was to make it more difficult for African-Americans, who constituted a minority of the voting population, to be able to elect their preferred candidates and specifically those of their own race. At-large elections were among many seemingly color-blind election practices meant to curb black voting power. In cities throughout the South, abolition of office, extension of the term of the

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63 Records of the Minutes of Board of Aldermen Meeting, January 22, 1957, Kellenberger Room, New Bern-Craven County Public Library.
64 Ibid.
white incumbent, increases in filing fees, increases in property qualifications, county consolidation, and gerrymandering were all used for minority voting dilution purposes. \(^{65}\)

After several weeks of discussion, the referendum to change the city’s election procedure was offered to the citizens of New Bern on May 7, 1957. After passing by a slim margin of 124 votes, it enlarged the boundaries of the predominately black wards, initiated an at-large election system, forced voters to mark their ballots for all five aldermen, and added a run-off provision, all of which ensured a thinning of the black vote. In 1959 the New Bern city charter was amended to reflect this change. \(^{66}\)

It is unlikely to be a coincidence that the at-large election proposal appeared at the instant of increasing black political activism. In the early part of the decade as well as years prior, there had been little reason to initiate any sort of discriminatory election law in New Bern. The percentage of the city’s African-Americans who attempted to partake in politics was far from being considered menacing to white political dominance. As a result, politics in New Bern continued to revolve around the interests of whites. In political campaign advertisements of the 1950’s, politicians spoke of fostering a progressive city government for all but most failed to acknowledge the interests of the black community. Progress proved to be primarily tied to industry, finances, and better sewer lines. With a lack of candidates willing to serve or represent them during this period, many blacks were prone to feel that there was little purpose or benefit to voting. A set of political advertisements for New Bern city elections during the 1950’s can be seen in Figure 5.

\(^{66}\) Records of Minutes of Board of Aldermen Meeting, May 10, 1957, Kellenberger Room, New Bern-Craven County Public Library
Furthermore, whites’ continued use of voting denial resulted in few African-Americans willing to try. In August of 1952, on the subject of the NAACP Registration and Voting Campaign in the South, Henry Lee Moon, Director of Public Relations, wrote to Chief Secretary Walter White of the “longstanding resistance to Negro voting in the Black Belt counties of eastern North Carolina.” Moon described the special effort which was made to “break the back of this resistance…,” but found that “years of official opposition had created a certain amount of apathy among Negroes in that section of the state,” which served as “an additional handicap for the political action director.”67 Located among the Black Belt counties, New Bern experienced a similar degree of low voter turn-out among African-Americans. It is unknown whether the political action director visited the city or what the

67 Memorandum from Henry Lee Moon to Mr. White on NAACP Registration and Voting Campaign in South (August 20, 1952) in Papers of the NAACP, Bostock Library, Duke University.
possible effect of the visit had been, but it was clear that work had to be done to reverse the existence of political disillusion among the area’s black population.

To ameliorate these and other struggles of the African-American political experience in the South, particularly in areas like Mississippi which in 1954 a total of fourteen black votes were cast within thirteen predominately black counties, President Eisenhower passed the Civil Rights Act of 1957. In addition to school desegregation, one of its chief objectives was to provide a means to enforce voting rights lawsuits. Despite its proposed intentions, the act had little effect on improving registration numbers among southern African-Americans. It did, however, add to the strong force of liberal legislation that was sweeping the nation. With the federal government apparently on their side, blacks developed a greater assurance and security to oppose discriminatory measures that continued to deprive them of their equal share.

It is perhaps no surprise that following the Brown decision and most notably after the Civil Rights Act of 1957, growing numbers of African-Americans in New Bern began a stronger move to assert their rights which had been promised under the Fifteenth Amendment some eighty-years before. It was during this period that Reverend W. G. Hickman initiated and directed successful voter registration drives in the city and that William “Willie” Vail, Sr. earned his nickname “Mr. Voter Registration Man.” At regular voting registration meetings, Hickman and Vail, along with other local NAACP leaders, were able to employ useful strategies to better prepare and instruct African-Americans of the requirements that they would face at the polls. Most importantly, they instructed African-Americans of the necessity of voting in order for their voices to be heard. Due to these local efforts, there was

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68 Payne, 26.
approximately a five-percent increase in non-whites registered in Craven County between 1958 and 1960, a good portion of which the city of New Bern could claim. In early 1959, as registration numbers continued to climb, the New Bern chapter aimed to apply black political strength by assisting one of its chief leaders, Reverend G.J. Hill, to run for a position on the Board of Aldermen in the city election held in May.

Hill, the next African-American to run for city office since I.P. Hatch in 1951, symbolized a growing disenchantment among the black community with the traditional slate of white politicians. With hundreds of newly registered voters on their side, the New Bern municipal election of 1959 was the greatest chance thus far for blacks to place someone in city hall who would sympathize with their interests; but standing in their way was the newly created at-large system, which was to be implemented during the same election. When the 1959 election results had been tallied Reverend Hill, receiving a total of 733 votes, had won the second ward but was defeated by white opponent Paul M. Cox for failing to gain a majority in the other four wards.

In previous elections, before the at-large system had been put in place, Hill would have been declared a winner based on the number of votes he acquired in his own ward. Requiring candidates to gain a city-wide majority made it nearly impossible for Hill or any other black aspirant to achieve political victory. It is reasonable to presume that those who had initiated the at-large proposal had anticipated this type of outcome. The at-large election experiment proved to have succeeded in diminishing the likelihood of black office-holding given that no other black candidate was to run for political office again until 1965. A sample of the unofficial tally for the New Bern election held in 1959 can be seen in Table 2.

70 Civil Rights Advisory Committee: Voting and Voter Registration in NC, 1960, North Carolina Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
71 The Sun Journal, Unofficial Tally in Municipal Election, May 6, 1959.
Table 2: Unofficial Tally in Municipal Election Held in New Bern on Fifth of May, 1959

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WARD</th>
<th>MAYOR</th>
<th>JUDGE</th>
<th>ALDERMEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ward 1</td>
<td>Ward 2</td>
<td>Ward 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ward</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Ward</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>508</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1930</td>
<td>801</td>
<td>2666</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: *The Sun Journal*, May 6, 1959

A month later, in June 1959, groups of upper and middle-class white residents of downtown New Bern, who had begun a gradual move to the suburbs since 1948, had grown enough in size to be given permission by the state to establish the town of Trent Woods. This trend of suburbanization comprised another form of resistance—escape by voluntary migration. Rather than contend with the spread of integration, numerous white elites willingly chose to depart for the outskirts of New Bern to set up their own schools, parks, and libraries. White suburban development, apparently motivated by a desire to be separated from the daily interactions with the predominately black and low-status members of the inner-city, further accelerated with the onset of civil rights demonstrations and protests in the 1960’s.
In the face of these rising forms of resistance, the New Bern branch of the NAACP became progressively stronger in both its presence and in its political action. The campaign effort to organize the black community behind the election of Reverend Hill was manifest of this fact. With an absence of substantial white support, African-American New Bernians demonstrated an ability to independently formulate and carry out a collective agenda of their own. In comparison to the fruitless attempts of the past, the movement for black political power had evolved to make significant headway by the late 1950’s. Nonetheless, in terms of creating significant change it was still to constitute a rather bleak period. Little was done to remedy the situation for once the sit-in movement emerged in 1960, the fight for political rights was forced to take a backseat. The years between 1960 and 1964, when integrating public spaces was the foremost task among civil rights activists in New Bern, marked a transition period in which the rate of forward progress within politics was temporarily reduced.
CHAPTER FOUR:
A PHASE OF TRANSITION

While public schools across the South were steadily being forced to open their doors to African-American students in observance of the Brown decision, the racially discriminatory practices of private businesses had yet to come under the scrutiny of the courts. White store owners, who believed to be lawfully within their rights to refuse customers based on race or color, remained generally reluctant to accelerate the pace of integration. As a result, African-Americans continued to be deliberately excluded along racial lines to sit, dine, or lodge with whites. The lunch counter, perhaps the most notorious symbol of white privilege, was among one of the least accessible public spaces in the South for blacks.

New attempts to modify the South’s lingering apartheid system were made on February 1, 1960, when four African-American college students from North Carolina A & T University staged the South’s first sit-in at a Woolworth’s lunch counter in downtown Greensboro, North Carolina. Within weeks, this event produced a wave of sit-ins in towns across the South in addition to sparking the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina that April. As members of the New Bern branch of the NAACP learned of the rising protest efforts among numbers of young black activists to gain inclusion into previously denied white-operated establishments, they too were influenced to take a similar vow to end racial exclusion in their own city.

Barbara J. Lee, a former Vice President of the New Bern NAACP Youth Council, described the discrimination that she and other paying African-American customers
experienced on a daily basis in various downtown stores before the arrival of the sit-in movement.

I think it was like everybody knew their place and tried to stay in it…Our place was that we didn’t touch anything. If we wanted a hot dog, you’d stand at the far corner of Kress Department Store. You had to order your hot dog or something and take it out of the store if you wanted to eat it. If you wanted to buy something, you had to keep your hands to yourself, because if you touched something they would assume you were stealing it.72

As Lee noted, not all stores refused African-American clientele, but within those stores African-Americans still faced unequal treatment by being disallowed from sitting in the store or being made to wait in the back of the line until all of the white customers had been served first.73 It was this type of racially-motivated treatment that provoked resentment among blacks in New Bern to join in the emerging freedom struggle.

In order to challenge the local establishments that refused to grant them equal service, African-American activists within the New Bern NAACP pooled a substantial portion of their energies to direct protest marches, pickets, boycotts, and sit-ins. This decision, however, would have a sizeable consequence for as the local branch broadened its civil rights crusade to the integration of lunch counters less attention was devoted to mobilizing the city’s black voters. A period of sporadic voter activism came as a result. Voting registration still remained a key focus of the local NAACP, but no significant attempts were made to endorse or run another African-American candidate until 1965. What made this transitory and seemingly inert phase of political activism critical was the organizational framework it provided black New Bernians to more effectively integrate themselves in politics in ensuing years. This was accomplished by three main factors.

72 Transcript of Interview with Barbara J. Lee (December 9, 1992), NBOHP.
73 Transcript of Interview with W.G. Hickman, NBOHP.
First, amidst the upsurge of civil rights demonstrations, African-American citizens in the New Bern area gained valuable practice in Christian-based non-violent direct action. By upholding the tenets of peaceful organization that were being preached by Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders of the time, they learned how to make their demands known in a most legitimate and effective manner. The sit-ins, which openly dramatized and lay bare the evils of racial discrimination, were able to force members of the white community to contemplate the practicality of segregation. It was this type of direct-action that set the tone for how African-Americans fought for their political rights in the latter part of the decade.

Second, the success that African-Americans experienced in integrating New Bern garnered confidence and self-awareness of what they could achieve. In addition to enlivening their determination to persist in the struggle for equality, victory also helped to ripen their political consciousness. From the escalation of white resistance that appeared during the demonstrations, it became even clearer than before that, in order for blacks to enjoy full participation in society, the existing power structure had to be changed. As New Bern activist Johnnie Sampson, Jr. explained, it required “removing whites who did not support us” and in their place “getting someone in office who would fight for what we needed.”

Blacks recognized that the task had been made more difficult by the recently enacted city at-large election, which generated a greater resolve to collectively enhance their voting power. The racial unity that grew out of this period was an essential step towards attaining political influence.

Third, and most important, the demonstrations, which were dependent on the efforts of local high school students, led to a development of several young leaders who

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74 Personal interview with one of New Bern’s leading civil rights activists Johnnie Sampson, Jr. and his wife Ethel Sampson, New Bern, N.C., 26 December 2006.
were central in reviving and carrying on the political struggle during the late 1960’s and throughout the remainder of the twenty-first century. Barbara Lee, who first participated in the demonstrations when she was 17, became one the most visible political leaders in New Bern beginning in the mid 1970’s.\textsuperscript{75} She attributed this to the local NAACP Youth Council and the importance it had placed on registration and voting. Reiterating this point Lee stated that, “I’ve always been involved in [the political] process ever since I was not old enough to vote.”\textsuperscript{76} The New Bern Youth Council, which was initially formed to test the potential of the non-violent approach to integration, had a dual effect. Not only did it provide a material force to combat racial segregation, it also helped to foster self-reliant leaders who were stirred to take on other remaining civil rights issues.

The leadership training for the young activists was set in motion on March 18, 1960 at the staging of the first sit-in in New Bern, which occurred simultaneously at the lunch counters of the S.H. Kress and Company Store and the Clark’s drug store.\textsuperscript{77} Just three weeks earlier, the local NAACP had formed a youth council of students from J.T. Barber High School with Charles Bell, aged 17, and Horace Chapman, aged 15, appointed as its president and vice-president, respectively.\textsuperscript{78} More so than the older generation who had jobs and families to tend to, the students were much freer and willing to face the consequences for confronting the customs of white hegemony. On the day of action, led by Reverends Hill, A. Hillary Fisher, Leon C. Nixon, and B.S. Rivers, twenty-nine African-American youths courageously marched downtown in unison to demand equal service at both establishments.\textsuperscript{79}

\textsuperscript{75} Transcript of Interview with Barbara J. Lee (December 9, 1992), NBOHP.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{77} “Big Negro Group Arrested Here on Trespass Charges,” \textit{The Sun Journal}, March 18, 1960
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{79} Names of key ministers involved in the demonstrations can be found in “New Bern Has Celebration For Counter Win,” \textit{The Carolina Times} (Durham, N.C.), October 22, 1960.
Dressed in their Sunday best and carrying along Bibles and other inspirational readings, the New Bern NAACP Youth Council, like thousands of black student demonstrators throughout the South, walked with faith and with conviction to achieve racial equality through non-violence. However, their walk was rather unique. Unlike the sit-in movements in other parts of the South, which were predominately directed by college students and college-based groups such as SNCC and CORE, the New Bern movement was principally led by local high school students and their adult mentors. New Bern saw occasional visits from SNCC activists in Raleigh and Durham as well as SCLC co-founder Reverend Ralph Abernethy, all of whom came to support the movement occurring there, but the overall preparation, toil, and execution was achieved locally by the black leaders and demonstrators found in and around New Bern.  

When the students and the ministers entered the S.H. Kress and Clark’s stores, they immediately sat at the available counter stools and insisted on service. Alarmed at the effrontery of the black activists, both store managers promptly put up signs reading “Closed” and requested for each African-American to leave. After refusing to abandon their seats, the New Bern police were called in to handle the disturbance. Following a short period of resistance, the demonstrators were arrested and escorted to the New Bern city courthouse on charges of trespassing. While sitting in the courtroom in city hall, members of the youth council began singing hymns, clapping, and stomping their feet with excitement from the strides that they had made toward achieving equal access.  

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The young students had much to be excited about. Greatly due to their own initiative they achieved an unprecedented task by openly challenging the forces of white supremacy within New Bern. However, as their first attempt revealed, they found little white support or police protection in their endeavors to desegregate the city. This remained the case for the duration of the demonstrations. Certainly, moderate whites existed in New Bern—many of whom appeared to lend encouragement to the African-American protestors during civil rights marches—but they were very few in number.82

Though peaceful in nature, whites throughout the South viewed the sit-ins and all other non-violent civil rights demonstrations as threats to good order and social harmony. Accordingly, African-American activists and their white allies commonly faced condemnation as lawless agitators. Luther H. Hodges, who presided as North Carolina’s

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82 Transcript of Interview with Reverend W.G. Hickman, NBOHP; Transcript of Interview with Barbara J. Lee, NBOHP.
governor during the onset of the demonstrations, openly expressed his lack of sympathy “for any group of people who deliberately engage in activities which any reasonable person can see will result in a breakdown of law and order, as well as interference with the normal and proper operation of private business.” Like Governor Hodges, a good portion of Southern whites did not entirely embrace the African-American cause for racial equality and, in response, fought hard to keep their freedom movement from succeeding. As the ongoing Cold War heated up, civil rights activism in the United States faced further condemnation as growing numbers of whites insisted on its link with Communist infiltration and influence.

In New Bern, rather than blame Communism or any other factor, whites seemingly preferred to ignore and pay no heed to the so-called disturbances. Satisfying this desire, the article that described the sit-ins failed to make the front page of the leading New Bern newspaper, The Sun Journal, and instead was tucked away on the second page amid the rest of the criminal reports. This likely served to comfort and reassure residents of the white community that the initial black protests were merely trivial. Nonetheless, despite attempts to belittle the effects of the demonstrations, a substantial number of whites found the occurrences all too alarming and felt that there was a dire need for some sort of resolution.

To this end, a special meeting was called in April 1960 by the New Bern Board of Aldermen to consider the formation of an interracial committee for the community. Its main goals were to “provide an opportunity for discussion of all matters concerning human relationships,” “to seek understanding, on the part of the different races,” and “in

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the event of claims of injustices [to] seek a solution of the problem…” The preliminary committee comprised of Reverend Worth Lineberger, former New Bern Mayor W.C. Chadwick, and African-American leaders Reverend J. Murphy Smith, Reverend Hill, O.T. Faison, and B.S. Rivers. These men were then given the responsibility to pick individuals to serve on the permanent committee, which came to be referred to as the New Bern Good Will Committee.86

A month later, Reverend Smith, who was then named chairman of the interracial committee, presented a progress report to the Board of Aldermen. Although noting that modes of communication had been opened, his report was mostly bleak as little noticeable change was described. Years later Reverend Smith recalled the inherent problems of the committee explaining that, “it was very hard to get a consensus in the commission, especially between the blacks and whites…[so] we just gave up on it. We didn’t feel we were accomplishing anything.”87 As a result of its inability to revolutionize age-old attitudes, the New Bern Good Will Committee dissipated in less than four months after its establishment.

Meanwhile, the civil rights revolution sweeping through New Bern was far from fading. By July 1960 the New Bern Youth Council added another local segregated establishment, Anderson’s Drug Store, to its list of targeted businesses.88 Carrying signs reading “The Manager SAID we don’t want your BUSINESS!” and “They still won’t SERVE US!,” local black ministers Hill, Fisher, and Shade Marshburn joined the youth

85 Records of Minutes of Board of Aldermen Meeting, (May 2, 1960), Kellenberger Room, New Bern-Craven County Public Library
86 Records of Minutes of Board of Aldermen Meeting, (April 20, 1960), Kellenberger Room, New Bern-Craven County Public Library
87 Transcript of Interview of Reverend John Murphy Smith (August 28, 1992), NBOHP.
group in picket lines in front of Anderson’s as well as Kress’ and Clark’s variety stores.\footnote{Ibid.} To add more fuel to their fire the New Bern NAACP also initiated a boycott of each store and encouraged all black citizens to participate. As Dorothy Bryan attested, the boycott movement received support across the black community. “I did not participate in the rallies, the marches,” she said, “but if [Rev. Willie Hickman and Mr. Nixon] decided they were going to boycott certain stores, I did not go into those stores. I can vividly remember not going into Kress’s.”\footnote{Ibid.} The boycott proved to be quite a decisive weapon in the struggle for inclusion as more blacks refused to give their patronage to the racially discriminative businesses.

Largely due to the losses in business profits, Kress’s was finally forced to integrate its lunch counter in October 1960. To celebrate the efforts of close to eight months of demonstrating, the New Bern NAACP hosted a Victory Rally in downtown at St. Peter’s AME Zion Church.\footnote{Ibid.} Following the celebration, the achievements made would essentially go unnoticed except on a very limited local level. The civil rights movement in New Bern never did gain the degree of national exposure that was seen in places like Nashville, Tennessee where Diane Nash and fellow student activists made television headlines by exposing the cruel, violent, and appalling character behind the South’s Jim Crow system. This fact undoubtedly played a part in the leisurely pace of desegregation that occurred in the former city. Without the same type of outside disapproval and pressure to integrate, white New Bernians maintained their hold on segregated accommodations for as long as legally possible. Thus, it was the sole responsibility of local African-Americans to bring forth pressure to generate change.

\footnote{Emily Herring Wilson, \textit{Memories of New Bern: An Oral History Based on Interviews of New Bernians by New Bernians} (New Bern: New Bern Historical Society, 1995), 143.}
While demonstrations continued to dominate the atmosphere in New Bern into the month of November, elections of great importance on both national and state level were quickly approaching. In the year 1960, due to the emergence and proliferation of the sit-ins in the South, race once again resurfaced as a key political issue. This was apparent in most political contests, particularly that of the presidential race between Democrat nominee Senator John F. Kennedy and Republican challenger Richard M. Nixon. For months, both men tiptoed around the delicate issue of civil rights for fear of losing Southern votes, but after Kennedy influenced a Georgia judge to release Martin Luther King, Jr. from jail, the central role race would play in the election was made concrete.\footnote{Michael Goldfield, \textit{The Color of Politics: Race and the Mainsprings of American Politics} (New York: The New Press, 1997), 287; Taylor Branch, \textit{Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 341.}

The gubernatorial race in North Carolina was also unable to escape the issue of civil rights. Candidate Dr. I Beverly Lake, who was described as a man who “would turn back the clock…and plunge North Carolina into an era of closed schools and racial discord” if he was allowed, made this certain through the constant voicing of his pro-segregationist platform.\footnote{Quote from the article “A Race-Centered Campaign” found in the \textit{Winston-Salem Journal}, June 1, 1960.} Progressive opponent Terry Sanford preferred to avoid the race issue but was forced to reveal a portion of his position on integration in order to compete with Lake’s campaign.\footnote{Drescher, xix.}

Deeply embedded within the political races mentioned above were strands of intense emotion that no political contestant could control. This emanated from white and black voters alike, many of whom felt that they had much to potentially gain or lose from the outcome of the elections. Whether social moderates or segregationists prevailed would undoubtedly determine the fate and the direction of civil rights in the state of North Carolina and the nation as a whole. African-Americans throughout North Carolina
had a clear recognition of this based on the increases in their voter registration numbers, which had more than doubled in percentage since 1952.  

Blacks in New Bern were no less conscious of the magnitude of the November elections in bringing forth a new day in race relations. Putting their faith behind Sanford and Kennedy, hundreds of the city’s black citizens, many of whom had never voted in any prior election, turned out at the polls to cast their votes. The local NAACP was responsible for registering and preparing many of these black voters who were able to assist Kennedy in sweeping every ward in the city. Across the nation, African-Americans voted Democratic in the presidential election by roughly a 70-30 ratio making them a key ingredient in securing victory for Kennedy. Sanford’s success over Lake in the North Carolina governor’s race was likewise greatly dependent on the support of African-American constituents.

Without question, black political influence had grown manifold, however the majority of African-Americans still faced restraints in their rights to register and vote. The Civil Rights Act of 1960 made small steps toward expanding the black ballot through the use of voting referees who were to investigate and report complaints of voting denial in state elections. Regrettably, like the Civil Rights Act of 1957, it was largely futile. Voting referees were rarely deployed and often could only cover small locales.

North Carolina was among several Southern states that were unaffected by the act. In 1960, no more than thirty-eight percent of the black voting age population was

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95 38% of voting-age African-Americans were registered in 1960 compared to 18% in 1952, Lawson, 81.
96 Phone interview with Bernard White, 12 October 2006.
98 Branch, 374.
99 Branch, 332-333.
eligible to vote. As seen below in Figure 7, similar statistics were found in most of the Eastern counties. In the same year, the state also witnessed frequent complaints of voting discrimination, which influenced the Civil Rights Advisory Committee of North Carolina to hold hearings in the communities of Greenville, Rocky Mount, Fayetteville, Raleigh, Durham, Greensboro, Winston-Salem, Charlotte, Asheville, and New Bern.


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100 Lawson, 81.
Civil right activists in New Bern acknowledged pervasive voting denial as a primary contributing factor to the lack of registered black voters in the city, but many began to doubt whether the local NAACP was doing all it could to build upon efforts of the past. In almost two decades, the branch had made extremely marginal gains in registering black voters especially compared to the successes of other branches in the state. This produced an upsurge of dissatisfaction, which soon influenced the formation of a new coalition. In 1963, after attending a Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) convention in Georgia directed by Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., several local African-American men and women were stimulated to form a branch in Craven County.\footnote{Personal interview with Ethel Sampson, New Bern, N.C., 12 September 2006.} Reverend Nixon of New Bern was named president and Reverend Hickman, who had experience working alongside SCLC leaders Andrew Young and King, was bestowed a key role in the organization as well.\footnote{Tape of interview of Willie Hickman (August 4, 1993), Behind the Veil: African American Life in the Jim Crow South Oral History Project, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.}

Though the birth of the SCLC symbolized a philosophical split among the black community, the organization did not intend to sever connections with the local NAACP, but rather form a collective force to improve and expand local voter registration campaigns and political education efforts. Like the NAACP, it ultimately aimed to empower African-American citizens within the New Bern area. What differed, besides its deep ties to ministry, were its stronger demands and more assertive methods. In particular, this involved the relentless petitioning of the city and the county board of elections against unjust and discriminatory practices. The immediate impact of the SCLC was somewhat stalled in Craven County, however, as no city in the county was among those to receive financial assistance from the Kennedy administration’s Voter’s Education
Project and, as before, the progressing desegregation movement was still occupying the weight of the attention of civil rights activity.\footnote{Greensboro, Goldsboro, High Point, Wilmington, and Durham were the only cities to receive financial assistance from the VEP, found in the Papers of the NAACP, NAACP Relations with the Modern Civil Rights Movement, Bostock Library, Duke University.}

In the same year that the Craven County SCLC was founded, the New Bern NAACP Youth Council had grown to become the second largest city chapter in the state with 219 members.\footnote{Dunn had the most with 247 members, found in the Papers of the NAACP, Youth File, Bostock Library, Duke University.} Its expansion in numbers directly corresponded to the expansion in the demonstrations it staged. Over the course of 1963, the youth council was engaged in picketing and protesting in front of several new establishments, namely the A&W restaurant and the Holiday Inn, where they still commonly faced lock-outs and arrest charges. The council also encountered more acute forms of white opposition as groups of “frightening-looking” whites carrying sticks and clubs began lining the streets to intimidate the African-American protestors.\footnote{Transcript of Interview of Barbara J. Lee, NBOHP.} At this point in the movement, racial tensions had clearly reached a boiling point.

Tension radiated from both races, which city attorney Alfred D. Ward could certainly verify. In the midst of 1963, Reverend Nixon and NAACP attorney Reginald Frazier paid a visit to Ward to discuss the ongoing civil rights protests. When disagreements between the two parties erupted, Reverend Nixon launched threatening remarks towards the city attorney and pledged that if the black protestors were harmed a violent insurrection would arise in New Bern. In the statement below, Ward described the level of concern that he felt following Reverend Nixon’s confrontational words.

Reverend Nixon became rather agitated…he told me the streets were going to run red with blood.

He left and I had some little conversation with Reginald Frazier and Reginald tried to assure me that that was not gonna happen. I took it seriously. At that time Terry Sanford was governor of
North Carolina. Terry was a friend of mine. I called and he gave me a number at which I could reach him any time day or night in case we needed any assistance from the National Guard down there. I kept that number in my wallet for years during the rest of his term in office…[but I] never had to use it.\textsuperscript{108}

Rather than call out the National Guard, the leading white citizens of New Bern naturally favored to avoid all racial conflict. Primarily out of a fear that the situation might evolve into the violent riots that were occurring in Albany, Georgia and Birmingham, Alabama, another city-wide interracial organization was put into place.

In August 1963, New Bern Mayor Mack L. Upton made quick arrangements to create the Bi-racial Committee to find means to peacefully desegregate the theaters, restaurants, and hotels that remained segregated. W.C. Chadwick, who served as a member of the New Bern Good Will Committee, was appointed chairman of the new-founded organization. At the request of the Mayors’ Cooperating Committee of North Carolina, Chadwick delivered a report in which he articulated the importance and the urgency in solving the problem of desegregation in New Bern. He asserted that integration must be accepted not only to avoid being forced by unpleasant methods, but also because it represented the will of the nation. Chadwick expressed this idea in a compelling manner as he uttered, “We, the citizens of New Bern, are a part of a great State, a great nation, and we cannot long resist a movement which is brought about by a sympathetic nation to remedy a wrong which has existed for so long.”\textsuperscript{109}

Fellow African-American committee member O.T. Faison credited Chadwick as being one of the few whites who was genuinely interested in improving race relations in

\textsuperscript{108} Transcript of Interview of Alfred D. Ward (December 22, 1992), NBOHP.
\textsuperscript{109} “An Eastern City’s Report,” written by W.C. Chadwick, Chairman of the New Bern Biracial Committee found in Waynick, Brooks, and Pitts, 204-205.
Owing much to Chadwick’s leadership, desegregation in New Bern certainly progressed at a much swifter pace than before and without any violent outbreaks or forced government intervention. The chairman’s willingness to negotiate solutions contributed a great deal to this. Throughout his tenure, Chadwick frequently allowed members of the black community to voice their opinions to him and other members of the committee about certain changes that they felt were necessary. This allowed an open forum for African-Americans to communicate their grievances as well as an opportunity to gain the sanction and sympathy of moderate whites such as Chadwick. The latter, in particular, was a key step for blacks in securing full integration.

With the support of the Bi-racial Committee, the force of desegregation propelled through 1965 as the legal counsel of the New Bern NAACP initiated and won cases against housing discrimination in *Norma Richardson et al. v. Housing Authority of New Bern*, school segregation in *Hickman et al v. Craven County Board of Education*, and the refusal of black customers in *Wooten v. John Moore*. In the last case, NAACP attorneys Reginald Frazier of New Bern and Julius Chambers of Charlotte were able to convince the judge to fine the owner of Moore’s BBQ in the amount of $5,000 which, in turn, forced Moore to relocate his business. As African-Americans garnered repeated success in integrating New Bern, the “American Dream” that King so fervently expressed in front of thousands during the March on Washington appeared exceedingly possible.

Upward black mobility in New Bern and across the nation was assisted a great deal with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which put an official end to the dominant reign of Jim Crow. Among its chief objectives, Congress laid out provisions in

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110 Transcript of Interview of O.T. Faison (April 7, 1992), NBOHP.
111 John Davis Larkins, Jr. Papers, Special Collections, J.Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University.
the act to outlaw discrimination in public places and to protect equal employment opportunity. The act also addressed the issue of African-American political rights, by prohibiting the employment of literacy tests or any other discriminatory schemes aimed at minority groups as a qualification for voting. The voting provision of the act was inadequate in its enforcement, but since desegregation had been legally validated, African-Americans were left with more liberty to focus on achieving political power.\textsuperscript{113} Subsequently, the strongest push yet to be seen was made among civil rights workers across the South to reverse the mass disenfranchisement of blacks in the region.

Within a few weeks of the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, nearly 60,000 African-Americans in Mississippi registered to vote as a result of the SNCC-sponsored project known as Freedom Summer.\textsuperscript{114} The organization frequently met tragedy—none worse than the kidnapping and brutal murder of three young civil rights volunteers by members the local Ku Klux Klan—but despite the heavy risks involved, their efforts never relinquished. The considerable gains during the summer months of 1964 allowed the formation of the interracial Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), which transported sixty-eight delegates to challenge the white-controlled party at the Democratic Party Convention in Atlantic City that August.\textsuperscript{115} At the convention, MFDP delegate Fannie Lou Hamer spoke in front of a national audience of the horrible barriers that she and other southern blacks experienced in registering to vote. After describing the physical assault that she was subjected to while in a state prison, Hamer then posed the question, “is this America, the land of the free and the home of the

\textsuperscript{114} D’Angelo, 285.
\textsuperscript{115} Gerstle, \textit{The American Crucible}, 286.
brave...where we are threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings?”

The extent of the community organization that transpired in the state of Mississippi denoted a stronger resolve among African-American citizens who over the years had grown dissatisfied with playing the sit-and-wait game. No longer willing to concede their rights to suffrage, blacks insisted on placing less faith in the broken promises of politicians and more faith in their own power to make things happen. This notion was shared and communicated by blacks outside Mississippi as well, perhaps most forcefully by Black Muslim revolutionary Malcolm X. In a speech he delivered on April 3, 1964, Malcolm X avidly expressed the widespread attitude among black people who he asserted were “fed up with the dillydallying, pussyfooting, compromising approach that we’ve been using toward getting our freedom. We want freedom now, but...we’ve got to fight until we overcome.” The “fight to overcome” unfurled in communities throughout the South that year via the organizational cooperation between SNCC, CORE, the SCLC, and the NAACP. In each of the Southern states, activists within these organizations supervised extensive voter registration drives and set up numerous “Freedom Schools” where literacy and civic lessons were taught to potential black voters.

While paying close attention to the happenings on the national scene, civil rights leaders in New Bern were compelled to reflect on the progress of their own movement. As they witnessed from afar, integrating lunch counters and other public spaces was largely becoming something of the past, while voting rights materialized as a more pertinent and worthwhile push. From an inspiration to follow this trend, African-Americans in New Bern sought to place more emphasis on influencing politics within

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116 Fragments of Hamer’s speech found in Gerstle, 288.
117 “The Ballot or the Bullet” speech found in George Brietman, Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements, (New York:Grove Press, 1965), 238.
their own locale. The subsequent preparation and groundwork that was made marked a renewed commitment among them to fight for political inclusion.

Local NAACP activist James Gavin was one of many who “were interested in getting blacks registered to vote…”, primarily for the November 1964 presidential election between Democratic candidate Lyndon B. Johnson and Republican hopeful Barry M. Goldwater.\textsuperscript{118} Blacks in New Bern found this election particularly important since the outcome, even more so than four years ago, promised to be contingent on the issue of race. As stipulated by the national branch, no local branch of the NAACP was allowed to endorse political candidates, but African-Americans in New Bern did not need any one tell them to whom they should cast a ballot. Liberal-minded Johnson was the obvious choice over Goldwater, who as Senator voted against the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and whose campaign was based upon both racial hatred and white chauvinism.\textsuperscript{119}

The crucial task then was to register as many African-Americans in the city as possible. The New Bern NAACP youth council was perhaps most involved in campaigning for black participation for the election. Over a period of several weeks that lasted up to Election Day, then Vice-president Barbara Lee and other members of the youth council made frequent door-to-door calls to homes throughout the black community to inform and train citizens of the common prerequisites to registering to vote—such as reciting the preamble of the Constitution. Other tactics used to better prepare blacks for registration included the dispatching of “poll watchers” who were to observe “what occurred to blacks in the polls” and report back to Reverend Hickman and other supervisors in the NAACP.\textsuperscript{120} The Combined Civic Organizations of New Bern and Craven County, prominent in political affairs by 1964, was also involved by offering free

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{118} Transcript of interview of James Gavin (October 15, 1992), NBOHP.
\item \textsuperscript{119} Goldfield, 309-310.
\item \textsuperscript{120} Personal interview with Barbara J. Lee New Bern, N.C., 8 August 2006
\end{itemize}
rides to blacks to the polls on the day of the election.\textsuperscript{121} As seen in Figure 8, the organization assisted in providing a total of eight car pool stations in New Bern.

![Figure 8: Free Vote Rides Provided by Combined Civic Organizations of New Bern and Craven County for 1964 Presidential Election. (Source: Coastal Progress, Inc. / Craven Operation Progress, 1963-1969, North Carolina Fund Records, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.).](image)

The results of the election indicated that these efforts were highly successful. Due to the sizeable majorities that Johnson polled in the predominately black wards of the city, he ousted opponent Goldwater by more than one thousand votes.\textsuperscript{122} Across the country (except in the Deep South states of Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and South Carolina as well as his home state of Arizona), Goldwater fared quite poorly and was unable to carry enough votes to triumph over Johnson.\textsuperscript{123} Black voters in New Bern likely felt proud to have contributed, though only a small amount, to Johnson’s overwhelming defeat of Goldwater on the national scene. However, this was only

\textsuperscript{121} Organization was led by Robert M. Whitehead (African-American).

\textsuperscript{122} \textit{Craven County Record of Elections, 1950-1968}, Search Room, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, N.C.

\textsuperscript{123} Goldfield, 309.
partially satisfying, for the resurgence of black political efforts in New Bern did not stop simply with the vote.

Table 3: Voting Tally in New Bern for 1964 Presidential Election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ward</th>
<th>Lyndon B. Johnson/Herbert Humphrey</th>
<th>Barry M. Goldwater/William Miller</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Ward</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Ward</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Ward</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth Ward</td>
<td>1049</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The second crucial aim among local black activists involved more concerted efforts to gain group access to office-holding. The task had not become any easier since Reverend G.J. Hill’s attempt in 1959, which James Gavin experienced first-hand. In 1964, while employed as a service worker at Stephen & Cardelli, Gavin applied for a position on the Craven County Board of Education.\(^{124}\) When his white superiors found out that he was running for a political position, they were baffled at his audacity. “They didn’t fire me,” Gavin said. “They kept me. But they ventured, ‘man, you running against your bread and butter. The very man that gives us jobs’…”\(^{125}\) Much like Gavin’s employers, many whites in Craven County still judged the notion of black office-holding to be extremely avant-garde and even laughable. Thus, as many might have expected, Gavin did not receive a position on the school board. Yet his strive for political influence stood to challenge old notions of who was fit to hold positions of power. Success did come to a few black aspirants in other parts of the state. In the same year that Gavin ran for office, William R. Crawford of Forsyth County was elected to the State House of

\(^{124}\) Transcript of interview of James Gavin (October 15, 1992), NBOHP.

\(^{125}\) Ibid.
Representatives, making him the first African-American to serve in the state legislature since the period of Reconstruction. Similar feats were gradually being won across the South as increased numbers of blacks boldly ran for political office in city, county, and state elections.

As it had in the past, the perpetual sprouting of black empowerment came to the dismay of Southern white conservatives who were not receptive to this type of social change. Considering liberal politicians as part of the problem, many whites were urged to speak out against what they found to be a decline and a decay of American society. In an anonymous letter written to North Carolina Governor Dan Moore in early 1965, an angry citizen, who felt that “God did not inte[n]d for white and negro[e]s to mix,” condemned Moore for his cooperation and compliance with African-American interests. At the end of the letter, the individual issued a prayer that “I can live to see you and [Lyndon] Johnson out of office for we have never had anything in office as we got now.” Similar attitudes saturated the minds of whites across the state of North Carolina, but they were not always so easy to perceive.

How whites truly felt about certain issues and certain politicians was often times masked by their voting activity. Based on their voting pattern in the 1964 presidential election alone, it appeared that whites in New Bern supported both Johnson and the biracial approach of the Democratic Party. Their endorsement of Johnson, however, was based more upon a tradition of Democratic Party loyalty that had existed among white Eastern North Carolinians since the Civil War. This longstanding nature proved particularly difficult for Goldwater to overcome. Frank Rouse, who ran for the position of

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126 “Negro Chosen as Nominee in Forsyth,” The News and Observer (Raleigh, N.C.), May, 31 1964
127 Letter found in Governor Moore papers under the folder titled “New Bern Bombing,” Search Room, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, N.C.
128 Black voters compromised a minority of those who cast a ballot in New Bern for the 1964 presidential election. Therefore, whites votes also contributed to Johnson’s success in the city.
state Republican Party Chairman in 1964, explained that to vote Democratic in North Carolina “was an obligation” and “a thing of honor, something [whites] take seriously.” In fact, from 1900 to 1968, North Carolina citizens voted majority Democrat in every presidential election, except in 1928. However, as the Democratic Party began slipping further away from its traditional conservative roots and towards a more liberal and race-centered agenda, increasing numbers of whites in the state were left feeling neglected and unrepresented.

A small percentage of these frustrated whites were compelled to take measures into their own hands. Beginning in 1964 and persisting into the late 1960’s, bands of the KKK reemerged across the state to hunt out and strip African-Americans of their power. During these years, the Klan was particularly vibrant in areas of Eastern North Carolina including Jones, Hyde, Beaufort, and Craven counties. State Bureau of Investigation records reveal that there were at least three Klaverns in Craven County, which frequently held outdoor rallies—drawing crowds ranging from 350 to 650 persons—in the rural towns of Vanceboro, Jasper, Ernul, Dover, and Cove City. New Bern was also the site of recurrent Klan activity which, on January 25, 1965, witnessed its most intense wave.

On that evening, two explosions occurred right outside St. Peter’s AME Zion Church where a local NAACP meeting was being held. The meeting, which drew close to two-hundred and fifty civil rights activists from Craven, Carteret, Jones, Pamlico, and Onslow counties, was put forth to discuss school integration as well as the 1964 civil

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129 Bass and De Vries, 237.
130 Ibid., 228.
rights bill.\textsuperscript{132} No individuals were injured in the blasts, as only two automobiles parked outside the church were damaged, one belonging to Jones County NAACP president Caroline B. Chadwick and the other to NAACP attorney Julius Chambers.\textsuperscript{133} Approximately an hour later that night, another explosion was set off at nearby Oscar’s Mortuary, where, again, only minimal damage occurred. Owner Oscar Dove, who was a known integrationist leader as well as a member of the Bi-Racial Committee, informed authorities that this was not the first incident of its kind. He indicated that in July 1964 a cross was burned in front of his establishment and that on several occasions bottles had been thrown through his front window.\textsuperscript{134}

Figure 9: News Article of the New Bern Bombing, 1965. (Source: The Carolinian (Raleigh, N.C.), January 30, 1965.).

The three white males who were arrested in connection with the crimes later admitted to setting off each of the bombs at both the church and the mortuary. Their affiliation with the KKK was never confirmed, however, their form of targeted racism fit

\textsuperscript{132} Federal Bureau of Investigation report (February 9, 1965) RE: Edward Earl Fillingame, Laurie Latham Fillingame, Raymond Duguid Mills, Governor Dan Moore papers, New Bern Bombing, Search Room, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, N.C.

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.
the mold of typical Klan brutality. The terrorism that the bombers inflicted in New Bern that winter day succeeded in catching the attention of members of the black community, but not to the point of causing any immediate panic. The most common sentiment was one of bewilderment, which compelled Dove to ask, “If they want something why don’t they come to me?” Similar episodes, but to a much lesser degree, continued to make sporadic appearances in New Bern up to the late 1960’s as loyal disciples of white supremacy insisted on spoiling African-American advancement.

Without a doubt, the racial climate in New Bern had radically evolved since the birth of the sit-in movement. The increase in black demands that arose during this period together with the intensification of white reactions produced a stormy and highly volatile milieu in which to live. This phase of the civil rights movement is important in framing the conflicting goals among white and black New Bernians, but more importantly it reveals the evolutionary process of several civil rights issues, namely politics. For several years, voting and office-holding were one of many integral issues for blacks in New Bern and only through time, reflection, and great effort did it come to prominence. To integrate voting lists, civil rights activists relied on the same resolute and grassroots-based organization that integrated hotels, lunch counters, and movie theaters. By 1965, when black political development was the primary issue being cultivated in the city, a new piece of national legislation—with the potential of breaking new ground in their political rights—was on the brink of being introduced.

In response to the racial violence that surfaced during the voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, President Johnson was persuaded to further champion the cause for civil rights by signing the national Voting Rights Act (VRA) into law. Ibid.

effect on August 6, 1965. More so than the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the VRA utilized expansive powers to abolish all existing obstacles to black voting power in the South. In North Carolina, twenty-six counties were initially affected under the act, which included Craven as well as most of the other eastern counties.\textsuperscript{137} As with all other affected areas, political opportunities within Craven County that had been previously unavailable for African-Americans to utilize were finally unlocked. The county seat, in particular, greeted the new political possibilities with outstretched arms. Accordingly, the post-VRA atmosphere in New Bern witnessed a dramatic increase in the ways that blacks understood, valued, and exercised the franchise.

\textsuperscript{137} After further scrutiny, an additional 14 counties in North Carolina were added under the act’s jurisdiction by 1966.
Soon after the Voting Rights Act was passed by Congress in 1965, nation-wide SNCC leader John Lewis energetically proclaimed it a “milestone and every bit as momentous and significant...as the Emancipation Proclamation or the 1954 supreme court decision.”\(^{138}\) Lewis’s keen observations are hard to refute. The VRA, which banned any voting qualification that might “deny or abridge the right of any citizen of the United States to vote on account of race or color,” was by far the strongest federal legislation yet to be seen to enforce and protect against violations of the Fifteenth Amendment.\(^{139}\) Voting qualifications, which used to lie in the hands of the states and local officials to determine, were now controlled and supervised by the federal government. This meant that all remaining poll taxes, literacy tests, or other racially discriminatory devices such as intimidation, harassment, or physical violence were effectively prohibited from all elections.

As stipulated in the VRA, any county which utilized discriminatory election practices and did not have at least fifty per cent of its eligible non-white voters registered by Nov. 1, 1964 or to vote in the 1964 presidential election was liable to change its election system in compliance with the new legislation.\(^{140}\) Due to the South’s historic resistance to African-American voting, only territories within this region of the country were covered under the 1965 act. This included the entirety of each of the Deep South


\(^{139}\) Section 2 of An act to enforce the fifteenth amendment to the constitution of the United States and for other purposes, August 6, 1965 (Voting Rights Act); Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789-; General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archive. [online version on January 10, 2007 at http://ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=100.]

states—Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina—in addition to Virginia and numerous counties in North Carolina. Any affected territory that violated the text laid out in the VRA faced severe consequences either in the form of intrusion by federal examiners or by possible forced court-order. Without such stringent measures whites—who were in complete control of the election process—would naturally choose to preserve their age-old practice of excluding qualified black citizens from the polls. It is just a shame, as historian Steven Lawson commented, that “it required a national crisis to precipitate a significant departure from past policies.”

African-Americans across the South, who were less concerned with the causes for the voting rights bill’s implementation, celebrated with jubilation at its arrival. For many of them, the VRA was cherished as a symbol of hope and deliverance from second-class citizenship. Fittingly, full participation in society never seemed so viable to Southern African-Americans as it did following August 1965. Southern whites, on the other hand, were not nearly as ecstatic, especially once they realized that they were now forced to fully renovate and rewrite their election rules to accommodate black voters. Finding the new voting rights law both unmerited and impractical, whites generally regarded it with great apprehension. In several of the Southern states, most notably in communities in Mississippi, South Carolina, and Alabama, whites abruptly lashed out by introducing discriminatory policies to dilute black voting and neutralize the bill’s authority.

White leaders in North Carolina likewise gave the bill a less than welcoming reception. Convinced that the VRA was unnecessary in his state, Governor Dan Moore was not at all reserved about speaking his utter disapproval. “I have said before and I say

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again,“ Moore proclaimed in 1965, “I do not think we need that bill in North Carolina…I think the people who wanted to vote have been allowed to vote.”

Although North Carolina had far fewer obstacles to black political participation than its fellow Southern counterparts, the majority of the state’s counties still utilized the literacy test, upheld in 1959 by Supreme Court Justice Earl Warren, as a primary requirement for registering to vote.

Moore was unable to recognize that these tests, which were racially motivated and administered unfairly to non-white citizens, certainly did not allow all of those who wanted to vote. Malcolm Seawell, who was Chairman of the North Carolina State Board of Elections at that time, also was seemingly unaware of the existence of voting denial as a function of the literacy test. He openly expressed his censure of the bill by stating, “I am not in favor of the law, but I am in favor of obeying it...it’s a bad day, when a person cannot read or write and a semi-moron can come in and cast a vote in North Carolina.”

Both Moore and Seawall, together with most Southern whites, had clearly missed the point behind the voting rights measure. However, as the months and years passed and black voting registration numbers soared, the original essentiality and merit behind the VRA was no longer so easy to discount. Throughout the South, where thousands of federal examiners were deployed to monitor election practices, African-American registration jumped from 33.8% in 1964 to 56.6% in 1968. In North Carolina, though the numbers were less impressive, the percent of registered African-Americans rose from 46.8% in 1964 to 53.7% in 1969.

The VRA, which quite visibly impacted the political

145 Krousser, 359.
147 Valelly, The Two Reconstructions, 4, 200.
lives of countless African-Americans, was to be deemed a watershed moment that redefined American democracy.

To date, despite its vast implications, the crucial post-1965 phase of the civil rights movement has received minimal scholarly attention in terms of unearthing answers to key questions, namely: How was African-American political behavior shaped by the Voting Rights Act? How did African-Americans utilize the inherent authority of the VRA to formulate political power? How did whites both challenge and accommodate the rise in black political opportunities after 1965? Lastly, how do the answers to these questions vary from community to community? In recent years, slight preparation for further discussion of these issues has been made. In 2005, Hasan Kwame Jeffries convincingly addressed the question of how the VRA transformed strands of black political behavior in his work entitled, “Organizing for More Than the Vote: The Political Radicalization of Local People in Lowndes County, Alabama, 1965-1966.” Yet his study is one of the few of its kind and, due to its limited scope in time, merely scratches the surface of the deep and long-lasting implications of the Voting Rights Act.

Such implications were more than apparent within New Bern. The rising forms of black political mobilization and activism that emerged in the midst of 1965 provide a fuller portrait of the functions of the VRA as it existed both in its early stages and in the years to come. Unlike any piece of legislation before, the VRA brought real change to the city. This was seen in the return of blacks running for local office, an enlargement of the black electorate, a more systematic and uncompromising approach among black activists to obtain political goals, and the advent of white candidates willing to represent black interests. Tracing the ways in which the political role of African-Americans evolved in

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149 Jeffries in Theoharis and Woodard (eds.), *Groundwork*, 140-157
New Bern following the VRA offers answers to many of the central questions of the period that are mentioned above.

When African-American New Bernians initially learned that their community was to be covered under the VRA, they were enthused yet somewhat mystified. Pervading the minds of citizens throughout the black community were common mantras such as, “Is it true? Can I really vote? Are they gonna take it away from me?” ¹⁵⁰ These doubts soon passed as they came to see the act as genuinely capable of rescuing them from their political vulnerability.

The VRA was certainly a vanguard of widespread black political power, but it did not automatically translate into equal access to voting rights. This has been a common misconception particularly among scholars, most notably Richard Valelly, who place far too much emphasis on the federal role on voting rights, which was not as defining as it has been claimed.¹⁵¹ The voting rights litigation simply set out the general course for expanding black ballots, but it was interpreted and abided by differently in every community. Thus, the level of benefits that could be reaped from the VRA hinged on black initiative to make the trip to the polls to register and vote, as well as the degree of discriminatory impediments that local white election officials placed in their pathway to progress.

In New Bern, impediments following the VRA were mostly limited to racial slurs and threats, which continued to be targeted at African-Americans who appeared at the polls to register or vote. This was the case in most communities in North Carolina where whites generally complied with the law. As a result, no federal registrars were forced to

¹⁵⁰ Personal Interview with Julius Parham, Jr. and Bernard George, New Bern, N.C., 7 August 2006
¹⁵¹ Valelly, The Two Reconstructions, 15-16.
be sent to any in county in the state, including Craven. In the company of legal protection, blacks in New Bern generally felt safer to exercise their political freedoms, which was a significant change from the past. Bernard White, who was a member of the New Bern NAACP youth council in the 1960’s and a developing political rights activist during the 1970’s, explained that before the VRA, the city’s blacks often felt that “there was no real reason to vote” since “just like the white bathrooms, pools, and seating areas, blacks were excluded from voting, too.”

This is not to say, however, that most African-Americans in New Bern were living in a sort of political slumber before the arrival of the VRA in which they were either incognizant or apathetic towards the importance of the vote. Rather, it was not until they were liberated from both the fears and the obstacles surrounding the election process that they could most effectively use the new political opportunities that they had been granted. However, once again it needs to be stressed that the VRA contributed to black political power in New Bern, but it did not create it. Instead, the origins of black political power are to be found much earlier in the days of Reconstruction and later Jim Crow. African-American historian Raymond Gavins explained it best when he argued that “black initiative born of the experience of segregation, not federal legislation and policy alone, must be seen as a major source of their collective effort.” In other words, blacks in New Bern were not solely dependent on government intervention, such as the VRA, to fight their political battle. Decades spent as second-class citizens provided the necessary motivation needed to make political gains, which, largely due to their own will and

153 Personal interview with Julius Parham, Jr. and Bernard George, New Bern, N.C., 7 August 2006
political awareness, had been steadily climbing since 1948. Several months before the VRA was passed, improved efforts continued to be seen in New Bern when black voters organized to rally behind the next black political candidate for the city election held on May 4, 1965.

In that election, Joseph Edwards, who was only the third African-American in New Bern to aspire to political office in the twentieth century, was one of five candidates running for a board of aldermen position from the fifth ward. After the official tabulation was reached, Edwards had enough supporters to beat out two white challengers, including incumbent R.B Bratcher, but lacked close to two-hundred votes to be elected.155 Edward’s attempt, though unsuccessful in terms of victory, was significant in galvanizing a fresh and unique trend in the history of New Bern politics. From that election forward, black candidates vied for positions of power in every city election up to the latest one to be recorded in 2005. As this political development reveals, African-American New Bernians had a heightened sense of confidence in which they believed that they shared both an equal chance and an equal right with whites to win political office and shape local policy. The enactment of the VRA contributed a good deal to this momentum, primarily by enveloping a sizeable number of potential black voters who were influenced to register and help elect their fellow black citizens.

The growth in black political mobility found in New Bern post-1965 stands to disprove another common misconception of this phase of the civil rights movement, which historian Charles M. Payne supports in his study *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*. In this work, Payne incorrectly maintains that the grassroots organizing tradition among Southern blacks was

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already in decline in 1965 and that the movement, as a whole, was on a slow downward spiral towards demoralization. Exemplified by the growing political organization among African-Americans in New Bern, civil rights efforts did not stop with the passing of the VRA.

In fact, the spirit of mass action born in 1960 remained a driving force in New Bern that enabled black activists, who desired to make the best use of the act, to help register more adults in the black community. Regrettably, few voter registration records in New Bern prior to the year 1971 have survived. The absence of these voter records makes fully understanding the impact of the VRA in its initial years more difficult. Nonetheless, other various forms of political activity and behavior among the African-American electorate, which will be in discussed in greater detail in the upcoming chapters, are able to demonstrate the presence and workings of the VRA in this locale.

Black citizens were the primary recipients, but they were not the only ones in the city whose political lives were shaped by the VRA. The other half of the post-1965 narrative involves the parallel rise in voting activity among the white community. The VRA had produced quite a political upheaval in the South which caused many whites, including those in New Bern, to feel as if their historic hold on political power was gradually being taken away and handed over to African-Americans. A month after the VRA was enacted, an Eastern North Carolina Democratic Rally was held approximately thirty miles west of New Bern in Kinston, North Carolina. Clearly directed to an audience of dissatisfied whites, the rally promised to exhibit political leaders from city, county, state, and national positions who could answer questions such as, “have our state and federal governments surrendered to the demonstrations, sit-ins, wallow-ins, riots,

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156 Payne, 339, 367.
marches, and other lawless acts by LBJ’s chosen people?” and “do the states of this Republic have any of the rights left to them?” These feelings of resentment were shared across the nation and produced a phase of “white backlash” in which conservative whites organized behind their ballots to restore the teetering balance of power.

For a significant number of these white Americans, the racial benevolence and liberalism of the Democrats within the Johnson Administration had become hackneyed and tiresome. As historian Matthew Lassiter asserts, by 1966, a new type of white voter emerged who was marked by an “obsession with future success rather than past injustice, and the submergence of racial discourse beneath the color-blind politics of residential privilege.” ¹⁵⁷ This new voter was also more than ready to make a change in his political leaders to those, who more like himself, were interested in placing less emphasis on race. As a result, a grassroots-based Republican strength rose across the Sunbelt South and the West where the Grand Old Party (G.O.P.) won numerous gubernatorial races in states such as Arkansas, Florida, and California, and gained a multitude of new seats in both the U.S. Senate and a range of state legislatures, including North Carolina.¹⁵⁸ The Republican revival movement made little immediate impact in New Bern where most whites still maintained a loyalty to the Democratic Party, but no later than the 1968 presidential election it became clear that even their past allegiance was fading.

ASK YOUR LEADERS!
They Can Tell You!
ALL OF THEM -- City, County, State, National --
Will Be At The
EASTERN CAROLINA
DEMOCRATIC PARTY RALLY
Thursday --- September 9, 1965
6:30 P.M. in the Kinston ballpark
BARBECUE SERVED
ASK! ASK! ASK! ASK! ASK! ASK! ASK! ASK! ASK!
Is the promised payment for the mixing of the races in our mental institutions worth it?
Does the National Democratic Party have enough rags, parliamentary proceedings, and whitewash to cover LBJ's boy, Bobby Baker?
Will the cost of a deteriorating public school system continue to rise as the quality of education for our children drops?
Have our State and Federal Governments surrendered to the demonstrations, sit-ins, wallow-ins, riots, marches, and other lawless acts by LBJ's chosen people?
Must a man be captive to a labor union he despises in order to provide food for his family?

YOUR LEADERS CAN TELL YOU!
COME TO THE RALLY!
FIND OUT FOR YOURSELF!

Figure 10: 1965 Eastern Carolina Democratic Party Rally Flier. (Source: Ruffin C. Godwin Papers, Special Collections Library, J.Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University (Greenville, North Carolina)).
While most whites used the ballot to reverse the tide of racially-charged politics, others continued to rely on the nature of physical pressure and intimidation. In the year 1966, the KKK and other white supremacy groups had further broadened their force in almost every Southern state in order to prevent black voting and office-holding. In North Carolina, numerous new “Klaverns” were organized primarily for this purpose; by the end of the year, the Klan had over one-hundred branches and approximately seven thousand official members in the state.\textsuperscript{159}

The Klan remained particularly active throughout Eastern North Carolina, especially Craven County, where the group was involved in countless violent demonstrations that were meant to “make things civilized.”\textsuperscript{160} KKK activity repeatedly took place in New Bern, as well. One familiar instance occurred in November 1965 when a cross was burned in front of a black couple’s home despite the fact that, according to the local paper, they “had no connections with any civil rights movements.”\textsuperscript{161} Seemingly random acts such as this were rare, but they were occurring more often and thereby causing the level of concern among the New Bern community to multiply.

Sometime between mid-1965 and February 1966, the frequency of the racially-motivated events of the past year spearheaded a move by local black and white leaders to formulate a city-wide Good Neighbor Council.\textsuperscript{162} North Carolina Governor Terry Sanford officially launched the idea of the Good Neighbor Councils in 1963, with the objective of fostering communication, understanding, and peaceful relations between black and whites in the state, with the ultimate aim of providing “equality for all

\textsuperscript{159} Cecelski, “Burning Memories,” 20.

\textsuperscript{160} Transcript of interview of Genevieve T. Dunn, October 15, 1992, NBOHP.

\textsuperscript{161} “Cross Burned at Negro’s Home Here Friday Night,” \textit{The Sun Journal} (New Bern, N.C.), November 6, 1965.

\textsuperscript{162} Governor Dan Moore papers, General Correspondence, Good Neighbor Council, 1966, Search Room, North Carolina State Archives (Raleigh, N.C.)
citizens.” After Sanford’s idea was proposed, councils had formed in dozens of cities and counties in North Carolina to address and eliminate the roots of racial conflict. Whites and blacks in New Bern desired to set up a council in their city for the same purpose.

At the founding of the New Bern Good Neighbor Council, D. Livingstone Stallings, white, and Robert M. Whitehead, black, were designated as its original two leaders. The remaining members of the council consisted of a wide variety of individuals from both the white and black communities including James Gavin, an African-American industrial worker, Genevieve Dunn, a white female who served on the New Bern Board of Education, and Janet Latham, a white female who worked in sales, to name a few. The interracial council, which remained active for roughly five years, was primarily instrumental in addressing racial discord and preventing it from escalating into outbreaks of violence. Reverend Charles Edward Sharp, who later replaced Stallings as chairman, felt that the Good Neighbor Council had been worthwhile since “many towns in Eastern North Carolina had some awful, awful times with rioting and bitter demonstrations,” especially in Plymouth and Williamston, whereas “New Bern had a much less difficult time.” The presence of a local mediatory group proved to be of vital importance particularly once elements of the militant and assertive ideology of “Black Power” filtered through the city in the latter part of the decade.

The New Bern Good Neighbor Council was able to contribute a good deal in enhancing the level of equality enjoyed by the city’s black citizens, but its powers were,

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163 Guidelines for the Establishment of County-Wide Good Neighbor of Human Relations Councils, North Carolina Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
164 Governor Dan Moore papers, General Correspondence, Good Neighbor Council, 1966, Search Room, North Carolina State Archives (Raleigh, N.C.)
165 Transcript of Interview of James Gavin (October 15, 1992) and Genevieve Dunn (October 5, 1992) NBOHP.
166 Transcript of Interview of Reverend Charles Edward Sharp (October 6, 1992), NBOHP.
of course, limited. Some issues had to be confronted at the source. In particular, several voting disparities still existed between whites and blacks, which Reverend Leon C. Nixon brought to bare to the Craven County Board of Elections in March 1966. In the form of a letter, Nixon complained that citizens from the predominately black fourth ward in New Bern had to travel across town to cast their ballots, which he argued was a significant obstacle to black political participation. As a solution, he suggested for Craven Terrace or some other location in the black community to be used instead. Nixon considered it to be a sensible request “to make places of registration and voting reasonably accessible to the people” as it was “consistent with the spirit of recent enactments of Congress and the decisions of the Supreme Court...”\(^{167}\) Moreover, he requested that black registrars be appointed to serve in the city for the upcoming May primary election. Nixon demanded that immediate attention be taken on both matters for “Negroes have waited more than three centuries for the right to participate equally and fully in the democratic government under which we live.”\(^{168}\) To ensure that his requests would not go unnoticed, he forwarded the letter to the North Carolina State Board of Elections as well as the Justice Department in Washington, D.C..

Pressure on the issue continued. No more than two weeks later, four representatives from the Craven County SCLC appeared before Chairman Alfred A. Kafer, Jr. and the Craven County Board of Elections staff to make the same request. After much deliberation, the board did not “deem it advisable” to change the current location of the polling place, but assured the SCLC representatives that members of the black community had already been contacted to potentially serve as registrars if an opening

\(^{167}\) Letter written by Reverend L.C. Nixon to Chairman of the Craven County Board of Elections A.A. Kafer, Jr. (March 17, 1966) found in the records of the Craven County Board of Elections, New Bern, N.C
\(^{168}\) Ibid.
became available. Several years passed before either plea was actualized, however, it is more than likely that little if any change would have been made without the weighty pressure brought on by Reverend Nixon and the SCLC. Their bold moves signaled a radicalization in the political rights movement in New Bern, in which black demands were becoming much more defined and vocalized.

Meanwhile, African-American registration efforts were progressing at a considerable speed throughout New Bern and surrounding areas in Craven County. By February 1967, there were 3,473 non-whites registered in the county compared to 2,150 in 1960, amounting to a sixty-one percent increase. Though exact numbers in New Bern are unknown, the rise in registered black voters was significant enough to have made a bearing on the overture of the municipal election that May.

In that election, two African-American candidates, Charles C. Jennett, Jr., running for a position on the board of aldermen, and NAACP attorney Reginald Frazier, running for city judge, appeared on the ballot. In previous elections, only one, if any, non-white individual aspired for political office. The unprecedented number of black candidates in 1967 suggests a strong self-belief in political victory, which likely came as a result of a larger base of black support.

The growth of the black electorate was also evident in the more inclusive campaign promises made by local white candidates. One such instance was seen in the political advertisement of William B. Brinkley, a white businessman, who pledged that if he was elected to the board of aldermen he would, among many things, work for “equal

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169 Minutes from Craven County Board of Elections (March 26, 1966) found in the records of the Craven County Board of Elections, New Bern, N.C
170 Registration Statistics compiled by the North Carolina State Board of Elections as of February 2, 1967 found in Robert Morgan Papers, Special Collections, J.Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University.
municipal services to all citizens regardless of race, color, or creed.” Brinkley’s proposal was particularly meaningful since never before had the interests of African-Americans been an explicit concern for any white politician in New Bern. By 1967, it was clear that black political influence had grown to the point that some whites, in hopes of gaining the black vote, began making stronger appeals to the interests of all of the city’s residents.

The character of New Bern politics was changing, yet the most prevalent position among whites remained rather conservative. As Graham D. Bizzell clearly stated in his 1967 election campaign, most white candidates and their constituents were “not in the interest of any particular or minority group.” Subsequently, after the votes had been counted, neither Jennett nor Frazier had gained a sufficient number of votes to edge out their white opponents. More than likely, both men received most of their support from the black community, but were unable to garner more than a minimal amount of white votes, which due to the lesser size of the black electorate was a contributing factor to their defeats. As will be discussed in the following chapters, close to ten years would pass before white voters in New Bern began offering substantial support in the election of black candidates.

Based on the various forms of political activity that surfaced after 1965, the Voting Rights Act played a significant role in rapidly expanding first-class citizenship to more African-Americans in New Bern than ever before. By easing the obstacles to political participation, the act stimulated an increased motive for numerous blacks to make an effort to register and vote for the first time. In turn, this equipped them, as a

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whole, to better utilize the vote in order to address issues of local importance. The existence of increased black political activity following the VRA has been partially acknowledged among historians and laymen alike, yet for decades it has been clouded by the dominant assumptions that the majority of blacks in America were apathetic or impartial towards the political environment around them.

In November 1965, after observing the pace of black registration in the South following the VRA, the Commission on the Civil Rights concluded that apathy was primarily to blame for the slight slowing in registration that occurred. “Negroes who for generations have played no part in the political process of their communities,” stated the Commission “cannot be expected suddenly to embrace all of the responsibilities of citizenship.” In contrast, blacks in New Bern proved that they indeed could be expected to make the most of their political rights as citizens. For many of them, the even older African-American tradition of freedom and citizenship of the nineteenth century had not been forgotten. As local political activist Bernard George explained, during that era, New Bern boasted a large free black population that was “used to making [their] own decisions.” Quite often, then, black memory of past political power overrode a lack of modern day experience or practice.

After 1965, African-Americans in New Bern were more determined than ever to demand control of their political destinies. This trend was further intensified with the tragic assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968, which prompted an exceedingly radical political movement. According to several local black activists, Reverend Nixon had arranged for King to visit New Bern on that same day. Not surprising, blacks in the city were both shocked and dismayed at the news, causing many

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to take up violent means to assail his death. James Delemar, who himself “felt empty,” explained that blacks in New Bern were utterly distraught and “just took out their frustration” any way that they could.\textsuperscript{175} The physical and destructive response of the black community was short-lived; in time, African-American New Bernians were able to transfer this negative energy into positive results, namely the development in their unfinished quest for political power and social equality.

\textsuperscript{175} Transcript of interview of James Delemar, May 11, 1993, NBOHP.
CHAPTER SIX:
1968-1969: A PIVOTAL YET TURBULENT PERIOD

At approximately 10:30 pm on the evening of King’s assassination, somewhere between 150 and 200 local African-American demonstrators, most of who were under 21 years of age, convened at the Craven Terrace Housing Project in New Bern. From there, they dispersed into groups and marched downtown where, out of grief and resentment, they vandalized and looted over fifteen businesses on Broad Street and within the Five Points area. While marching, many were also engaged in throwing bricks, bottles, and other objects at cars parked alongside the streets. Soon after the sounds of destruction were heard, dozens of law enforcement officers from both the local police force and the North Carolina Highway Patrol were called in to halt the civil uprising. Armed with riot guns, night clubs, and helmets, they forcefully broke up the protest march, arresting five of the demonstrators in the process. Fortunately, no injuries were reported and order was restored by 3:00 a.m., at least temporarily.

When Mayor Ethridge Ricks learned of the rioting, his initial concern was for the safety of the people. At noon the next day, he issued a public statement to the community, requesting that “everyone stay at home unless absolutely necessary to be outside after sunset,” and that “all citizens remain calm, and assist us in the every way to maintain good relations among all the people.” Mayor Ricks made plans that afternoon to meet with the New Bern Board of Aldermen and the city Good Neighbor Council to discuss the troubling events of the previous night. While meeting with the Good Neighbor Council, Ricks took further action by approving a list of thirty respected

177 Ibid.
individuals from the black community who might be counted on to aid in easing tensions and ensuring that peace was maintained.

Names of people in the black community deputized to keep the peace April 5, 1968, by Mayor Etheridge Ricks at the time of civil unrest following the assassination of Martin Luther King; recommendation by New Bern Good Neighbor Council.

Mrs. Dollie Taylor  Mrs. Marjorie Williams  Carolyn Hickman
Mrs. Carolyn Stryon  Willie Vail  Mrs. Alice Bacon
Christopher Howard  Dr. Sydney Barnwell  Essel Singleton
George McQueen  Mrs. Ruth Milteer  Johnnie Sampson
Mrs. Lillian Williams  Mrs. Anne Priestly  Rev. John Dewey
Mrs. Clarita Wordlaw  Mrs. Estella Clark  Lester Strayhorn
Thomas B. Wallace  Lee R. Morgan
Willie Rich  Bob Blow
Johnny Bryant  Robert Hill
Ike Martin  James Gavin
Clyde Armstrong  Seth Williams
Mrs. Frances Carter  Rosa Williams

Figure 11: Copy of List of Recommended Black Citizens to Keep Peace in New Bern, Submitted from Good Neighbor Council Records. (Source: Found in folder # 1015: Transcript of James Gavin interview, New Bern Oral History Project, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.).

Despite the appeals voiced by Mayor Ricks and other community leaders, civil disruptions continued to take place in the city in the weeks following April 4. Genevieve T. Dunn, who presided over the New Bern School Board during this period, recalled that several physical confrontations occurred between white and black students at New Bern High School as a result of the King assassination. On one day in particular, she and an African-American man from the school board were forced to “walk the halls of the school...on every class change” so to prevent fights from breaking out.\(^{179}\) Far more intense episodes transpired outside the New Bern school yards. Several days later, on April 9, home made fire-bombs were thrown at a police vehicle carrying three officers.

\(^{179}\) Transcript of interview of Genevieve T. Dunn, October 15, 1992, NBOHP.
and at a laundromat persuading Ricks to impose a 10:00pm curfew, the first to be called in the city.  

Similar occurrences crept into the month of May, which drove the New Bern Board of Aldermen to write an ordinance into the city code outlawing demonstrations.

The intense emotions of anger and rage that arose in April 1968 were not limited to the black community in New Bern. Black-led violent riots and uprisings, many of which had fatal consequences, erupted in over one hundred of the nation’s cities in response to King’s death. Represented in an almost divine-like manner, Martin Luther King was looked to as one of the few dedicated advocates for racial equality. Thus, for many African-Americans, his murder signaled a destruction of the civil rights dream and the beginning of a rather hopeless future. Although most were devastated, only a fraction chose to respond with violent and destructive behavior. Those who did were disproportionately young African-Americans whose initiative was fueled by an attraction to the philosophies of the mounting “Black Power” and other Black Nationalism movements. As historian Timothy B. Tyson correctly concludes in his study of African-American militant Robert F. Williams, there had always existed an undercurrent of black militancy since the institution of slavery, but it was within the social context of the late 1960’s that its notions became most relevant and widespread.

“Black power” ideology first came to prominence in the summer of 1966 when national SNCC chairman Stokely Carmichael (also known as Kwame Ture) chanted the fiery phrase in front of a crowd of thousands during the James Meredith March Against Fear in Mississippi. The twenty-four year old Carmichael, who called for “freedom by

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181 New Bern Board of Aldermen Minutes, Kellenberger Room, New Bern-Craven County Public Library.
any means necessary,” evoked a growing trend especially among young blacks who found the ideals of nonviolence as both limiting and impractical and instead looked to armed self-defense as a much more practical option in gaining equality. By this point in the civil rights movement, the younger generation of African-Americans had grown considerably dissatisfied with the rate of progress. Gains had been made—most notably the right to vote and the right to access public spaces such as restaurants and hotels—but little else seemed to have changed. As a race, black people were still largely underrepresented in positions of political power and still dealt with racial injustice in the form of police brutality, job and educational discrimination, and poor housing.

To aid African-Americans in achieving more substantial gains, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP), which borrowed its symbol from the all-black Lowndes County Freedom Organization in Alabama, was formed several months later in Oakland, California. Founders Huey Newton and Bobby Seale modeled the organization on a firm belief that “black people will not be free until [they] are able to determine [their] destiny.” Their rhetoric, which was deeply influenced by the speeches and writings of Malcolm X and psychologist Franz Fanon, thereby centered on rejecting the capitalist world of the oppressive white man who, they argued, thrived on racial exploitation. This involved a separatism from past principles in which blacks were encouraged to take a militant stance in order to protect their rights as citizens. Over the next two years, the popularization of these revolutionary ideas was unmistakeable as BPP branches and other black nationalist groups sprung up in communities across the nation.

In the state of North Carolina, the BPP was notoriously active in Winston-Salem, Greensboro and Durham following 1966, which led to a multitude of radical demonstrations as well as increased Federal Bureau Investigation surveillance. “Black Power” likewise struck a chord among African-Americans in New Bern. H. Rap Brown, who became the Minister of Justice for the national branch of the BPP in 1968, and fellow party members from Durham were invited to the city at least once between 1965 and 1969.\textsuperscript{185} Dressed in typical attire which included black berets, black coats, and guns strapped across their chests, the presence of the Panthers in the streets of New Bern symbolized a new way of thinking and acting that was exciting to its black residents.\textsuperscript{186} Although the rising trend of “Black Power” influenced a good many to stray away from their previous dedication to non-violence, most refused to jettison past traditions and remained primarily loyal to Christian values, the older generation especially.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{185} Wilson, 147.
\item \textsuperscript{186} The Black Panthers mostly came to New Bern for protection purposes after the racially-motivated bombings that occurred at Oscar’s Mortuary and St. Peter’s AME Zion Church in 1965.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
The introduction of “Black Power” in New Bern did not result in anything close to the mass or persistence of violence that was observed on the national scene, but it did usher in a more radical period as African-Americans—convinced of their birthright to influence society—became far more involved and determined to use political action to produce real change. As historian Clayborne Carson pointed out, the “black consciousness movement” of the late 1960’s “achieved psychological and cultural transformations” for countless African-Americans. In New Bern, too, black identity was defined and embodied quite differently following the arrival of “Black Power” in which racial pride was given a new and far greater value. Subsequently, the period between 1968 and 1969 was a whirlwind of both racial turbulence and progress.

The period was primarily characterized by the drastic changes that were made in the established social structure. For one, the Ku Klux Klan, which had threatened the

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livelhood of local African-Americans for multiple decades, lost most of its strength by 1968.\textsuperscript{188} At this point, the majority of whites were coming to accept black political participation as a part of reality. More than likely, the existence of national legislation protecting the rights of black citizens contributed to this decline by narrowing the abilities of racist whites to exude terror. Furthermore, after delaying the process of integration for close to ten years, Craven County Schools received a court order from U.S. District Judge John D. Larkins, Jr. to fully desegregate by January 1, 1969.\textsuperscript{189} Larkins’ ruling, besides guaranteeing a more even racial mixture in the schools, made certain that educational experiences for black and white students were finally equal or at least close to the same.

In the midst of these changes, African-American New Bernians emerged as a mighty and energetic political faction. In fact, at this stage in the movement for political inclusion, black activism was at an all-time high. Due to the turbulence that surrounded the period, such as the growth of “Black Power” and the violent responses to King’s death, it might seem reasonable to agree with certain historians who claim that America’s civil rights tradition was lost after 1968, but this would be oversimplifying and incorrect. The case of New Bern reveals a far different story. There was no erosion in community organizing or in the original goal to peacefully gain equal rights. The biggest distinction between the late 1960’s and years prior was the amplified volume of the growing voice of displeased African-Americans.

The pitch, too, was far more radical. A clear example occurred in March 1968 when African-American citizen Alphonso Morris presented a petition of grievances to the New Bern Board of Aldermen. “We the Negro citizens of the city of New Bern, North

\textsuperscript{188} Cecelski, “Burning Memories,” 23.
\textsuperscript{189} “Craven Schools Receive Order,” News and Observer (Raleigh, N.C.), August 8, 1968.
Carolina,” he declared, “are here tonight to demand our constitutional rights as tax paying citizens.” Above all, Morris wanted an “adjustment” so to erase racial privileges in New Bern. His appearance before the aldermen was likely a culmination of several years of frustration, but it primarily grew out of recent events involving police brutality against fellow black citizen W. Allen. Accordingly, Morris demanded that the accused officer be dismissed as well as all others in the police department who partook in prejudice or discrimination towards African-Americans. He voiced several other concerns which included: a stop to police trespassing on black private property without a warrant, more blacks to be hired for the city police force, for present black officers to receive their “proper promotion,” and an increase in the number of blacks employed in the public works department, the city civil service board, and the city planning board.

The demands that Morris made were mostly ignored, but his bold words and demeanor set the tone for how African-American New Bernians during this period utilized politics to address their grievances. Their desire to shape local affairs was best exemplified by the number who aspired for public office. From 1968 and onward, blacks within New Bern attempted to infiltrate as many political offices as possible, ranging from city aldermen and mayor to member of the county board of education, district judge, and congressman. For many of them, the type of position they ran for, whether it was alderman or congressman, was less important than the prospect of contributing in some way to the social equality of their race. Among the numerous concerns for African-Americans, economic reform was at the top of the list.

Blacks from New Bern best showcased the extent of their political willpower in the May primary of 1968, which witnessed an unprecedented number of African-
American candidates from the city and across the state of North Carolina. Reverend Leon C. Nixon, who was one of five African-Americans in the state to seek major political offices as a Democrat, ran for a Congressional seat from the first district. The district, compromised of nineteen eastern counties including Craven, Pitt, Jones, Lenoir, Pamlico, Beaufort, and Washington counties, was not only one of the poorest in the state, it was one of the poorest in the nation. With a median family income of $2,662, it ranked 430th out of the nation’s 435 Congressional Districts. The economic situation fared worse for African-Americans; the median family income was $1,546 with at least thirty percent of those families making under $1,000 annually.\(^{192}\) As he hoped it would, Nixon’s name on the ticket offered promise in rescuing the district’s blacks from their meager economic condition.

The area’s economic situation had been partially assisted by the formation of Coastal Progress, Inc. in September 1966 (previously known as Craven Operation Progress, Inc.), which received monies from the statewide North Carolina Fund to address poverty as well as poor education, unemployment, and the lack of health services in Craven, Jones, and Pamlico counties. In that year, the board was compromised of 37 members, twelve of whom were African-American.\(^{193}\) The fact that the organization principally served African-Americans citizens, however, upset many whites who were compelled to label it “the curse that has been brought upon New Bern and Craven County,” “a smelly mess,” and a “political bonanza.”\(^{194}\) With disapproving attitudes


\(^{194}\) Ibid.
among local whites, it seemed all the more necessary for someone, like Nixon, to secure a high seat in power in order to more effectively lobby for black economic progress.

In addition to Nixon, two other black candidates from New Bern sought key political positions in the May 1968 primary. Attorney John H. Harmon ran for District Court Judge and Leander R. Morgan, who had served as deputy in Coastal Progress, Inc., ran for the Craven County Board of Education from district eight. Each of these contests was critical by contributing to the unprecedented number of black candidate choices in North Carolina. Perhaps the most significant event was the gubernatorial race which exhibited Dr. Reginald A. Hawkins from Charlotte, the first non-white in the state to run for the office.

With a sizable number of African-American candidates on the ballot, many predicted that the primary would set turnout records throughout the state. Based on election surveys, officials in New Bern reported that voting in all wards was “heavier than usual, with a large Negro vote expected.” Regardless, when the votes were tallied no black candidate survived past the primary. As for those candidates from New Bern, Nixon finished second best out of four contenders, but was more than four thousand votes behind victor Walter B. Jones. John H. Harmon, who received 5,766 votes, was also defeated by well over two thousand votes. Though Morgan missed winning by only a few hundred votes, he likewise received a similar fate losing to white opponent J.H. Miller. Despite the lack of tangible success for the three men, their resolve to achieve political power did not waver, as would be seen in later years.

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Hawkins, too, failed to win his race against Democratic challengers Mel Broughton and Robert W. Scott, but not before gaining more than 100,000 votes. As a result of his positive showing, Hawkins confidently declared that “North Carolina politics will never be the same. We’ll have to be reckoned with...when you get over 100,000 votes, you become a force.” Hawkins was correct; African-Americans were becoming quite a political force. Victory did not come immediately, yet the tide was turning in their favor. The height of the tide could be seen across the state, New Bern included, as more blacks were steadfast in playing a part in broadening the political shift already in motion. As Hawkins stated, it was “just the beginning.”

While the racial composition of local and national political officeholders appeared to be on the brink of transforming, the prevalence of white conservatism rose nationwide. The 1968 presidential election offered one of the most unmistakable indications of white voter attitudes at the time. Of the three men to contend for the presidency, two of them—Republican candidate and later victor Richard M. Nixon and American Independent candidate George C. Wallace—focused on defeating the progress of civil rights, arguably reflecting the desires of their constituents. Nixon largely ignored matters relating to African-Americans and instead primarily talked of “economic conservatism and law-and-order defense of social stability” which “appealed to affluent urban and suburban whites.” Alabama governor George Wallace, who expanded upon Strom Thurmond’s crusade of 1948, took his campaign a step further to the right by running on a purely segregationist platform. Maintaining the same beliefs that he evoked during his 1963

199 In New Bern, Hawkins fared well receiving 936 votes compared to 1,293 for Mel Broughton and 1,253 for Kerr Scott. (source: ibid.)
201 Ibid.
gubernatorial inaugural address, “I say, segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever,” Wallace was solely dedicated to canvassing for the concerns of working-class whites. Though he received only thirteen percent nationally, he captured over thirty four percent of the Southern vote.

In New Bern, Wallace’s white supremacist rhetoric noticeably charmed the white electorate as he gained the most votes in three of the five wards and temporarily broke the political dominance of the Democratic Party. Wallace received 1895 votes, followed closely by Democratic candidate Herbert Humphrey with 1856 and Nixon with 1275. Humphrey, who tended to center his platform on the concerns of African-American and liberal-minded voters, won the second and third wards, suggesting a strong presence of black voters. Nonetheless, the number of blacks to vote in the election was not enough to override the lion’s share of conservative whites in New Bern who contributed to Eastern North Carolina’s identification as a “Wallace stronghold.” If it was ever unclear before how whites in New Bern felt—or if their beliefs were simply unspoken—it became palpable after the 1968 presidential election as their votes spoke loudly and vehemently.

The common white attitude toward black political power, which feared and tried to prevent its fulfillment, did not lighten up and permeated the 1969 municipal election held on May 6. Just a few months prior, in order to create more cohesion and to lessen the confusion for voters, the Craven County Board of Elections effectively took over control and supervision of all New Bern elections thereafter. One of the changes that the county board implemented after its commencement of city elections control was to double the

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203 Goldfield, 310.
204 Ibid, 311.
206 Bass and De Vries, 237.
filing fees for mayor from ten to twenty dollars and to increase those for aldermen from two to ten dollars.\textsuperscript{207} Such a considerable adjustment in the required fees may have been intended to deter certain groups from running for office. Given that blacks were generally the least affluent in the city it was likely that they were the group targeted. This alteration, like the 1959 switch to an at-large election, thus, seemed related to and motivated by race. Moreover, precinct lines were redrawn between 1966 and 1968 to incorporate the all-white area of Trent Woods into the Tisdale district, creating one large and predominately white voting ward.\textsuperscript{208} Presumably, Trent Woods, which clearly laid outside the New Bern city limits, was annexed in order to supersede or neutralize the black vote. As will be discussed later, other examples of covert schemes to prevent black office holding occurred on the day of the election itself.

In spite of an observable white reluctance to see blacks attain public office, neither Reginald Frazier, who ran for aldermen of the fourth ward, nor John H. Harmon, who ran for mayor, was dissuaded from fully participating in the 1969 election. Harmon, who ran for district judge in May, took up the most courageous endeavor of the two by becoming the first African-American in New Bern’s modern history to run for the mayor’s post. Yet it could be argued that both candidates made a bold statement with their political advertisements within the local newspaper, displaying not only their faces, but a new black identity and pride. As seen in Harmon’s advertisement which appears in Figure 13, his call for a “new look” suggested that someone of a darker complexion deserved to be among New Bern’s preponderantly white political decision makers.

\textsuperscript{207} New Bern Board of Aldermen Minutes, March 4, 1969, Kellenberger Room, New Bern-Craven County Public Library.
\textsuperscript{208} “Noon Vote Count Indicates Little,” \textit{The Sun Journal}, May 4, 1968.

Figure 14: Political Campaign Advertisement for Reginald L. Frazier, 1969. (Source: *The Sun Journal*, May 4, 1969.)
Whereas the language used in Harmon’s advertisement is much more direct and candid, Frazier used his ad to publicly appeal and cater to a wider range of voters. He accomplishes this by taking a strong anti-“Black Power” approach. As seen above in Figure 14, Frazier made it clear to the New Bern community that he was against “black militants,” “lawlessness in the streets,” and “communism that is infiltrating the ghettos of this city.” Statements such as these were likely intended to ease the doubts of whites and older African-Americans who may have found “Black Power” excessively violent and domineering as well as ominous and scary.

Trying to convince America of the true meaning behind the movement was a struggle that many “Black Power” advocates were involved in on a constant basis. Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, co-authors of a manual meant to correct misconceptions entitled Black Power: The Politics of Liberation, wrote in 1967 that “the ultimate values and goals [of Black Power] are not domination or exploitation of other groups, but rather an effective share in the total power of the society.” For Harmon and Frazier, their sincere feelings about “Black Power” during this time are uncertain, but their goal of achieving a ‘share in the total power of the society’ was no different than that described by Carmichael and Hamilton. Dressed nicely and portraying professionalism, Harmon and Frazier showed through their public ads that black politics was not necessarily something to be feared or to be considered extremely revolutionary.

Assisting the two men in their chances of political victory was what appeared to be a sizable increase in the number of registered African-American voters since the 1967 city election. Between 1967 and 1969, certain wards actually saw losses in registration numbers, but in the predominately black fourth ward there was a substantial rise of over

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five hundred new voters, as shown in Table 4. It is unlikely that all of the new voters recorded were African-American, but two factors may have contributed to a growth in their opportunities to register during this time. The first was the offering of year-round voter registration in Craven County that began in July 1968 allowing citizens—unlike before when registration was limited to certain months—to register any day of the year before an election. This gave all citizens, especially African-Americans who often worked long hours or were employed in seasonal occupations, more time flexibility to register in order to vote in an upcoming election.

Table 4: Change in voter registration in New Bern between 1967 and 1969

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ward</th>
<th>May 1967</th>
<th>April 1969</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Ward</td>
<td>535</td>
<td>599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Ward</td>
<td>1,005</td>
<td>721</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third Ward</td>
<td>1,265</td>
<td>1,315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth Ward</td>
<td>1,354</td>
<td>1,861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth Ward</td>
<td>1,134</td>
<td>1,124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5,293</td>
<td>5,620</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: May 1967 statistics found in “Tuesday Election Leaves City Mayor Race for a Runoff,” The Sun Journal, May 2, 1967; April 1969 statistics supplied by Craven County Board of Elections Chairman Alfred A. Kafer, Jr. in correspondence to John H. Harmon (April 8, 1969), Craven County Board of Elections Records, New Bern, N.C.

The second factor was the formation of the Craven County Voter’s League (CCVL), an all-black Democratic partisan organization, which was initiated by members of the New Bern NAACP in order to further voter registration and political education efforts for local blacks. The exact year that the CCVL was founded is still not known for certain, but most tend to agree that it was formed sometime between 1968 and 1969 and

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210 “Year-Round Voter Registration to be Offered in Craven,” The Sun Journal, May 7, 1968.
was first chaired by Herman Dawson. One of its principle strengths that made it distinct from the NAACP was that it could endorse political candidates.

Accordingly, members of the CCVL were deeply committed to motivating and informing African-Americans on the importance of the vote and who their votes should go toward. As co-founder Joseph George recalls, their motto of “moving blacks forward through politics and prayer” was a central belief for its members. Relying heavily on efforts of local people to organize and unify behind certain candidates, the league revealed a strong existence of grassroots organizing within New Bern’s black community. The energy of the CCVL persuaded many to become drawn into politics and explains in part the substantial rise in registered voters in the fourth ward between 1967 and 1969.

Based on the various factors mentioned previously, the results of the 1969 New Bern municipal election was to be of critical importance especially in the ways that local African-Americans conceived of their political roles in the near future. The prospect for city race relations, too, was to be a significant outcome which white businessman and mayoral candidate Jack R. Crawford evoked in his political advertisement. “Having served people of a number of races in my past business endeavors and continuing to serve both the Negro and White Man with equal respect and interest in my present business,” Crawford stated, “I am in a position to know their needs and wishes and feel qualified to communicate with them and be instrumental in helping to promote Good Neighbor Relations.”

Likely owing a portion of their success to the CCVL, both African-American candidates fared well in the election. Frazier, who was one of six candidates, received the

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second highest number of votes, but again fell short in securing political office. In comparison, Harmon garnered the greatest success as he won wards two and three and gained a substantial number of voter support from ward four, causing a run-off election between himself and white incumbent Ethridge Ricks. As stipulated in the city election rules, if the number one vote-getter fails to reach a majority, then the second best man has the right to declare a run-off within five days of the election. With great confidence, Harmon immediately filed his request for a run-off.

The run-off election was held a few weeks later on May 20th. Voter turnout nearly doubled from the previous election as whites and blacks alike arrived in great crowds to support their chosen candidate. After the ballots were collected and counted, Ricks accumulated the most support and was able to soundly defeat Harmon 2,400 votes to 900. However, the outcome of the election did not end here. As Harmon would later argue, several illegalities and wrongdoings were at play on election day that gave Ricks a clear advantage.

A few days after the election had passed, Harmon wrote a letter to Craven County Board of Elections Chairman A.A. Kafer describing the illegalities that occurred. He claimed to have received reports on his desk that poll workers from three different wards instructed voters that the lever beside his name was out of order and told them that they would have to pull the one beside Ricks’ name. In addition, Harmon charged that Ricks lingered in the polling places of several of the wards for up to thirty minutes, apparently attempting to solicit votes. For these reasons, he requested a full hearing to “determine

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if the May 20th Election should be set aside.”218 The board agreed to set a special hearing for June 7. Yet Harmon never appeared at Craven County Court House. 219 Instead, he made what seemed to him a more proper and fruitful decision by initiating a broader attack that challenged the entire New Bern election system.

“With this evidence of voter irregularities,” Harmon stated on June 12, “we see an opportunity to attack the entire electoral process, including the New Bern ward system...”220 Criticizing the at-large election system as an intentional violation of African-American political rights, Harmon demanded its removal. If the election system was implemented, as he suspected, to “keep Negroes from being elected aldermen,” then the “action was illegal.”221 He likewise confronted the “incompetence” of the board of elections as a “number of people who were registered to vote” came to the polls “only to find that their names were not recorded” and thereby were denied the right to vote.222 Out of these weighty issues, Harmon threatened to bring suit in federal court. Whether Harmon pursued federal court action is unknown, but if he did, it appeared to have made little impact.223

This period in the African-American struggle for political rights highlighted key transformations in both attitudes and activism. Although the early months of 1968 were primarily dominated by turbulence, blacks in New Bern came to use their frustrations to break new political boundaries that, in time, led to a pivotal realization: with an unyielding effort, social empowerment and legitimacy could be achieved. As black mobilization further enlivened into the 1970’s, public office became a much more

218 Ibid.
219 Minutes of Special Meeting at Craven County Court House, June 7, 1969, Records of the Craven County Board of Elections.
221 Ibid.
222 Ibid.
223 The at-large election system in New Bern was not effectively removed until 1988.
attainable goal for the city’s minority residents. The following decade unveiled a
continuation of forward progress in which local African-American organization was key
in producing a political landscape unlike it had existed before.
Within the available historiography, 1970’s America has most commonly been afforded an unenthusiastic consideration, at best. Generally, the decade is perceived as a time of decline when few positive or groundbreaking changes were either seen or made. Historian Peter Carroll affirms, “so where the ‘sixties’ (in quotes) evokes an era when much ‘happened,’ the ‘seventies’ (also in quotes) conjures up a culture of inertia, passivity, and retrenchment.” Moreover, the dominant histories and memories of the period tend to ignore the existence of a continued struggle for civil rights progress in America. This falsified characterization is primarily due to moldings of New Right political thinking since the late 1960’s that maintained that racism and social inequality were things of the past and, therefore, efforts toward African-American advancement were no longer needed.

As historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall asserted, this tragic view of the 1970’s warrants alteration for it “erases from popular memory the way the victories of the early 1960’s coalesced into a lasting social revolution, as thousands of ordinary people pushed through the doors the movement had opened and worked to create new, integrated institutions...” Indeed, the civil rights revolution, which was far from finished in the late 1960’s, remained largely incomplete at the dawning of another decade. Yet, this is not to say, in contrast to those who have dated its ending to 1968, that the movement was close to collapse. The opposite is illuminated by the progress made during the 1970’s in various aspects of the political and social lives of black Americans. In fact, the mounting

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225 Hall, 1254.
political activism and organization among blacks in New Bern after 1969—out of which grew greater fulfillment of lasting social change—adds to this argument by revealing the sustained longevity of civil rights progress in a “post-Civil Rights Movement” America.

The nascent Craven County Voter’s League (CCVL), which expanded in number as well as influence over the 1970’s, was the predominate contributor in the initial rise of black New Bernian political interest and subsequent political victories in the first half of the decade. Over the course of its growth as an organization, the league held numerous public meetings and rallies in New Bern in which its leaders “motivated [and] stimulated blacks to participate in political process and to believe that we could win and benefit.”

To this end, the CCVL was enthusiastically present in local and national elections alike. As local African-American political leader Julius Parham, Jr. recalls, on the day of an election, members of the voting league were found riding through the black neighborhoods carrying megaphones and shouting “Get Out the Vote!”

To celebrate moments of political success, the CCVL often held end-of-the-year banquets at various downtown venues. As indicated by the theme of one banquet entitled, “Unity and Community,” the organization greatly depended on the collective and unified political force of blacks in New Bern. It encouraged them to vote as a bloc, especially behind local black candidates, in order to maximize their electoral strength. The CCVL likewise depended on maintaining a strong relationship with nearby black churches that, in turn, provided places for their meetings and volunteered to give black voters free rides to the polling booths on the day of an election. Above all, the voter’s league relied on the footwork of local people, many of whom were young to middle-aged African-American women, to travel across the community to educate as many African-American citizens as

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227 Personal Interview with Julius Parham, Jr. and Bernard George, New Bern, N.C., 7 August 2006.
228 Ibid.
possible of election procedures, who the desirable candidates were, and the importance of their vote. With the exception of Barbara Lee who first ran for the New Bern Board of Aldermen in 1975, black males were typically the ones selected and encouraged to run for public office or awarded leadership positions such as league director, head of the registration committee, or campaign manager. Black females, on the other hand, as they had throughout the civil rights movement, often served as secretaries or resided over other seemingly lesser responsibilities.

In 1977, the CCVL was joined by the formation of another organization in New Bern—originally named the Concerned Citizens of the Tri-county Area—that took even stronger efforts to enhance African-American political power. Between 1970 and 1979, and with minimal collaboration with whites, the CCVL and the Concerned Citizens enabled African-American New Bernians to gain greater inclusion and influence in city politics in the form of office holders and a strong and savvy electorate. The task was not easy for progress cut across the grain in a city where custom ruled and whites still assumed control of the entire social structure, including the election process. For this reason, older African-Americans, in particular, either were afraid to vote or believed that they did not belong in politics. Former secretary of the CCVL Ethel Sampson described that for these types of citizens, “it was hard to convince them to believe their vote would matter” since “they believed that whites were going to do what they wanted anyway.”

The pursuit of continued political progress, then, was frequently accompanied by hazy periods of difficulty, disillusion, and uncertainty.

The haze initially lifted following the results of the 1971 New Bern city election which, due in part to the behind-the-scenes workings and support of the CCVL, saw three

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self-assured African-Americans vie for political office. John H. Harmon, coming off momentum from the 1969 election, was pushed to run for mayor once again, which he did on the promise that “a vote for me is a vote for Peace, Prosperity, and Progress.” As detailed in his platform, this promise involved gearing education toward the unskilled, removing taxes that impose on the poor, removing the at-large election system, creating a program to furnish adequate housing for all, and forming a Human Relations Committee to bring about “better understanding between the races.” Harmon’s appeals, however, could not yield the required votes to overwhelm white favorites Cecil G. King or Charles Kimbrell.

Reginald Frazier, the second black candidate on the ballot, was likewise unsuccessful as he took up yet another failed attempt to win an alderman position from the fourth ward. Nevertheless, victory was secured for one African-American aspirant, Leander R. Morgan, who garnered 1,611 votes and decisively defeating white opponent L.L. Gaskins for the position of aldermen of the second ward. Morgan received the most votes ever acquired by a non-white candidate in a New Bern election—ensuring him a sizeable margin of victory—as he became first of his race to win political office in the city. Between 1970 and 1975, similar victories took place in local elections across North Carolina as the number of black elected officials increased from 62 to 194.

Morgan’s feat was undoubtedly of great historical significance, but more importantly, its significance lie in the boom in black political activity that immediately followed. To numerous local blacks, his political success demonstrated that what had

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231 Ibid.
233 Ibid.
234 Table 3-1 in Bass and De Vries, 51.
once been unimaginable was now finally possible. As a result, political enthusiasm spread to communities throughout Craven County as black registration numbers jumped from 3,690 in December 1970 to 4,629 in October 1972.\textsuperscript{235} At the center of this new political energy was the CCVL whose members used Morgan and his victory to exemplify what could be done behind a strong black voting base.

Despite the observable positives, much work still left to be done, for white registration numbers were growing at a far quicker pace.\textsuperscript{236} By October 1972, white registration in Craven had climbed to 17,014 compared to 12,654 in June 1970.\textsuperscript{237} This trend, coupled with their rising support of the Republican Party and its conservative values, rivaled black political power. In the U.S Senate race of 1972, for instance, whites in Craven assisted ultra-conservative Jesse Helms in sweeping Eastern North Carolina on his way to becoming the first Republican senator of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{238}

The parallel growth of white conservatism and black voting influence continued to clash into the city election of 1973. In the election, fourteen candidates contended for six political offices, three of whom, James R. Bland, Charles C. Jennett, Sr., and Leander Morgan, were African-American. For both white and black New Bernians, the primary focus of the 1973 election was the mayoral race between Morgan and white opponent Charles Kimbrell. During the past two years, Morgan had served as city alderman but his authority to affect city affairs was minimal and was often quashed by five other white power holders. His attempt to run for mayor reflected a desire for greater influence.

\textsuperscript{235} Registration Statistics compiled by the North Carolina State Board of Elections, 1970-1972, Old Records Center, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, N.C.
\textsuperscript{236} Both black and white voter registration numbers were impacted by the passing of the twenty-sixth amendment in 1971 that gave anyone over the age of 18 the right to vote. Previously, the age requirement to vote was 21.
\textsuperscript{237} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{238} Bartley and Graham, 176.
Yet white voter opposition in New Bern stood to prevent Morgan’s chances of victory as rumors of racial overtones permeated the election. Apparently by his color alone, Kimbrell, who had fared poorly in every election he ran in since 1967, astonishingly received fifty-five percent of the total vote. In addition, he captured over six-hundred more votes than the white candidates in the previous election. After he learned of Kimbrell’s triumph, Morgan was disappointed but not ‘bitter’ stating that the ‘voters have made their choice and that’s the democratic process.’ African-American aldermen candidates Bland and Jennett, who received thirty-two percent and twenty-seven percent of the vote, respectively, were also vanquished by white opposition. In the 1973 election, white voters in New Bern, most of whom shared an ostensible aversion to black office-holding, succeeded not only in keeping blacks from winning office, but also in bringing a return to an all-white city council.

Despite their enlarged freedom to partake in politics since 1965, African-Americans throughout the nation regularly coped with hostility, albeit more quieted, from whites who were still not prepared to share or relinquish their political power. In January 1975, the United States Commission on Civil Rights, which detailed the positive effects of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, calculated that the percentage of registered Southern blacks more than doubled since 1964 and the number of blacks elected to office rose from fewer than 100 that year to 963 in 1974. Based on these statistics, the commission concluded that “in the 10 years since passage of the Voting Rights Act, minority citizens in jurisdictions covered by the act have finally begun to participate

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actively in the American political process.” Nonetheless, as the commission continued to report, “though minority citizens usually are no longer excluded from political participation,” persistent discriminatory barriers initiated by whites such as “racial gerrymandering and manipulation of voting rules...dilute the effect of their participation and minimize hardwon success at the polls.”

The incidence of black voter dilution in New Bern, perhaps most observable in the 1969 municipal election surrounding John Harmon’s run for mayor, had been a constant in city elections since at least 1959 and perpetuated into the hotly contested election of 1975. In that contest, Leander Morgan, who remained optimistic of his chances, made another attempt at mayor against past rival and then incumbent Charles Kimbrell. As seen in Figure 15, Morgan’s platform, which centered on a belief that “government should be open and responsible to the people,” symbolized a direct criticism of certain aspects of city life that needed immediate attention. To offer similar criticisms, two other black candidates, Earl J. Hicks and Barbara Lee, entered the election to run for alderman in their respective wards.

In preparation for victory in the 1975 election, the CCVL was engaged in an aggressive campaign that lasted several weeks, registering new voters, holding fundraisers, organizing rallies and mass meetings, leading voter education workshops, and canvassing for black and moderate white candidates. The voter’s league also made its presence on election day beginning in the early hours of the morning as it provided food and transportation to the polls for as many black voters as possible. Based on their tireless activism and preparation, members of the CCVL were more than cognizant of the role race played in the outcomes New Bern elections.

242 Ibid.
243 Ibid., p. 329.
“GOVERNMENT MUST BE OPEN AND RESPONSIVE TO THE PEOPLE”

During the present administration there have been too many unanswered questions as to WHY:
— CLOSED MEETINGS other than those permitted by the General Statutes of N.C.
— continued rise in ELECTRIC RATES on the local level
— increases in GARBAGE FEES, yet no increase in the improvement of these services
— the CITY EMPLOYEES’ SALARY scale that was adopted while I was Mayor Pro Tem has never been put in effect
— the application was never signed for monies that would have put our city in a position to move forth with a CIVIC CENTER that now will be located in Carteret County.
— priority budget spending wasn’t established for the POLICE and FIRE DEPARTMENTS

As Mayor of New Bern I would:
— emphasize and encourage that citizens be informed on city affairs
— place a priority on having the best equipment available for our Police and Fire Departments
— promote orderly and controlled growth through long-range planning
— promote the control of electric rates on the local level
— improve public services (street maintenance, garbage collections)
— emphasize the need for a comprehensive recreation program
— promote a drainage project

I, L.R. (Lee) Morgan respectfully urge you to vote on Tuesday, October 7th.
I would appreciate your vote for Mayor.
Despite the diligent efforts of the CCVL, not a single black candidate was assured victory. Hicks faced immediate defeat, while the political races for both Morgan and Lee resulted in a run-off. The latter was not necessarily a positive outcome as \textit{The News and Observer} editor A.L May remarked in July 1982. “The veteran politicos tell it simply,” he explained, “get a black candidate against a white in a runoff...in rural Eastern North Carolina, and the white will win every time.”\textsuperscript{245} For a black candidate in New Bern, a one-on-one battle with a white candidate was just as unlikely to end favorably given that white voters outnumbered black voters 4:1.\textsuperscript{246} The existence of a run-off was especially unfortunate for Morgan who, as seen in \textbf{Table 5}, had already tallied the most votes in the original election. The run-off, then, naturally played to the tune of conservative white interests. Thus, as somewhat expected, both Morgan and Lee lost in their second attempt. Local blacks were utterly dismayed over the results, some of whom were convinced of occurrences of shuffling of votes by white registrars.\textsuperscript{247}

\textsuperscript{245} Krousser, 256.
\textsuperscript{246} Records of the Craven County Board of Elections.
\textsuperscript{247} Transcribed interview of Dorcas Carter, New Bern, N.C., Behind the Veil Project, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.
The result of the 1975 city election was a disheartening blow to the black community, but it did not quash their political spirit. Sometime in 1977, in order to cultivate more social progress, several men and women from the Craven County Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) helped to form an independent political organization, the Concerned Citizens of the Tri-county area, that served African-American interests in New Bern and surrounding areas of Craven, Pamlico, and Jones counties. A Christian-based organization, the Concerned Citizens was dedicated to tackling several key issues including voter education and voter registration. Its main purpose, as described by one activist, was to “[carry] the load for those blacks who
weren’t concerned.\textsuperscript{248} The CCVL contributed a good deal in broadening political awareness, but there were still far more local African-American citizens who were not politically active and whose faith in democracy appeared to be dwindling.

On the day of its formation, the Concerned Citizens organized a celebration at Kafer Park in New Bern, where it registered over 500 new black voters.\textsuperscript{249} Enlarging the black electorate was given such great attention for, as former president Johnnie Sampson, Jr. explained, “we knew that most of the Aldermen would have to come out of office before anything could be done.”\textsuperscript{250} What could be done, as the Concerned Citizens saw it, involved numerous civic improvements in the lives of African-American New Bernians such as housing, recreation, and unemployment.\textsuperscript{251} Over the course of the year, the organization—together with the CCVL—helped to register close to sixty percent of the eligible black voters in New Bern.\textsuperscript{252} Seen below in Table 6, this trend continued as the number of registered black voters drastically rose after 1977.

Table 6: Number of Blacks and Whites Registered in New Bern (1971-1980)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Blacks</th>
<th>Whites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April 1971</td>
<td>1,679</td>
<td>4,303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1974</td>
<td>1,668</td>
<td>4,707</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 1975</td>
<td>1,654</td>
<td>4,564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1976</td>
<td>1,946</td>
<td>5,074</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 1977</td>
<td>1,768</td>
<td>4,052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 1978</td>
<td>1,841</td>
<td>4,280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 1979</td>
<td>1,812</td>
<td>4,232</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 1980</td>
<td>2,142</td>
<td>4,772</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Records of the Craven County Board of Elections

\textsuperscript{248} Personal interview with Ethel Sampson, New Bern, 12 September 2006.
\textsuperscript{249} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{250} History of the Concerned Citizens of the Tri-County area courtesy of Johnnie Sampson, Jr. (copy in Karen Medin’s possession).
\textsuperscript{251} Ibid.
The Concerned Citizens made its official political debut during the 1977 New Bern municipal election. In the weeks up to the election, members “[knocked] on the doors to get people registered, and we took them to the registrar’s homes, and we left someone baby sitting for a lot of them until they came home from registering....” Ethel Sampson recalled that on one particularly hot day, she and several other women pushed their baby strollers while walking to homes in the black community to “get the people to vote.” “We were sweatin’, and we were hot,” she said, “but we didn’t care.” The Concerned Citizens also used the power of local radio and television stations to campaign behind each of the five black candidates who appeared on the ballot. The organization’s energy continued to be visible once election day arrived for when “the majority of the people went to work…most of the Concerned Citizens took the day off to support the election...” At the various polling booths, members passed out candidate lists to remind black voters who they should support.

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253 History of the Concerned Citizens of the Tri-County area.
255 Names on the ballot included Leander R. Morgan (for mayor), Reverend L.C. Nixon (for alderman, first ward), Willie Vail (for alderman, second ward), Earl Hicks (for alderman, third ward), and Barbara Lee (aldermen, fifth ward). (source: The Sun Journal, October 12, 1977)
256 History of the Concerned Citizens of the Tri-County area.
The presence of the Concerned Citizens in the election was undeniable. Out of the five African-American candidates vying for office, four received enough votes to challenge for a run-off election against white contenders. Yet it was the fifth African-American candidate, Leander R. Morgan, whose political race best revealed the recently enhanced voting strength amid black New Bernians. After his third successive attempt, Morgan was finally victorious as he garnered fifty-three percent of the total vote and became the first black mayor ever to be elected in New Bern. As soon as the election results were announced at the Craven County Courthouse, a mixture of clapping, shouting, and tears of joy erupted among the crowds of blacks who were present. Although Morgan did not view the outcome of the election as either a black or white conquest, he admitted that “we would be naïve if we didn’t see that people feel this is a

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257 Despite their good showing in the original election, no African-American candidate survived past the run-off.

victory for blacks.” The euphoria and great excitement that came as a result of Morgan’s win persisted at a celebration sponsored by the Concerned Citizens at a nearby dance spot on Broad Street. Commenting on the hundreds of rejoicing African-Americans at the festivity, President of the CCVL James Delemar remarked, ‘Look at these people, Sure they’re happy. They feel they’ve got something. It will give them more confidence when they have problems to bring before the board, because they will have black representation on it....I tell you some of these people will be dancing all night.’

Figure 17: Newspaper Headlines after Morgan wins New Bern Mayoral Race, 1977. (Source: The Sun Journal, October 12, 1977.).

Without question, black political organizing was imperative in forging a change in representation out of the 1977 city election, but the most striking result was the amount of support that a few black candidates, Morgan in particular, received from the white electorate. In addition to winning the predominately black first and second wards, Morgan was able to gather fifty-five percent of the votes cast in the fifth ward where sixty-seven percent of the voters were white. Arguably, his eventual success among white voters came as a result of a multi-year long effort to bind white and black voters

259 Ibid.
behind a better New Bern and to embody himself as a candidate for all the citizens. Nonetheless, there still remained a substantial number of whites who were not persuaded and who were hesitant to support a black candidate regardless of his or her wide-reaching appeal. This race-phobic mindset was most staunchly defended by the existing political office-holders in New Bern.

Following the 1977 city election, as recounted in a 1985 documentary film entitled “New Bern: Struggling into the 20th Century a little bit late,” white members of the board of aldermen originally refused to allow Morgan to administer the oath of office to other newly elected officials, a duty that was traditionally bestowed upon the mayor. One of the aldermen included Ella J. Bengal who explained that she “didn’t like change” and justified the board’s behavior on the fact that this is “an old traditional city.” After several minutes of dialogue between himself and the board members, Morgan’s request to be allowed to deliver the oath was eventually granted.

As he later voiced in his address to people of New Bern, Morgan recognized the inherent difficulties that lie ahead of him as a black mayor in a historically conservative and white-run city. In such a situation, his ultimate goal was racial cohesion and cooperation. “For the next two years,” he stated to his bi-racial audience, “your hands and minds will be needed to facilitate the growth and development conducive to providing a suitable environment for every New Bernian.” Morgan continued by stressing that “each citizen has the responsibility for the action for the institution in which he or she is imbedded.” These words spoke vast truths of what was required in forming a black and

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263 Minutes of the New Bern Board of Aldermen, December 6, 1977, Kellenberger Room, New Bern-Craven County Public Library.
white coalition in New Bern, in which both races might be able to work together for the public good.

When Morgan was re-elected in October 1979 by sixty-four percent of the city’s voters, it appeared that the bi-racial coalition he had envisioned was closer to fulfillment.\(^{264}\) As it had been during the 1977 election, white voter support was once again a key to victory. Yet, Morgan’s most loyal allies and cheerleaders were found in the black community and it was to them that he primarily owed his political station. Directly from local organizing in the CCVL and the Concerned Citizens, a new political culture was born in the late 1970’s that allowed for and paved the way for Morgan to lead New Bern. Over his tenure, Morgan committed himself to repaying all of his constituents, both white and black, by promoting city progress through economic growth, affirmative action, law and order, better street conditions, improved recreational facilities, revitalization of the downtown area, and the establishment of a Mayor’s Ad Hoc committee composed of members of various local organizations including the Concerned Citizens.\(^{265}\) His devotion to African-American interests, in particular, solidified the dawn of a modern political order in New Bern from which previously excluded citizens gained a far more equal share of city resources.

Regrettably, Morgan’s time as mayor was generally symbolic in nature. Though his intentions were well-placed, as just one man among over 15,000, he was incapable of bringing immediate relief to the common concerns of black New Bernians such as the large gap in median annual income between themselves and whites that in 1980

\(^{264}\) “Mayor Morgan wins in sweep.” \textit{The Sun Journal} (October 10, 1979).

\(^{265}\) Minutes of the New Bern Board of Aldermen, December 6, 1977, Kellenberger Room, New Bern-Craven County Public Library.
amounted to more than ten thousand dollars.\textsuperscript{266} Similarly, Morgan was unable to effectively repress persisting racist attitudes among whites who continued to fear a city government run by African-Americans, which was commonly the case for black mayors in cities across the country. In the run-off election in November 1979, for instance, two black candidates, Barbara Lee and Clyde C. Best, Jr., faced obvious white opposition from the anonymous “coalition for Responsible Government” that mailed letters to an unknown number of white voters warning them to use their vote in order to prevent “PUPPETS on the Board of Aldermen.”\textsuperscript{267} Despite his inabilities to cure all city ills, Morgan’s leadership epitomized greater expectations that naturally contributed to the political discourse within the black community, which was no small task. As a graduate of Howard University, he was always encouraged to “work hard so your race can be proud of you.”\textsuperscript{268} Since his term of office, Morgan’s hard work has encouraged numerous fellow African-Americans to run for city office in hopes of further transforming politics in New Bern through his guiding footsteps.

Though not all of their goals were realized and though underlying difficulties still existed, by 1979 African-American New Bernians were finally able to reap ample benefits from the seeds they had planted in 1948. Success, in terms of attainment of political office, came slow in comparison to other cities in the state, but the level of community empowerment that they achieved was hard to rival.\textsuperscript{269} As a result of their prolonged determination to incorporate themselves into city politics, African-Americans


\textsuperscript{267} “Politicos admit some role in letter,” \textit{The Sun Journal} (November 1, 1979).

\textsuperscript{268} Tape of interview of Leander R. Morgan, New Bern, N.C., Behind the Veil Project, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

\textsuperscript{269} Examples include the city of Raleigh which received its first black mayor, Clarence Lightner, in 1973 and Chapel Hill which elected its first black mayor, Howard Lee, in 1968.
in New Bern forged remarkable transformations in their life circumstances and in the society that they dwelled. By way of their own efforts, they came to find that the door to politics unlocked various possibilities to confront lingering inequalities. In fact, it was this recognition that fueled their faith in the political movement, for forward progress into the 1980’s and beyond wholly depended on continuing the prized struggle begun generations ago.
CONCLUSION:

“WHITES KNEW WE OUGHT TO GET A PIECE OF THE PIE”

By 1983, due to increased pressure on the federal government brought by Reverend Leon C. Nixon, the at-large election system was finally abolished in New Bern for not being in accord with the original Voting Rights Act (VRA).\textsuperscript{270} In its place was a return to the ward-based system that effectively provided African-American voters an equal chance to elect their desired representatives. The effects of this change became evident in the city election of 1989, in which four blacks were elected to office, including Leander R. Morgan for mayor. The switch from an at-large system, which before had purposely mired their voting influence for close to forty years, signaled a monumental triumph in the fight for African-American political rights in the city.

As many blacks in New Bern could easily attest, enfranchisement as well as the struggle for political inclusion was a long and arduous process. For most of the history of New Bern politics, race had been the principal determining factor in who was allowed to participate, who voted for whom, and who held local office. Though, ideally, skin complexion would have no role at all, reality offers a different picture. As Barbara Lee recalls, politics in New Bern was based on “voting on race.”\textsuperscript{271} This pattern was exacerbated by conservative whites who, at the first sight of black political advances, clung dearly to tradition and their exclusive hold of power. However, in time, in order to avoid federal intervention, both the programmatic set of customs and the old understandings of racial status would be forced to change. Although national legislation, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the VRA, provided greater opportunities for

\textsuperscript{270} Records of the Craven County Board of Elections.
\textsuperscript{271} Personal Interview with Barbara J. Lee, New Bern, N.C., 8 August 2006.
African-American New Bernians to assert their rights as citizens, it was solely up to them to take advantage of the tools at their disposal.

Indeed, as a result of their great resolve, the political functions of blacks in New Bern came a long way from the official spawning of the movement in 1948. Whereas no African-American dared to attempt political office when the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was formed, by the late 1970’s, African-Americans not only ran for office, they found ways to win. The accomplishments that local blacks made over their long political struggle rarely made headlines or seldom prompted the arrival of national leaders or organizations but this is perhaps what gave the movement in New Bern its exceptional character. Receiving little outside attention, black New Bernians may have found reason to cultivate an even sturdier and self-reliant political base. Moreover, with no civil rights messiahs to rely on or to direct plans of action, regular everyday people arose as heroes to battle the political injustices in their lives.

Grassroots organizing was the centerpiece of their battle. Generally, it involved practical methods that were often as simple as motivating African-Americans to “[support] those people that would be for our interest or seemed to be for our interest.”

Other more extensive strategies entailed voter registration drives, voter education workshops, carefully choosing and encouraging black candidates to run for office, and petitioning city, state and national officials. Every effort taken was done for the sole purpose of directly challenging their second-class citizenship in anticipation of removing the chains of political and social oppression. As blacks in New Bern were well aware, to

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272 Transcript of interview of James Gavin, (October 15, 1992) NBOHP.
vote was the best way to change black status; voting was a means to achieve equality, or as Ethel Sampson put it: “no vote, no voice.”

To strengthen their collective voice, African-American New Bernians, of all classes and backgrounds, unified behind one another for the same cause. Some may criticize this study for its lacking discussion of the role that social class played in the movement, but in New Bern blacks typically overlooked class distinctions, which was particularly necessary in order to most effectively combat rigid forms of white privilege. Their political movement, then, was not primarily class-driven, but race-driven. The tradition of community grassroots organizing was fundamental in the early years and it continued to mature into a period in which many historians have claimed it rarely survived. By 1977, two new political organizations, the Craven County Voters League (CCVL) and the Concerned Citizens, were formed by local African-American activists who yearned for enhanced community empowerment.

Recounting the story of black political activism in a community like New Bern is central to the study of America’s Civil Rights Movement for two main reasons. First, it raises the question on whether a community can join the movement with little external organizational assistance. As this study argues, the presence of national organizations, leaders, or attention does not equate with importance or relevance. In fact, the movement for political rights in New Bern proved most successful and meaningful when local activists formed and led their own organizations and separated themselves, as they did by branching away from the NAACP and the SCLC, from dealings with national offices. Despite the fact that their fight is widely unknown and underappreciated, African-

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274 This is not to say that their movement was racially exclusive. In fact, blacks in New Bern often accepted or sought whites who might support their struggle.
Americans in New Bern faced similar struggles and obstacles that were found in the various publicized areas of the South.

Secondly, the black political struggle in New Bern complements the available historiography by revealing that progress and political reform could occur after the supposed high water marks of the 1960’s. Due in part to the opening of possibilities following the passing of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, African-American New Bernians achieved fuller political inclusion as they began wanting and demanding more. Accordingly, by the 1970’s, black political strength in the city reached record heights. For both of the reasons mentioned above, the black political experience in New Bern improves our overall knowledge of what the Civil Rights Movement represented and signified in different locales. In agreement with historian Robert J. Norrell, “each community now has a story to tell about the movement, and only when many of those stories are told will the South’s great social upheaval be well understood.”

Presently, three out of six members of the New Bern board of aldermen are African-American, all of whom have held their respective offices for at least fifteen years. This detail is not told purely for celebratory purposes but to show the lasting changes in city politics that have occurred. Despite the progress that has since been made, black activists in New Bern still look back on the political vigor of the 1960’s and 1970’s, in particular, as one of the most brilliant and prosperous moments in the movement. Without a doubt, that blossoming period amounted to immense transformations in the ways African-Americans further emphasized their political lives in subsequent years.

276 In addition, two out seven Craven County Commissioners are currently African-American.
The vote was certainly not without its limits but for African-American New Bernians it came to signify an important source of power in a society where power was sanctioned to a select and predominately white few. Arguably, the political inclusion that blacks came to achieve can be attributed to the choices made by all its citizens. Its evolution may have been spurred by African-Americans but whites would have to decide how to act on it. This is perhaps the central legacy of the black political movement for much of the struggle involved winning the hearts and minds of whites. As Bernard George rightfully argued, it takes “more than brick and mortar...attitudes have to change.”

Over time, despite hesitation, white attitudes did change. Because, historically, blacks and whites lived rather separate lives in New Bern (they each had their own neighborhoods, churches, parks, businesses, schools, and assigned places in society) integrating the local political system came slowly and with frequent toil and conflict. Nevertheless, due to the repeated appeals and mounting activism from a

277 Personal Interview with Julius Parham, Jr. and Bernard George, New Bern, N.C., 7 August 2006.
dissatisfied yet resilient local black citizenry, whites came to realize that they had few sensible options but to allow them “a piece of the pie.”

Soon after the disenfranchisement law was passed in North Carolina in 1900, African-American Congressman George H. White of New Bern confidently avowed that—regardless of the legislation’s intentions to demoralize—the political spirit of his race would not die: “Phoenix-like he will rise up some day and come again. These parting words are in behalf of an outraged, heart-broken, bruised and bleeding, but God-fearing people, faithful, industrious, loyal, rising-people—full of potential force.” By the second half of the twentieth century it was clear that White’s prediction had come to fruition in New Bern. Emerging as a mighty political force after 1948, African-American New Bernians revealed that their faith in democracy had not simply disappeared. Between 1948 and 1979, they encountered many ups and downs as well as frequent modifications in their strategy, but their struggle continued to center on an assurance of a positive social revolution as they came together to reclaim their natural and ever present right to first-class citizenship.

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