

ABSTRACT

STRICKLAND, SHANTARA NICOLE. *For the Sake of Freedom: Landownership, Education, and Memory in Halifax County, North Carolina, 1900-1960*. (Under the direction of Dr. Katherine Mellen Charron).

This thesis explores the symbiotic relationship between landownership and education in eastern North Carolina from 1900 to 1960. Centering the experiences of African American farmers in a black majority county, it examines two central questions: How did the fight for adequate education transpire in Halifax County both before and after the 1954 *Brown* decision? And, what is the significance of narratives constructed by both black Halifaxians and outsiders to memorialize the county's civil rights movement? Beginning in the early decades in twentieth century, black farmers utilized the American Missionary Association and the New Deal to build independent and economically self-sufficient black communities, which helped them navigate and, at times, prosper in the Jim Crow South. After the Supreme Court handed down the *Brown* decision, black Halifaxians came together, temporarily, to support desegregation. By 1956, the community had split over which strategy—equalization or desegregation—would provide the best education for their children. This division, rooted in geographical and class differences, had harmful consequences as the lack of a united front allowed white educational leaders to stymie substantive change. This study also considers how Halifax County's freedom struggle has been depicted by local folks and outsiders. Comparing and contrasting narratives of the fight for education and land ownership deployed by native activists and attorneys at the University of North Carolina's Center for Civil Rights reveals significantly different emphases. In the broadest sense, the focus on rural Halifax County complicates urban-based and progressive narratives of the state's Civil Rights Movement.

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For the Sake of Freedom: Landownership, Education, and Memory
in Halifax County, North Carolina, 1900-1960

by
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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

2013

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DEDICATION

To all the extraordinary women in my life.

BIOGRAPHY

Shantara Nicole Strickland was born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from Agnes Scott College in May of 2010. In that same year, she moved to Raleigh, North Carolina. After finishing her Master of Arts degree in History at North Carolina State University, she plans to pursue a career in history and education.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This was a journey. I would like to express my gratitude to all of those who helped and encouraged me along the way. First, I would like to thank the men and women of Halifax County who inspired me to write this thesis. A class field trip to eastern North Carolina gave this city girl a glimpse of rural life, which fundamentally changed my prospective of the movement. Special thanks go to my committee members who taught me to think critically about black resistance in the US and Africa. I was fortunate enough to have a chair, Dr. Charron, who viewed this process holistically. She made it her business to check in on the status of my life and the progress of my writing.

From a far, my family has given me the most support. I appreciated the daily phone conversations with my mother and the many prayers sent from my grandmother. Mama Val, your words “you did that girl,” lets me know every time that I am destined for greatness. Thank you to my father, who took time to read every paper that I sent him. I am grateful for all the cousins and family friends that sent me cards just to let me know that I was in their thoughts and prayers, and a little extra to do something nice for myself.

I am grateful to have such great friends. Jemeka and Kimberly thanks for your love, support, and understanding. Natasha, our Skype secessions helped me survive the thesis. To my North Carolina folks, fun times and breaks from school helped keep me sane.

Last, but not least, Bella has made this journey a little sweeter. Taking you on walks definitely helped me clear my mind in between reading and writing.

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INTRODUCTION

Upon her arrival to Halifax County in 1936, Ruth Johnson, a New Deal resettlement farmer and educator, remembered the lines of segregation as stark. As “I got older, I could see more and understand more,” but when “we got ready to vote and we couldn’t vote. We were denied to vote. We were denied a lot of things.”¹ Gary Grant, son of landowners in Tillery, identified similar inequalities in the county’s school system when he returned home from college in the mid-1960s. As a teacher in the Halifax County Public Schools, Grant recalled that many of the black farmers who worked for white landowners still could not send their children to school as frequently as those of landowners.² Such testimonies speak to the pervasiveness of white supremacy, especially the unequal power relationship between whites and blacks in North Carolina’s Black Belt. This disproportionate power dynamic that lay at the foundation of the rural South’s economic structure determined blacks’ access to the franchise, and other opportunities. Johnson, Grant, and many black Halifaxians would dedicate their lives to organizing North Carolina’s Black Belt. However, their activism does not align with the popular memories of the Civil Rights Movement.

Traditional narratives of the Civil Rights Movement often embrace a top-down perspective by focusing on the passing of federal legislation and renowned civil rights leaders, such as Martin Luther King, that have become fixed in popular memories of the

¹ Ruth Johnson, interview by Rhonda Mawhood, n.d., Halifax, N.C., *Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South*, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina (Collection hereafter cited as BTV; archive hereafter cited as Duke; and interview hereafter cited as Ruth Johnson Interview).

² Gary Grant, interview by author, Tillery, N.C., November 14, 2010, in author’s possession (Hereafter cited as Gary Grant Interview).

movement. Over the past forty years, scholars have enlarged the political focus of the movement by examining how local people led grassroots movements that challenged disenfranchisement and segregation in schools and other public accommodations. Civil Rights scholars have also uncovered the contours of local movements in the Deep South. Both John Dittmer and Charles Payne present the Civil Rights Movement from the perspective of local Mississippians, narrating the black freedom struggle within their every day experiences. Hasan Jefferies embraces the same grassroots approach in his work on African Americans in Lowndes County, Alabama.³ Even so, as Charles McKinney contends, “scholars have been far less diligent with the rural regions of the upper South, in places like North Carolina.”⁴ Some have even claimed that the movement “by-passed” eastern North Carolina altogether.⁵

While there remains a considerable amount of scholarship on black activism in North Carolina, few historians have examined the African American freedom struggle in the state’s rural locales.⁶ Those who write about the Black Belt have begun to challenge the frameworks that urban studies have established for the entire state. In his work on Wilson, McKinney argues that rural North Carolinians’ absence from the historical record allows white

³ Hasan Kwame Jefferies, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama’s Black Belt* (New York: New York Press, 2009); Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

⁴ Charles McKinney, Jr. *Greater Freedom: The Evolution of the Civil Rights Struggle in Wilson, North Carolina* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010), xv-xxi.

⁵ Jack Bass and Walter De Vries, *Transformation of Southern Politics: Social Change and Political Consequences since 1945* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 274.

⁶ See, for example, William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980; Davidson M. Douglas, *Reading, Writing & Race: The Desegregation of Charlotte Schools* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1995); and Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

narratives of progressivism and civility to mask the “intransigence, violence, and oppression” that flourished everywhere, especially in rural areas. Here, McKinney critiques William Chafe’s model of race relations in his seminal study *Civilities and Civil Rights*. Explaining the state’s “progressive mystique,” Chafe insists that North Carolina’s white progressive leaders eschewed violence and promoted compromise in order to maintain the state’s harmonious race relations. The terms of that compromise, however, were always dictated by whites. McKinney, by contrast, takes issue with scholarship that “attribute[s] the relative lack of civil rights activity in the region to the high levels of economic independence, political exclusion, and Klan-inspired violence faced by blacks.” In tandem, the “progressive mystique” and the relative lack of in-depth research on North Carolina’s Black Belt renders generations of black activism invisible.⁷

Marcellus Barksdale has recovered some of this story. In his dissertation, “The Indigenous Civil Rights Movement and Cultural Change in North Carolina: Weldon, Chapel Hill, and Monroe, 1946-1965,” Barksdale posits that African Americans in North Carolina developed a new black consciousness after World War II and “armed themselves psychologically over time to resist the long-established caste system of white supremacy.” This consciousness manifested itself within local movements that addressed specific community issues. Barksdale claims that he chose places where the movement was “live and active.” The movement in Weldon, a town in Halifax County, stood apart from his other two areas of study because activists in “this part of the state met little violence” relative to other areas in the South that had black majority populations. Looking at Weldon’s black middle

⁷ Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 6-7; and McKinney, *Greater Freedom*, xv-xxi.

class, Barksdale contributes to the literature on rural movements by examining the emergence of a voter's registration campaign in late 1950s and early 1960s.⁸ However, there remains much to learn about African Americans in Halifax County's farming areas.

In regard to education in North Carolina, David S. Cecelski and Vanessa Siddle Walker have each probed the complexities of segregation, desegregation, and integration in rural areas. Walker looks to the conditions of Caswell County Training School in Yanceyville from 1933 to 1960 to evaluate the value of African American schools during legalized segregation. Cecelski, on the other hand, investigates battles to preserve black schools in Hyde County during the 1970s. Both scholars seek to understand how rural blacks addressed issues of inadequate education before and after the *Brown* decision. Taken together, their expansive chronology helps us better comprehend the stakes of desegregation and the subsequent backlash and challenges of implementing the decision in rural areas.⁹

Complicating our understanding of black opposition to segregation, this study considers the schoolhouse as one of the few public places that rural blacks welcomed separation from whites. Scholars have long debated the origins of segregation but most look to urban areas and public accommodations to explain its rise. Their disagreements revolve around the issues of when, why and how racial segregation began in the South. Most

⁸ Marcellus Chandler Barksdale, "The Indigenous Civil Rights Movement and Cultural Change in North Carolina: Weldon, Chapel Hill, and Monroe 1946-1965," Ph.D. Diss. Duke University, 1977, iii-v.

⁹ David S. Cecelski, *Along Freedom Road: Hyde County, North Carolina and the Fate of Black Schools in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); and Vanessa Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American Community School in the Segregated South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1996).

importantly, they ask were the lines of segregation between whites and blacks—in public and private spaces—a matter of social custom or law?¹⁰

When biracial politics threatened white racial solidarity at the end of the nineteenth century, white southern Democrats turned to legal measures to curtail African American citizenship. De jure segregation did not resemble the informal practices of separation during slavery and the postbellum period. White southern Democrats' successful campaign to disenfranchise African Americans would exclude blacks from the American polity politically, economically, and socially. Without the vote, blacks would not have access to federal or local offices that decided how schools were funded as well as who had access to any state-funded social services. In his contribution to the conversation, Howard Rabinowitz identifies the problem as not when segregation began but what segregation replaced. Simply put, de jure segregation represented the best alternative to racial exclusion, not integration. Rabinowitz asserts that de jure segregation “occurred because of the efforts of white Republicans who initiated it, blacks who supported it and at times requested it, and Redeemers who accepted and expanded the new policy once they came to power.” In his view, black southerners believed de facto “separate but equal” better than exclusion altogether. Such “custom” derived from the material conditions that freed people confronted after the Civil War, when the ability to give meaning to their freedom depended on separation from whites. However, when the Redeemers reclaimed the South following Reconstruction, they codified these informal practices of separation into law to legally

¹⁰ John David Smith, “Segregation and the Age of Jim Crow: From Slavery to Segregation,” in *When did Southern Segregation Begin?*, John David Smith, ed., (Boston: Bedford, 2002), 9.

control African Americans. Beyond losing the franchise, restricted access to public services, especially education, shaped the economic and social destinies of countless black men and women and assigned them a separate and unequal position in nearly every aspect of daily life.¹¹

In her more recent study of segregation in urban spaces, Blair L.M. Kelley examines the complex relationship between race, class, and gender in black resistance to segregation on public conveyances from 1890-1910. Like other scholars, she calls attention to the fact that racial segregation on train cars first appeared in the antebellum North and later became a phenomenon of the postwar South. According to Kelley, black resistance to segregated travel meant more than receiving better accommodations. Equal access on trains was about black citizenship and black social mobility. America. Kelley emphasizes the importance of gender by showing that black women made claims to respectable womanhood in their opposition to segregation and demonstrates that this also had economic consequences for the working class. Additionally, she highlights the fissures this issue created within black communities, particularly amongst the black elite who chastised poor blacks for their uncouth behavior during travel. Most importantly, Kelley makes clear that in an era typically characterized by accommodation, African Americans continually resisted.¹²

However, without street cars and other urban public accommodations, the sites of contestation would differ in the rural South. Like other African Americans in the region,

¹¹ Howard N. Rabinowitz, "From Exclusion to Segregation: Southern Race Relations, 1865-1890," in *When did Southern Segregation Begin?*, John David Smith, ed., (Boston: Bedford, 2002), 120-122.

¹² Blair L.M. Kelley, *Right to Ride: Streetcar Boycotts and African American Citizenship in the Era of Plessy v. Ferguson* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 1-13, 46-48, 134.

black Halifaxians preferred separation from whites in the realm of education. During Reconstruction, black political leaders and legislators had recognized this desire for autonomy, but most refused to enshrine segregation into law in the era's new state constitutions.¹³ Yet, separation did not suggest consent with the inequalities implicit in white supremacy that became even more entrenched following state-sanctioned disfranchisement.¹⁴ During the early decades of the twentieth century, for example, black Halifaxians used their separation from whites to develop cooperatives and other local self-help organizations, which spoke to how they imagined freedom and reflected their desire for strong, self-reliant African American communities.

Centering the importance of landownership and education, this thesis explores alternative narratives of the black freedom struggle in Halifax County. Many historians have addressed African American efforts to educate their communities, despite the oppressive nature of white supremacy at the turn of the twentieth century and during the Progressive Era.¹⁵ However, Chapter One extends our view into the interwar years and examines how rural blacks fought for an adequate education and obtained land in the New Deal years. I argue that the Joseph Keasby Brick School, an American Missionary Association (AMA) institution, and Tillery, a nearby New Deal resettlement community, became political centers for black farmers in the 1920s and 1930s. Situating black farmers and educators at the

¹³ Katherine Mellen Charron, *Freedom's Teacher: The Life of Septima Clark* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 55-56. See also Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005).

¹⁴ Raymond Gavins, "Fear, Hope, and Struggle: Recasting North Carolina in the Jim Crow Era," in *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy*, David Cecelski and Timothy Tyson, eds. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 189.

¹⁵ On early educational movements in the South, see James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860- 1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1988); and Walker, *Their Highest Potential*.

forefront of Halifax County's narratives for both uplift and self-determination, I suggest that these men and women took advantage of the academic and economic opportunities proffered by the AMA and the advent of the New Deal to ameliorate conditions in their rural communities. The Brick School adhered to the Progressive Era pedagogy that emphasized real life experiences and the classroom.¹⁶ In rural North Carolina, this included teaching black farmers how to hold onto and improve the productivity of their land, which provided some physical and financial protection for them when interacting with local whites. However, black farmers in North Carolina would reap the most opportunity for landownership from the Resettlement Administration under the New Deal.¹⁷ After the closing of the Brick School in the mid-1930s, this renewed chance to own land would reinvigorate the freedom struggle in Halifax County. To be sure, both northern philanthropy and federal policies had limitations. Yet, members of this earlier generation created significant activist strategies and networks upon which future generations would draw.

Chapter Two turns our attention to the public school system and examines how African Americans responded when the walls of Jim Crow began to crumble following the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), which legally declared segregation unconstitutional. Too often, civil rights scholars emphasize African American

¹⁶ Charron, *Freedom's Teacher*, 43, 73; and Eric Anderson and Alfred A. Moss Jr., *Dangerous Donations: Northern Philanthropy and Southern Black Education, 1902-1930* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 37.

¹⁷ Concerned Citizens of Tillery (CCT), *We Shall Not Be Moved: The Story of the Tillery Resettlement Community*, directed by Charles Thompson and Chris Potter, 2007.

support of desegregation.¹⁸ However, in his re-examination of *Brown*, Cecelski's research on Hyde County challenges the notion of black consensus with regard to integration. He argues that in Hyde County, African Americans focused on the losses for their community and schools that could occur. Instead of integration, blacks defined educational freedom in terms of maintaining control over their own schools. This not only provided their children an adequate education but also protected them from the physical threats of white violence and the negative psychological costs of sending black children to school with white children.¹⁹

Following Cecelski's lead, Chapter Two contributes to research on the complexities of black political responses to *Brown*. Immediately after the decision, African Americans in Halifax County coalesced temporarily under the aegis of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to petition the county school board to devise a plan to desegregate the schools. In 1956, when the board refused to comply, black Halifaxians began to pursue different political strategies—specifically both equalization and integration—to provide their children the best education. Yet because black leaders lacked a united front against the school board, white educational leaders avoided properly funding black schools and devising a desegregation plan. Therefore, this study goes beyond the legal fight conducted by the NAACP and considers how men and women in different parts of Halifax County responded to *Brown*. As Raymond Gavins contends, the history of the NAACP depicts the black freedom struggle as “a linear progression of strides toward

¹⁸ See, for example, Wilma Cecelia Peebles-Wilkins, “School Desegregation in Raleigh, North Carolina, 1954-1964,” Ph.D., University of North Carolina, 1984; Douglas, *Reading, Writing & Race*; and Greene, *Our Separate Ways*.

¹⁹ See Cecelski, *Along Freedom Road*.

freedom by the national office that prepared the way for southern black activism.” But the fight for adequate education in South was always more complicated.²⁰

Part of that battle has also occurred in terms of how we remember the movement. Many significant aspects of local movements go unnoticed in popular chronologies of the Civil Rights Movement that begin with the landmark case of *Brown* and end with the Voting Rights Act of the 1965. Most often, these narratives examine the Civil Rights Movement through groundbreaking court cases, the “great men,” the events published in newspapers, and the laudable or vile moments captured on film and broadcast on the national news. As Nikhil Pal Singh argues, “This brief period is now viewed as the Apex of the historical arc of black struggles for citizenship in the United States: the moment when questions of black political participation and civic equality became central to U.S civic identity.” Singh finds this cursory interpretation of African Americans’ move toward citizenship problematic because it obscures longer traditions of black resistance as well as the perpetuation of institutionalized inequalities that continue to exacerbate racial disparities in wealth, housing, and employment. Focusing on the passing of federal legislation during the civil rights era suggests that the movement’s goals were accomplished in the 1960s. The Martin Luther King who in 1963 declared his hope that his children would be judged by the content of their character and not the color of their skin thereby remains frozen in time.²¹ Moreover,

²⁰ Raymond Gavins, “The NAACP in North Carolina during Age of Segregation,” in *New Directions The Civil Rights Studies*, Armstead L. Robinson and Patricia Sullivan, eds. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), 106. See also, Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*, 4-5.

²¹ Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black Is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 1-8.

adherence to this “won cause” version of events veils continued black resistance following the classic phase of the movement.²²

Scholars also underscore how such chronologies and revered historical moments have had political consequences. Conservatives of the 1970s and 1980s embraced the “won cause” to argue against the role of race in continued discrimination and inequality, and to dismantle many gains of the civil rights era. In “The Long Civil Rights Movement and Political Uses of the Past,” Jacquelyn Hall recasts the movement’s timeline, locating its origins in the labor struggles of the late 1930s and following events well into the 1970s. Including labor unions, economic struggles and the emergence of “color blind” political discourses propagated by the New Right, her analysis extends the chronology of civil rights narratives and allows us to examine school integration, desegregation of public accommodations and voting rights in new ways.²³

The use of a “long civil rights movement” framework helps us recover some of what has been missing in stories of African American activism in Halifax County, particularly over the issue of black land loss. Chapter Three takes up historical constructions of this movement using documentary film and autobiography to interrogate how local residents memorialize their freedom struggle and what they identify as its defining moments. In doing so, it emphasizes the importance of private black institutions during the interwar years and the independence born in landownership that stemmed from the New Deal. I also examine

²² Owen J. Dwyer and Derek H. Alderman, *Civil Rights Memorials and the Geography of Memory* (Chicago, IL: The Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago, 2008), 52.

²³ See Jacquelyn D. Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past” *The Journal of American History* 91 (2005): 1233-1263.

the political uses of “Unless Our Children Begin to Learn Together,” a policy brief crafted by the Civil Rights Law Center at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill in 2011, that functions as a different kind of cautionary tale. Questions of audience and insider/outsider status shape each of these narratives in different ways. For example, locals tend to highlight moments of uplift and triumph to pass on to future generations while outsiders focus on white racism to garner support from sympathetic North Carolinians. Taken together, these narratives make clear that the gains of the Civil Rights Movement did not touch all black communities equally. And as much as they mark how much has been accomplished, they underscore the on-going fight for freedom in rural eastern North Carolina.

CHAPTER 1

Black Farmers, the Joseph Keasby Brick School and the New Deal: Recovering the Fight for Adequate Education and Economic Independence during the Interwar Years

In August of 1895, Thomas Sewell Inborden pulled the dining room table to the middle of an unfurnished room on the second floor of what would become the first building on the Joseph Keasby Brick School campus. He had arrived at his new job to discover that only two-thirds of the building was finished. Due to the lack of windows and doors, Inborden believed it best to spend the night on the table to avoid small animals and insects. When recounting his first night at Brick, Inborden mentioned the mosquitoes as a nuisance but the voices from members of the local black community lingered in his mind the most. He remembered: “The nights were made hideous by...the song of the mosquitoes and last but not the least, cursing and threats by drunken Negroes passing to and fro to chicken fights, gander fights and what not, which convinced me thoroughly that this was the place that needed Christian influence.”²⁴

Such a reproach toward the community’s drunkenness exemplifies southern black reformers’ contempt of alcohol and its perceived threat to racial progress. As historian Matthew Harper posits with regard to this era: “When advocating temperance, [black protestant leaders] spoke principally of the moral and material development of the race, usually as an issue internal to black communities.” For southern black leaders, promoting

²⁴ T. S. Inborden, “History of Brick School (1934),” n.p., Box 1, African American Miscellany 1757- 1983 and undated, Duke (Document hereafter cited as “History of Brick School”).

temperance meant more than keeping up appearances in front of southern whites. They also emphasized its effect on their communities' prosperity and advancement as a race.²⁵

More broadly, Inborden's reflection on his first night in eastern North Carolina provides a window into understanding his perspective as an African American educator, preacher, writer, and farmer in the turn-of-the-century South. His mission at the Brick School, whether it presented itself in the form of temperance, education, or efficient farming practices, always returned to racial progress. Inborden's tenure with the American Missionary Association (AMA) also profoundly shaped his writings, most notably in the ways he constructed his life narrative in relation to the grand narrative of northern missionary philanthropy in southern black education. Like other black educators of this generation, Inborden centered his life story in the context of the progress and demise of the institution. Yet, recording his personal progress from youth to his greatest accomplishments as principal of the Brick School, Inborden also implicitly underscored what northern philanthropy made possible for innumerable students and alumni.²⁶

At the Brick School, blending the role of the school as an academic institution and community organization spawned both racial uplift and economic self-sufficiency efforts, which together promoted black landownership. Brick and the organizations it fostered helped local people confront the social and economic structures of the Jim Crow South that

²⁵ Mathew James Zacharias Harper, "Living in God's Time: African-American Faith and Politics in Post-Emancipation North Carolina," Ph.D. Diss. University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, 2009, 163-165.

²⁶ As Katherine Mellen Charron notes, "The question of audience is of utmost importance, particularly for African American autobiographers, who have historically confronted the reality that documenting one's life could put it at risk." See *Freedom's Teacher* 9. Booker T. Washington penned the most prominent black educator's autobiography in this era. See *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997).

propagated a cheap labor system and spawned dependency. Sharecropping and tenancy tied black and poor white farmers to the land through debt.²⁷ However, landownership gave African American farmers the means to navigate Jim Crow while economic self-determination allowed rural blacks to establish their own separate communities wherein progress remained a possibility. The overlap of Brick as academic institution and community organization demonstrates the importance and necessity of challenging white supremacy on multiple fronts. By the 1930s, Brick's mission and purpose in eastern North Carolina would change. Yet, the institution's roots in the community meant that it was well positioned to help another generation of black farmers, who arrived in nearby Tillery, take advantage of the federal opportunities of the New Deal.

Both the emergence of independent rural black schools funded by northern philanthropy and federal intervention through the New Deal proffered academic and economic possibilities for black farmers in eastern North Carolina. To be sure, both also had limitations. Robbing African Americans of the vote, white southerners had substantially limited black control over black public schools. More critically, by 1910, northern philanthropists began to withdraw their support from rural black private schools in order to relinquish control to all-white county school boards. In addition, the promises of the New Deal fell short due to local officials' discriminatory practices and the federal government's poor implementation of the programs. Despite the shortcomings of outside assistance, local

²⁷ Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco, and Rice Cultures Since 1880* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 4-5.

African Americans seized these opportune moments to ameliorate the social and economic conditions in their communities.

Founded in 1895, the early years of the Brick School demonstrated the importance of northern philanthropy in founding autonomous black institutions in the South. Julia Brick, a New York native, inherited the abandoned Estes Plantation from a Union Army General. In the early 1890s, she decided to visit. Dismayed by the inequalities between black and white farmers in the area, Brick turned to the AMA to devise a plan to build a school for African American children on the land. To begin, she donated the Estes Plantation, which consisted of 1,000 acres that stretched across three counties in eastern North Carolina: Halifax, Nash, and Edgecombe. She also made an agreement with the AMA that the school would be named in memory of her late husband, Joseph Keasby Brick, a civil engineer who acquired his wealth through developing the infrastructure of the South after the Civil War. Because the property had been vacant since the Civil War, the site needed a large investment to become a functioning educational institution. Thus, Brick also personally contributed \$5,000, sold a portion of the farm to raise additional cash, and influenced some of her friends to donate to the project as well. Reflecting both the Brick School's and the AMA's emphasis on religious training, a gift of \$5,000 from George Ingraham, her lawyer and a deacon in the Methodist Church, helped finance the school's chapel.²⁸

The next step was to find a principal to lead the school, and the AMA chose one of its own who seemed most promising. Thomas Sewall Inborden was born in the mountains of

²⁸ Inborden, "History of Brick School."

region of Upperville, Virginia, in January of 1865 to Harriet Protector Smith, a free black woman. He never knew his father but he claimed to have Native American and white blood. As a child, Inborden helped his mother cane chairs and became very interested in the plants and fruits that grew in the area. Inborden's mother instilled in her son the importance of education. Because her son only attended public school a short three months during the winter, Smith paid a tutor to teach him during the other months. At the age of seventeen, in search of better opportunities, Inborden decided to move to Cleveland, Ohio. He found a job as a bellboy at a local hotel and quickly began to save his earnings to attend Oberlin College, the first college in the United States to admit African Americans and women. In 1887, he enrolled at Fisk University, an African American university sponsored by the AMA. By this time, the AMA had established itself as a viable Protestant organization that challenged the American racial caste system through financing and supervising schools and universities for African Americans in the South.²⁹ Influenced by the AMA's work while attending Fisk, Inborden chose to pursue a path in Christian missionary work. After graduating from Fisk, he began working for the AMA as a preacher and later he became the principal of two schools, Helena Normal School in Arkansas (1892) and Albany Normal School in Georgia (1894). A year later, Inborden found himself forced to sleep on a table the first night at his new school. His wife, Sarah Jane Evans, would soon join him in eastern North Carolina.³⁰

²⁹ Frederick Leslie Brownlee, *New Day Ascending* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1946), 107-114; and Inborden, "History of Brick School."

³⁰ Willa Cofield, *The Brick School Legacy* (Philadelphia: Scribe, Inc., 2007); Inborden, "History of Brick School;" and Robert Ewelle Greene, *A Biography: Thomas Sewell Inborden, Early Educator of Color* (Fort Washington, MD: R. E. Greene, 1996), 6-9, 364-365.

Black principals, like Inborden, acted as fundraisers for their institutions and also negotiated with white state educational and political leaders to provide for their schools. Once the builders finished the construction of Brick's main hall, its rooms still needed furnishing. Inborden visited adjacent towns to acquire equipment at discounted rates but the merchants refused "to do business for less than twenty-five percent on their investment." Rejecting local high interest rates, Inborden travelled to New York to purchase the equipment at wholesale prices from department stores.³¹ In this case, Inborden had to respond pragmatically to the problems that faced the Brick School and he relied on both distant friends and his own skills to solve them. Yet Inborden sought more than a better deal. Bypassing local whites in this instance demonstrated his defiance of the unequal economic relationship between rural blacks and whites in eastern North Carolina. By charging higher interest rates on materials for the school, local whites attempted to stop or at least stall the school's development. Turning to the retailers in the North, Inborden's actions underscores his lack of compliance with the unequal power dynamic.

In the fall of 1895 after returning from New York, Inborden faced another problem. County officials sent the Brick School a tax bill for the institution's property totaling fifty-seven dollars, an unanticipated expense that the institution could not afford. Inborden requested a meeting with the all-white County Board of Commissioners. At the meeting, board members offered a compromise that taxed all the farm area and only exempted classroom equipment and a portion of the school's land. Inborden refused the offer, firmly stating that "every inch of the farm was to be used for school purposes as much as a map

³¹ Inborden, "History of Brick School."

hanging on the walls and if they taxed any part of it they would have the same right to tax all of it.” Though AMA lawyers believed the county commissioner’s offer sufficient, Inborden would not comply, reiterating that everything on the campus contributed to the students’ education. Inborden decided to continue the negotiations on his own and the board finally budged on the tax issue. For forty years, the school did not pay property taxes.³² Inborden’s defiance in this case testifies to black resistance in an age typically characterized by accommodationist tactics. Despite the risk, he circumvented the AMA’s decision to support compromise on local whites’ terms for the good of the Brick School. Inborden had the foresight to challenge whites on this tax issue because exemption would afford a layer of economic protection that would aid the school financially in the following years. Through establishing a precedent that the county would not tax the school’s property, Inborden provided a model on which future leaders in the community could draw if the issue rose again. Inborden’s resistance was also symbolic. Others in the Brick community would perhaps look to Inborden as an example of how to stake a claim to one’s independence.

The school experienced immediate growth. Within months of Inborden’s arrival, AMA officials in New York sent five African American teachers, all trained at AMA universities. By the end of the first academic year, fifty-four students had enrolled; in a short eight years, total enrollment would climb to 230 students, 140 of whom boarded on a campus that now had twenty buildings. Pleased by the faculty’s ability to teach African Americans “how to do things with their hands,” Julia Brick continued her financial support and wrote Inborden about the progress of the school until her death in 1903. By 1904, tenant farmers,

³² Greene, *A Biography: Thomas Sewell Inborden*, 20.

who leased land from the school with the intention to buy, had also begun to cultivate crops and raise livestock. In an issue of the *Joseph K. Brick News*, the school's newsletter, Inborden wrote that some tenants owned cows, chickens, and other livestock. In addition, the school farm produced 350 barrels of corn, 996 bushels of peanuts, 379 sweet potatoes, and other crops such as cabbage, turnips, beans and peas.³³ The successful harvest at the school marked one of the initial steps of Brick's becoming a self-sufficient farming community. The school soon hired a graduate of North Carolina A&T College in Greensboro as the Farm Superintendent in order to help the community produce all the products that they would need on the school's farm. Inborden boasted that "for more than twenty years we never bought a pound of food except a few concentrates for the cows."³⁴

The success of the Brick School and its significance as a local organization manifested itself in the community in three different ways. First, sharecroppers and tenants gathered on the campus annually to attend the Farmers' Day celebration, which began in 1908 with only five farmers in attendance. The idea behind Farmers' Day was to raise local awareness of the most efficient farming and livestock practices. At the first meeting, black farmers testified that they used a team of oxen to plow the land. The farmers believed this the most beneficial method because they did not have to feed the livestock; instead, they released them in the woods to graze. Yet, if black farmers wanted to remain competitive with their white neighbors, they would have to adapt newer technologies and practices as agricultural

³³ Ibid., 26. Greene cites Inborden's speech at the National Sociological Conference in 1903 on page 28.

³⁴ Inborden, "History of Brick School."

techniques evolved.³⁵ Mary Boddie, a Brick alumna and former teacher, considered the Farmers' Day meeting a critical event for rural communities. She remembered tenants and new landowners from areas such as Tarboro, Weldon, and Rocky Mount congregating to learn the most up-to-date and efficient farming, livestock rearing, and record keeping practices.³⁶

Second, the Brick School fostered economic independence by encouraging cooperatives. By 1922, local black farmers had organized the Tri-County Federal Farm Loan Organization, which had provided approximately \$75,000 dollars toward black farms and land improvements. Lastly, the meetings promoted landownership. In 1934, Inborden recalled: "At one of our earliest meetings the Chapel was filled with farmers, eighty six percent of whom owned their farms and were farming on their own account." The import of the Brick School in eastern North Carolina seems even more impressive when considering Inborden's emphasis on landownership. "When the Brick School began, there was not a single Negro owning land in five miles of the institution." Inborden bragged that "Now, every piece of land to date, January 1, 1934, adjacent to Brick School is owned by Negroes."³⁷

Inborden's comments testified to what had been achieved despite nearly impossible odds. The link between education and land ownership remained critical. Beyond those

³⁵Inborden, "History of Brick School (1934); and Greene, *A Biography: Thomas Sewell Inborden*, 41.

³⁶Mary Boddie, interview by Karen Ferguson, Enfield, N.C. June 25, 1993, Box TR 6, BTV, Duke, (Interview hereafter cited as Mary Boddie Interview).

³⁷T. S. Inborden, "A Trip to California and Several Addresses to the Negro Farmers' Congress of North Carolina: Brick School in Retrospect (1922)," 36, MC112, Box 1, File 12, Josephine Scott Hudson Papers, Special Collections Research Center, D. H. Hill Library, North Carolina State University, Raleigh (Document hereafter cited as "Brick School in Retrospect" and archive hereafter cited as NCSU); Inborden, "History of Brick School;" and Greene, *A Biography: Thomas Sewell Inborden*, 41.

fortunate enough to attend Brick, the majority of black children confronted economic and social structures in the rural South that impeded the growth of public schools. White planters reaped the most profit from cash crops, such as tobacco and cotton, by relying on cheap labor. In Black Belt regions like eastern North Carolina, black farmers remained synonymous with easily exploitable workers. Most conservative white southerners did not support schooling for African American children because they believed that education or literacy “spoiled” blacks as good field hands. Even those white southerners, who did advocate for southern black education, framed their support in terms of socially engineering an inferior class in order to ensure a perpetual source of cheap labor.³⁸ As a private school, Brick had some immunity from such local restrictions and allowed black southerners to create a curriculum that carried out what they envisioned as an adequate education. Inborden was but one of many black educators that took advantage of the possibilities created by the AMA when local white educational leaders refused to fund black schools. Working within a segregated system, Inborden facilitated the growth of an institution that directly contested the relationship between the rural economy and black agricultural workers.

Economic independence remained at the core of the Brick philosophy, but Inborden also envisioned agricultural education as complementary to a liberal arts education. Akin to other institutions at the turn of the twentieth century, the Brick School pedagogy aimed to provide an education applicable to the students’ and community members’ lived experiences. Creating a curriculum that was also relevant in students’ daily lives reflected a larger pedagogical shift in Progressive Era education, which suggested that educators move away

³⁸ Anderson, *The Education of Blacks*, 149.

from older traditions of rote memorization and corporal punishment and adopt new curriculums that included hands-on experiences. For educators in the rural South, this often meant blurring the lines between the community and the schoolhouse.³⁹ When commenting on educators at the Brick School and similar institutions, historians Eric Anderson and Alfred A. Moss Jr. argue that “A related though distinct hope of many blacks who thought, wrote, and talked about ‘Negro education’ was the desire to ensure that black educational institutions were anchors and stimulants for economic life of the African American communities in which they were situated, particularly those in rural areas.”⁴⁰

The Brick School’s ability to do so stemmed from Inborden’s belief that farming, raising livestock, perfecting wood-work, and type-setting would be effectively rendered impossible without “mental training.” Inborden argued: “The mind is master and unless that has training and poise the hands fail,” concluding that, “the academic course is to meet that condition.”⁴¹ In the Jim Crow era, Inborden’s philosophy remained politically astute. He propounded a middle ground between industrial and liberal arts education, which took into consideration the social and economic forces that aligned against rural African Americans while also imagining blacks as successful landowners or thriving students who could opt to pursue a higher education. At a time when many rural communities lacked any schools for African Americans, Brickites received both an education on the primary and secondary level. What was accomplished at Brick seems even more extraordinary when considering that the

³⁹ Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*, 43, 73.

⁴⁰ Anderson and Moss, *Dangerous Donations*, 37.

⁴¹ Inborden, “History of Brick School.”

state of North Carolina did not open a public high school for African American youth until after 1917.⁴²

The mere presence of the Brick School in eastern North Carolina countered southern white elites' beliefs that blacks could not or should not obtain an education. By 1922, the school had grown from five to twenty teachers who instructed approximately 400 students. The majority of the students lived within a fifty mile radius, but the school also housed students who hailed from distant counties in North Carolina and other southern states. The geographic range of Brick's student body in its first two decades hints at the early success of the institution and its import in rural black communities, both near and far. Inborden hoped that the students would take what they learned at school back to their home communities and implement its practices. The institution taught boys and girls how "to do the things the best way in the community where they may live."⁴³

At the same time, Inborden insisted that "Being rurally situated, the first and greatest appeal must be made along the line of an agricultural education."⁴⁴ Agricultural education at Brick exemplified the idea that racial uplift stemmed from hard work. In addition, the type of work expected from students connected to uplifting the race by creating a cadre of respectable black men and women. A gendered division in course work reflected Inborden's mission "to teach our boys and girls the dignity of home and farm life."⁴⁵ For example, in the classrooms of the industrial education department, distinct courses for male and female

⁴² Cofield, *The Brick School Legacy*.

⁴³ Inborden, "Brick School in Retrospect," 50.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Inborden, "History of Brick School."

students reinforced a gendered division of labor in the world outside of Brick. The department was divided in two sections: “manual arts” and “domestic sciences.” In the manual arts courses, male students learned how to carve wood, handle iron, and use machinery. These classes taught young men useful skills for farmers who needed to build or repair tools or conveyances utilized on farms. As for female students, domestic science courses taught them how to cook, clean, sew, and wash clothes.⁴⁶

During harvest season, however, the division of labor was rarely as neat as Inborden had imagined. In her research on women’s labor in the rural South, Jacqueline Jones reveals that though men oversaw crop production, when crops needed to be planted or harvested women and children entered the fields to help.⁴⁷ Organizing men’s and women’s labor provided some stability and was considered necessary for the survival of the black rural family and community. For male students, in particular, Inborden also believed that these courses prepared them to assume leadership roles in their communities when they returned home. In reality, as Glenda Gilmore posits, “the coeducational experience influenced gender relations among educated African Americans by encouraging domestic partnerships and an active place for public life.” Thus, black women assumed complementary but equally important roles alongside black men. Many of the women that attended Brick would continue their education by taking teacher training courses. As teachers, these women became active

⁴⁶ Cofield, *The Brick School Legacy*.

⁴⁷ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to Present* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1985), 82.

in the public sphere, working daily to uplift the race and maneuvering strategically to circumvent Jim Crow and provide their students a relevant education.⁴⁸

Racial uplift and respectability also permeated the liberal arts courses and the campus culture. Classes in African geography and African history gave students racial pride by providing positive images of their African ancestors.⁴⁹ The tradition of including Africans in historical narratives began with black northern teachers who taught southern blacks after the Civil War. These teachers also hoped to counter depictions of the “lazy” and “loud” slave often found in textbooks. However, the overall goal of teaching students about their African ancestors included utilizing examples of how blacks from the continent, or the Diaspora, had also shaped history as whites had done. Such efforts by African American educators instilled in the youth that blacks were not passive beings in a long history of oppression.⁵⁰ In addition, providing courses in advanced sciences, mathematics, and classical languages prepared students who yearned to continue their education beyond Brick. Lessons of self-respect and racial pride also extended outside of the walls of the classroom. In salutations, students were required to address each other as Ms. and Mr., recalled alumna Virginia Wills. This was so ingrained in the Brick culture that even Wills’ parents always addressed each other with proper titles. The students’ attire also embodied respectability. The dress code required boys to wear a tie and hat while girls donned long skirts, stockings, and high-collared shirts.⁵¹

⁴⁸ See Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1902* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 31, 32; and Mary Boddie Interview. For additional testimonies from women who became educators, see Cofield, *The Brick School Legacy*.

⁴⁹ Cofield, *The Brick School Legacy*.

⁵⁰ Anderson and Moss, *Dangerous Donations*, 24, 25.

⁵¹ Cofield, *The Brick School Legacy*.

While the AMA facilitated the growth of private institutions, the Julius Rosenwald Fund (JRF) improved rural public education by building schoolhouses throughout the South. However, the fund did not grant all the capital or materials needed for construction; black southerners and southern states also contributed. The JRF actually ignited a fundraising campaign among black southerners that outweighed the financial contributions of the fund.⁵² For example, in Halifax County, the black community raised \$870, the JRF donated \$700, and the state yielded the remaining \$1976 to build the Tillery School in the early 1920s. Donations from the black community emphasize the importance that African Americans placed on education and show that they practiced “self-help” to secure adequate education due to southern states’ neglect.⁵³

Despite northern philanthropists’ and the black communities’ commitment to improving rural education in the South, many black children still received little to no education. In farming communities, the rural economy dictated when children, especially sharecroppers’ children, would attend school. Therefore, most children only attended school approximately four months during the year. In an ethnographical study of the rural South, Charles S. Johnson found that education for youth and their parents had two practical outcomes. The first, literacy, protected them from being taken advantage of by white landowners, who wrote fraudulent contracts to tenants. Second, education meant economic growth. Johnson stated that education provided a “means of escape from the prospect of an unpleasant occupation which is frequently associated in the minds of Negroes with a low

⁵²Anderson, *The Education of Blacks*, 152-154.

⁵³ Ibid., 179, 184, 185; and Fisk University, *Fisk University Rosenwald Fund Card File Database*, <http://rosenwald.fisk.edu/index.php?module=search>, (accessed August 25, 2011).

racial status.” Despite the dysfunctional economic relationship between the schoolhouse and the harvest season, African Americans always understood the importance getting an education.⁵⁴

The practical uses of literacy motivated African Americans that did not attend school to utilize old traditions established in slavery to educate themselves; learning, therefore, did not always occur in the classroom. Lillian Fenner grew up in Tillery, North Carolina and only attended school two months during the year. Although Fenner did not spend much time in the classroom, she remained determined to get an education. She did not fret when she could not attend school. She recalled that “Along then it won’t no strict laws for children to go to school no way... but I didn’t worry about [that]...I just stayed home and I tried to learn, to read books at home.” In addition to the children who taught themselves, some who had acquired some education also became the teachers in their home. Mary Boddie and her brothers attended the Brick School. Their parents had moved to the area because her father knew that unless he eventually owned a farm, his children would never attend school. He became a tenant farmer on Brick’s property and later bought land near the school. While their parents worked hard on the farm and did not attend school themselves, the Boddie children would teach their parents what they believed the most important part of their education at the Brick School. It was important for them to learn correct English “so that you can communicate more intelligently,” Boddie recounted.⁵⁵ Central in the accounts of both Boddie

⁵⁴ Charles S. Johnson, *Growing up in the Black Belt: Negro Youth in the Rural South* (Washington D.C.; American Council on Education, 1941), 109-112.

⁵⁵ Interview with Lillie Fenner, Halifax, N.C., June 26, 1993, Box TR6, BTV, Duke; and Mary Boddie interview.

and Fenner is the importance of “self-taught” education and African Americans’ determination to become literate even when the odds worked against them.⁵⁶

Black advances in education seemed to stand on shaky ground as white philanthropists continued to urge southern states to accept responsibility for black education. The shift from northern philanthropy and private schools to white state control over public education began in the early 1900s. Early indications of this shift rested in the JRF’s requirement to have county school boards assume ownership of school properties and maintain the schools as a part of the public school system, despite black southerners’ large contribution to funding schools across the South. In exchange for this turn in this educational movement, black communities gained new facilities in which to hold classes.⁵⁷ Additionally, pushing southern states to include black children in public education established a battleground for African Americans to fight to secure equal education while retaining control of black schools.⁵⁸

Changes in the AMA’s policies and North Carolina’s intervention in private education collided at Brick in 1925. That year, the AMA moved to terminate Inborden from his position as principal. For reasons unknown, the AMA replaced him with another official appointed by the executive board. Inborden did not leave the campus, but the AMA’s decision substantially decreased his leadership role. The same year, the AMA approved the

⁵⁶ See Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught*.

⁵⁷ Anderson and Moss, *Dangerous Donations*, 4-9.

⁵⁸ Kimberley Johnson, *Reforming Jim Crow: Southern Politics and State in the Age of Brown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15-17. For more on the connection between local and state organizing when securing equalized education in the segregated South, see also Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*, chap. 4, esp. 118,119,128-134.

state of North Carolina's recommendation to add a junior college at the site. When the junior college opened in 1926, the new curriculum included courses in pre-medicine and teacher training, which further prepared students to continue their education.⁵⁹ Despite the additions to the curriculum, the future of Brick seemed ambiguous when considering the decrease of black control over the institution and subsequent increase of negotiations with the white state. Historians Eric Anderson and Alfred A. Moss, Jr. argue that the decision by northern philanthropic organizations to make changes in leadership, add normal schools, and fund schools with the expectation that southern states would take control represented a larger shift in these organizations' policies and southern politics. Instead of appealing to the interest of black schools, communities, and leadership, the AMA adopted similar policies of emerging philanthropic industrialists, who acceded to the requests of white southern politicians due to their shared economic interests.⁶⁰

By the early 1930s, the most menacing transformation that resulted from southern states' intervention in black education touched Brick. The school shifted from being a private institution to a public school and the AMA closed the Junior College. Under the supervision of the state, AMA officials collaborated with the superintendents of Halifax, Nash, and Edgecombe County School Boards to form the Tri-County Brick High School. The AMA deeded a portion of Brick's land to provide a free primary and secondary education to African American residents in these counties. To facilitate an easier transition into the public school system, the AMA allowed the state to use the facility without charge, provided buses

⁵⁹ Cofield, *The Brick School Legacy*.

⁶⁰ Anderson and Moss, *Dangerous Donations*, 8, 9.

for the students who attended, and paid the salaries of four teachers for a few years. When many of the schools supervised by AMA closed, the organization blamed its withdrawal on the Great Depression, but also claimed that “it had been a long-time policy of the American Missionary Association...to withdraw its support from schools whenever the state was ready to assume that obligation, or when population shifts placed the institution in a marginal position, or when other factors made the change wise.” The AMA re-directed the Brickites who had attended the Junior College to universities and colleges in the cities of North Carolina. The organization justified closing the Junior College by pointing out that North Carolina had built “one four-year college and several two-years colleges for the training of Negro teachers.” In addition, “there were three substantial private colleges for Negroes in the state, a four-year public college of liberal arts, and a progressive college of agriculture and liberal arts.”⁶¹

The AMA’s decisions seemed incomprehensible to Brickites, including those who lost their jobs and the parents of students, who lost the chance to provide their children a quality education in a safe environment. Moreover, closing the college required its local students to adjust to life in an urban setting far away from familial support networks. Most importantly, shifting private institutions to public schools systems meant African Americans lost control over their own schools. Nevertheless, AMA officials focused on the “awaken[ed] public conscience,” and hoped that “some intangible force for good went out with the

⁶¹ Frederick Leslie Brownlee, *Brick Rural Life School* (New York: American Missionary Association, n.d. [1938?]).

institution.”⁶² Decades after the school closings and transfers to county school systems, Frederick Brownlee, Secretary of the AMA, reflected on his ambivalence toward the organization’s decisions. He remembered that every time the committee moved to relinquish another school to a county school board “it read like a death sentence to the people. To me the decision meant extended life; to the people it meant death. Invariably it was impossible to carry the people with us in our conclusions.” Brownlee neglected to consider the fact that the people would now have to provide for themselves in a white supremacist system that excluded them. One of the AMA’s biggest shortcomings lay in its failure to address how a public school system could operate effectively when the white state disenfranchised parts of the population. “‘Public’ institutions serving a voteless population were bound to be inattentive at best, egregiously unfair at worst, since their constituents had no direct sanction against hostile policies,” Moss and Anderson note.⁶³

The Great Depression also had a much broader effect on the everyday lives of rural black southerners, which extended beyond the closing of some private schools and the transference of others to public school systems. The economic downfall, which actually began in the South shortly after World War I, struck the stronghold of the region’s economy, the agricultural system, and devastated all its farmers. More than half of the United States’ black population still lived in the South and black farmers, entangled in the social and political structure of the rural economy, suffered the worst. “After the crash,” Harvard Sitkoff explains that, “the earnings of black landowners, cash tenants, sharecroppers and wage

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Brownlee quoted in Anderson and Moss, *Dangerous Donations*, 216, 217.

laborers all spiraled steeply downward.” Farmers who depended on earnings from cash crops did not make any profit or slipped further into debt, and subsistence farmers were devastated. In addition, immediate relief proved slow to reach rural blacks.⁶⁴

When President Franklin D. Roosevelt proposed the New Deal in the early 1930s, he attempted to address the economic issues of farmers that had been overlooked in the previous decade.⁶⁵ However, Roosevelt walked a fine line when it came to garnering support from the agricultural South. Since Reconstruction, white southern Democrats had remained resistant toward federal intervention; they feared that interference from the government would significantly challenge the region’s social and economic structures. Yet the effects of the Depression were so catastrophic that white southern elites temporarily eased their undying commitment to states’ rights and welcomed federal assistance to heal the South’s economy. With Congress packed with southern Democrats, white southerners supported New Deal programs with hopes of manipulating funds in the favor elite planters. “As the primary recipients of federal dollars going to the South,” Patricia Sullivan observes that “southern landowners and their business associates controlled the administration of New Deal programs.”⁶⁶

Despite the Roosevelt administration’s high hopes of ameliorating the economic as well as social conditions of the South, historians’ research on New Deal programs reveals

⁶⁴ Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks, The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue: The Depression Decade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 27.

⁶⁵ Lowery, *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South*, 152. For more details on the economic depression in the South during the 1920s, see also Daniel, *Breaking the Land*.

⁶⁶ Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 3.

mixed results from the implementation of its various policies. For example, the National Recovery Administration (NRA) aimed to assist small business owners and laborers but completely excluded black agricultural workers and domestic servants, who comprised 17 percent of all laborers in North Carolina. The NRA's omission, which came at southern legislators' insistence, guaranteed that these black workers would continue to receive lower pay. Similarly, under the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), black sharecroppers and tenants suffered severely. In eastern North Carolina, control of the land and crop reduction policies combined to force landless farmers off the land. Because the AAA made all payments to white landowners, sharecroppers who did maintain contracts did not benefit from any of its provisions. These policies ultimately privileged large landholders while disregarding the needs of small farmers, black and white.⁶⁷

Regardless of the limitations of the New Deal's agricultural legislation, African Americans largely supported Roosevelt, partially due to the fact that the Republican Party had increasingly disenfranchised its black constituents.⁶⁸ Most importantly, the Roosevelt Administration proved that the federal government could intervene in southern politics, though with less efficacy than the Republican Party had during Reconstruction. Black leaders understood that help from the federal government constituted a significant way to contest Jim Crow in the South successfully. "As an arena for redefining the role of government and politics in modern life, Washington became the focus of groups along the margins of national

⁶⁷ Jeffery J. Crow, Paul D. Escott, & Flora J. Hatley, *A History African Americans in North Carolina* (Raleigh: Division of Archives and History North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources, 1992), 140, 141.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 144.

politics—industrial workers, sharecroppers, and African Americans of all classes,” one historian notes.⁶⁹

Strengthening civil rights organizations, like the National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), constituted another way to seize the opportunities created by federal intervention. The NAACP laid the foundation for its education campaign in North Carolina by utilizing the courtroom as a means to circumvent Jim Crow in higher education. In 1933, the NAACP challenged the University of North Carolina’s refusal to admit a black applicant in *Hocutt v. Wilson*. *Hocutt* was the first of the NAACP’s higher education equalization cases and reflected a strategy of supporting exemplary individuals who applied for admittance to universities. By doing so, NAACP lawyers ultimately hoped to limit white institutions’ use of petty loopholes to deny admission to black students. Despite the Association’s careful maneuvering, Mark V. Tushnet argues that opposition from a black leader doomed the outcome of this case. James Shepherd, president of North Carolina College for Negroes, refused to release Hocutt’s transcript to the graduate school.⁷⁰ Even though the NAACP lost this early equalization battle, Patricia Sullivan posits that the court case galvanized support for the organization in the South and established North Carolina as “the testing ground for strategies and approaches that would provide the main focus of the school equalization campaign” in urban areas.⁷¹ In rural areas, however, the fight for adequate education remained tied to landownership and economic

⁶⁹ Sullivan, *Days of Hope*, 4.

⁷⁰ Mark V. Tushnet, *The NAACP’s Legal Strategy Against Segregated Education, 1925-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 49, 52-53.

⁷¹ Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The New Press, 2009), 168-170.

independence; therefore, black farmers would contest Jim Crow through taking advantage of other New Deal agricultural policies.

The Roosevelt Administration made the most progress with black farmers in eastern North Carolina through the creation of the Resettlement Administration (RA) in 1935. The RA supervised the founding of approximately 113 federally-funded agricultural communities throughout the nation, which granted poor farmers and black sharecroppers the opportunity to buy their own farms at low-interest rates.⁷² When searching for places to build resettlement communities in North Carolina, the federal government first contacted the AMA. Due to the AMA's long involvement with African Americans through the Brick School, the federal government planned to buy 1,000 acres of land from Brick and 9,000 from white landowners in the area. But the white landowners recoiled at idea of selling their land to the federal government for the purpose of serving the needs of African American farmers. AMA official Brownlee recounted that "it was impossible to buy up the 'white' plantations in the neighborhood, so government officials turned to a crossroads center called Tillery, in Halifax County, about fourteen miles farther north."⁷³

Having identified this new location, the federal government purchased the Roanoke Farm, spreading over more than 18,000 acres, for black and white farmers. Halifax County officials segregated black and white farmers into separate areas. White settlers lived in west Halifax while African Americans migrated to southwest Halifax to the Tillery Resettlement

⁷² Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 7; and *Concerned Citizens of Tillery*, "Remembering Tillery: Our Land, Our Community," <http://www.cct78.org/history-house.html> (accessed on September 13, 2011); and Lowery, *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South* 152, 160.

⁷³ Brownlee, *New Day Ascending*, 150, 151.

Farm, “one of the largest Resettlement Projects in North Carolina and one of only fifteen African American Projects in the United States.” Many of the African Americans farmers that migrated to the Tillery Farms came from adjacent counties, including Nash, Edgecombe, Warren, and Northampton, and other southern states such as Virginia, Georgia, Florida, and Arkansas. The construction of the Tillery Farms began in 1935, with two of the largest sections located near the Caledonia Prison and Conoconnara Swamp and, later, the smaller sections located in Crowell and Dawson.⁷⁴

Even though white resistance forced the federal government to reconsider its plans of situating the resettlement community next to Brick, the AMA still established close ties with the African Americans that moved to the Tillery Resettlement Farms. After the AMA transferred many of its primary and secondary schools to county school systems, the organization shifted its focus to adult education with tenant farmers. By the advent of the New Deal, the AMA had already made headway at the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, North Carolina, where instructors implemented “ideas about adult rural education and co-operative enterprises.” In 1934, the AMA opened another adult education program in eastern North Carolina, under the leadership of Neil McLean, called the Brick Rural Life School. Engaging the traditions that Inborden had developed decades earlier, the AMA hoped to teach tenant farmers “how to do things of life uncommonly well. To that end the plantation was virtually put at [tenant farmers’] disposal, with the understanding that henceforth tenant rentals would be plowed back into adult educational programs of their own making.”⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Concerned Citizens of Tillery, “Remembering Tillery: Our Land, Our Community.”

⁷⁵ Brownlee, *New Day Ascending*, 151, 152.

Tillery residents took classes at the Brick Rural Life School. As younger students had for decades, these farmers enrolled in liberal arts courses and classes on efficient farm practices and management. Because the federal government required Tillery residents to pay off their land mortgage within approximately forty years, Brick also educated adults about loans and most effective ways to purchase their farms.⁷⁶

The collaboration between the RA and Brick helped sharecroppers move toward landownership. Approximately 150 African American families shared a chance to own land when the resettlement community opened; nevertheless, their journey was not easy. The initial development of the community placed black farmers on an unequal footing to white farmers. When the RA built homesteads, blacks received smaller houses, smaller plots of land, and smaller tobacco allotments. Smaller plots of land and smaller tobacco allotments meant that black farmers yielded fewer crops. This racially-based distribution of land and crops ultimately resulted in less profit for black families compared to white families. The RA supervised black farmers more closely than white farmers as well because the federal government required blacks to lease their land for three to five years before becoming eligible to purchase it. RA officials also paid visits to black homes to see if they were keeping up the land and their houses properly. Many of the residents were experienced farmers and found the actions of the RA patronizing.⁷⁷

More seriously, the paternalism of the RA often placed racist whites in leadership positions that oversaw loan payments and co-operative efforts. Black farmers who had

⁷⁶ Concerned Citizens of Tillery, "Remembering Tillery: Our Land, Our Community."

⁷⁷ Ibid; Concerned Citizens of Tillery, *We Shall Not Be Moved*.

obtained land from the RA made their loan payments to the Tillery Mutual Association, an organization with a white-only board. In research on Lumbee Indians on the Pembroke Farms in eastern North Carolina, Malinda Maynor Lowery posits that “while the FSA (Farm Security Administration) conceived of and executed a plan to revolutionize the economic and social conditions that impoverished Indians in Robeson County, cultural assumptions and misunderstandings hampered the project’s ability to fundamentally change the economic and social system under which Indians lived.”⁷⁸ In the case of Tillery, the program remained similarly flawed because local racist whites served as the intermediary between the federal government and local black farmers. Black residents complained that the secretary and treasurer of the board wrote blank checks and could not account for money that had fraudulently disappeared. In addition, when blacks consulted whites to make their annual loan payments to the federal government, they always encountered problems.⁷⁹

Local whites’ discrimination highlights the limitations of the RA but black farmers’ response reveals how the federal government also fostered a useful relationship in Halifax County between the Brick School and the resettlement community. In 1938, residents met with Inborden to address their concerns. Even in his retirement, Inborden remained a respected figure in the community and served as representative for the Tillery community when addressing officials in Washington D.C. After meeting with the group of farmers, Inborden wrote a letter to his wife’s cousin, Joseph H. B. Evans, Special Advisor to the Director of RA in Washington, D.C. In it, he explained that “one of the local white men who

⁷⁸ Lowery, *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South*, 164.

⁷⁹ Greene, *A Biography: Thomas Sewell Inborden*, 130, 141.

has to deal directly with the project is full of prejudices against educated colored people and said that when a Negro is educated he forgets his place.” He also expressed additional concerns, testifying that he had heard “some criticisms from some white people about blacks managing their own businesses,” and that they also “believed that white people should be present to accomplish the task.” He concluded that “our country is a democracy but at times we fall short of living up to our creed.”⁸⁰ Inborden’s letter to Evans shows that African American appeals to the federal government were not only an urban phenomenon led by national organizations in the 1930s. Like their urban counterparts, rural blacks in eastern North Carolina thoroughly understood the stakes and also jumped at the possibilities that arose from federal intervention in the Jim Crow South.

By the fall of 1940, flaws in the federal government’s implementation of resettlement communities’ policies and local whites’ discriminatory practices wore down the progress that African American farmers had made in Halifax County. When they initially distributed land in the Roanoke Farms, the government had sold to black farmers land located in the flood plain in southeast Halifax. Some white families were initially issued land next to the river. Once the RA learned that white farmers’ houses and crops could be devastated if severe weather hit the area, they quickly relocated them to higher ground. When such a flood of the Roanoke River occurred in 1940, ninety-three out of one hundred black families, in the process of purchasing their land, lost their homes and farms.⁸¹ Whether intentionally or

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Gary Grant (community activist), in a discussion with North Carolina State Graduate students, Concerned Citizens of Tillery Community Center, Tillery, N.C. September 18, 2010 (notes in author’s possession); and Concerned Citizens of Tillery, *We Shall Not Be Moved*.

unintentionally, the federal government set African American farmers up for failure by placing them in the lowlands, which forced many black farmers to move away to other areas.

Moreover, by the time Tillery flooded in 1940, the responsibility over the resettlement communities had bounced among many federal agencies. The Farmers' Home Administration (FmHA) remained one of the last federal agencies that managed the resettlement communities. Ruth Johnson, an educator and landowner in Halifax County, later claimed that black farmers lost more land under the FmHA than the RA. The main difference between the programs was that the RA granted plots of lands where the farmer would pay a set rate per acre at the end of the year; the insurance and the rest was left to the family's discretion. Ruth Johnson recalled the transition of the homestead through different federal agencies. "Every time a different group come in somebody would be lost out. So it was elimination process all the way through until very few could keep their land or is here that started in the early days."⁸²

Despite the seemingly democratic process of including African American farmers in New Deal programs, the federal policy still gave the county the power to decide who could actually receive the loans and in this way enabled discriminatory practices to limit black farmers' ability to keep or buy land. The original legislation of the FmHA had stated it would grant credit to those who wanted to buy farms, expand small farms, buy new tools to improve farm operations, and to those who had suffered from natural disasters. Most important, the FmHA would extend credit to those who could not obtain private loans. But in reality, white paternalism, along with bureaucracy and discrimination, remained one of the flaws of the

⁸² Ruth Johnson Interview.

program. In *Reforming Farm Policy*, Willard W. Cochrane and C. Ford Runge posit that “a major criticism of the FmHA has been that it, in fact, gave loans to established farmers who could have obtained credit from conventional sources, and it ignored its mission to assist low production, low income farmers to become viable commercial farmers.”⁸³ Such discriminatory practices ultimately led to a decrease in land ownership amongst black families, which caused some to move to other areas and others to return to working for whites as sharecroppers.

Yet, despite the tragedies black farmers faced when they lost their land as a result of discrimination, African Americans still focused on gaining the opportunities that ensued from landownership. In January of 1947, Matthew Grant, his wife Florenza, and their children moved to Tillery from Newport News, Virginia. The Grant family was a part of the last migration of black farmers who moved to Tillery to take advantage of federal programs for poor farmers. The Grants also represented a small percentage of black families that could afford to buy and maintain ownership of their land. Matthew Grant secured greater autonomy for his family when he moved to Tillery because he applied for his loans through a private bank owned by whites that serviced black families fairly. Therefore, early on Grant avoided the racist bureaucracy of the federal and local agencies that headed the resettlement communities. This sort of independence provided Grant more leverage when interacting with whites in his community. He believed black men and women who owned land more likely to send their children to school and garnered more respect from the community for acting on

⁸³ Willard Wesley Cochrane and C. Ford Runge, *Reforming Farm Policy: Toward A National Agenda* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1992), 97.

this belief. Hence, he would soon hold many leadership positions in the community, one of which would include contesting the unequal opportunities for black and white school children in Halifax County in the following decade.⁸⁴

When focusing on the economic blows that black farmers took from the 1920s and into the Great Depression, and the discriminatory practices that followed from the implementation of the New Deal programs, the fate of black farmers looks dismal. However, an older educational foundation also facilitated their attempts to move toward self-sufficiency. The Joseph Keasby Brick School, Farmers' Day, and the co-op loan organization fostered the growth of autonomous black life, albeit slowly. Black farmers in the Brick community, and those from Tillery, who took classes there in the 1940s, learned the importance of farming scientifically, record keeping, and an appreciation for how a liberal arts education could improve their lot in life within the confines of the rural segregated South. Therefore, broadening our lens acknowledges how the fight for both education and land could politicize daily life and allows a more nuanced image of black farmers' struggles, successes, and failures to appear. Moreover, despite the limitations of the New Deal, its policies provided many African American farmers the opportunity to become landowners. As Vanessa S. Walker argues, landowning or small business-owning black men and women comprised most local organizations because "self-sufficiency made them less vulnerable to

⁸⁴ Interview with Matthew Grant, n.d, Halifax County, BTV, Duke.

the economic reprisal that could have occurred if they had been more dependent on whites for their income.”⁸⁵

Future generations of activists would utilize the networks created by black educators in black institutions and facilitated by the New Deal Programs when mobilizing rural blacks in Halifax County during the post-war period. World War II increased black political involvement across the nation. One of the indicators of wartime militancy included an upsurge in African American membership in the NAACP and the chartering of new local branches in the southern states. Between the 1940s and the 1950s, two branches emerged in Halifax County. In 1942, African Americans in Weldon, a town in central Halifax County, formed a joint branch with Northampton County. Almost a decade later, farmers in Tillery, North Carolina formed the Lower Halifax County Branch. It was no accident that when the NAACP North Carolina State Conferences of Branches chartered chapters in Halifax County, one of the local branches appeared in an area that had been political and educational hubs for black farmers in previous decades ⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Walker, *Their Highest Potential*, 19.

⁸⁶ Raymond Gavins, “The NAACP in North Carolina during the Age of Segregation,” in *The Civil Rights Movement*, Jack E. Davis, ed., (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 158; and Ruth Johnson Interview.

CHAPTER 2

Between *Brown* and a Hard Place: Reconfiguring African Americans' Responses to Desegregation in Halifax County, North Carolina, 1954-1960"

After visiting black public schools in rural North Carolina during the summer of 1949, Dr. Nathan Carter Newbold, along with his colleagues at the Division of Negro Education in the State Department of Public Instruction, released a report that detailed the conditions of black education in Halifax County. The study began, "Halifax has the most monumental task of providing adequate school buildings for its colored children of any other county in the state," thereby setting the tone for the type of change needed within the county's educational system and the urgency with which the county's superintendents needed to develop a plan of action. Newbold and his staff had faith that county leaders would look to tradition when "deal[ing] with different problems which had faced its biracial population." During the early decades of the twentieth century, Halifax County had led the state in building schools for black children through the Julius Rosenwald Foundation. In the segregated South, northern philanthropy provided something for everyone. White southern educational leaders recognized it as a way to quell African American requests for universal education with relatively little additional costs to them; for black families and communities it offered critical access to education. Due to this foundation, which had provided a solution, albeit temporary, to Halifax's race and education problems, the Division of Negro Education

“believed that this historic county will provide adequate schools for all the children within its borders without prolonged delay.”⁸⁷

Prior to intervention from the Rosenwald Fund, the state legislature had taken steps to establish segregation in all areas of life. Since Halifax County had a black majority population with high concentrations in specific areas, the legislature approved the gerrymandering of school districts to match the geographic distribution of the black and white population. This permitted local whites to create three school districts: Weldon City Schools (WCS), Roanoke Rapids Graded School District (RRGSD), and Halifax County Public Schools (HCPS). In 1903, white education leaders chartered the WCS, located in northeastern part of the county. Weldon, a stop serviced by the Atlantic Coastline railroad and industry hub, counted the second largest concentration of African Americans in its schools. Four years later, the state legislature approved the charter of the RRGSD, situated north of Weldon. Roanoke Rapids had the largest white population within the county and the most wealth generated from the paper and cotton mills. In the fall of 1909, white Halifaxians appointed twelve members to its newest school district, the HCPS, thereby isolating the largest concentration of black pupils and the farming population within its borders.⁸⁸

That Halifax County faced a “monumental task” by 1949 in providing adequate education to its students would not have come as a surprise to local school board members or

⁸⁷ The Division of Negro Education State Department of Public Instruction, “Study of Negro Schools in Halifax County,” Halifax County Board of Education Minutes, August 31, 1949, State Archives of North Carolina, Raleigh, North Carolina (Collection hereafter cited as HCBE Minutes and archive hereafter cited as SANC). Interestingly, Halifax County ran a close second to a county in the Mississippi Delta in the number of black schools built with Rosenwald funds.

⁸⁸ Mark Dorosin et. al, “‘Unless Our Children Begin to Learn Together...’ The State of Education in Halifax County,” (Chapel Hill: A Publication of the UNC Center for Civil Rights, 2011), 4, 5; and Newspaper Clipping, “Educational Matters,” HCBE Minutes, October 1909.

to the students, parents, and principals in the district that experienced the effects of inadequate conditions daily. Throughout the 1940s, the HCPS board received numerous requests from all Halifax residents to improve current facilities, to build new schools, or to provide supplies. On February 5, 1945, for example, Mr. R. Hunter Pope and Mr. Sam Dunn requested that the HCPS board build a new school for white children in Enfield. One month later, a Reverend Bullock and the principal of the black school in Enfield asked the board to replace the auditorium that had been destroyed in a recent fire. Due to the lack of available funds, the school board responded with “no action taken” to both requests.⁸⁹ Until 1942, the majority of the administrative units under the HCPS district claimed “indebtedness [totaling] approximately \$240,000.”⁹⁰ The fact that both blacks and whites found the funding of public education lacking speaks to the destitute conditions of the school system as a whole in an agricultural county with a low tax base. Evidence from school board meeting minutes suggests that members had believed that they could increase their funding of public education, or at least answer white requests for improvements, after World War II ended.⁹¹ Yet, Halifax County never experienced the same economic boost as other southern locales during the war.⁹² Moreover, whether the Division of Negro Education acknowledged it or not, in the Jim Crow South, a meager budget most certainly meant that the all-white school board would channel the majority of what little funds it did have into white schools. Thus,

⁸⁹ HCBE Minutes, February 5, 1945 and March 12, 1945, SANC.

⁹⁰ Ibid., December 7, 1942.

⁹¹ Ibid., September 4, 1944.

⁹² Robert R. Korstad and James L. Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs: The North Carolina Fund and the Battle to End Poverty and Inequality in 1960s America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 198.

Newbold's and other state educators' faith in Halifax County's ability to answer the educational needs of its entire population rang false.

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board* would complicate matters further when it declared "separate but equal" education unconstitutional. North Carolina's political leaders soon implemented legislation, namely the Pupil Assignment Act (1955) and the Pearsall Plan (1956), to prolong desegregation, and members of the Halifax County School Board supported the state's refusal to comply with federal law. In response, African Americans throughout Halifax County—normally divided by class and geography—briefly united, and through the NAACP petitioned the HCPS board to devise a plan to desegregate the schools.⁹³ Had this effort been sustainable, it could have laid the foundation for building a broader county-wide civil rights movement. By 1956, however, such county-wide organizing had become impossible as leaders divided over whether to continue to support integration or to secure equalization for segregated facilities.

The Halifax story illuminates the contours of how *Brown* played out in rural areas, thereby complicating our understanding of African American responses to the decision. Too often, histories of this era reproduce the notion of a monolithic black politics, in which all black people supported the desegregation of public schools.⁹⁴ Events in Halifax remind us that subordinate groups act within what they believe politically possible at certain times and in specific contexts. In his work on subaltern groups, James Scott argues that deference and

⁹³ In his research on Weldon in the 1940s and 1950s, Marcellus Barksdale argues that African Americans did not organize countywide under the NAACP against white supremacy. I contend that African Americans' throughout the county signing the petition to force the school board to comply with the Supreme Court ruling indicates such a moment. See Barksdale, "The Indigenous Civil Rights Movement."

⁹⁴ A notable exception is David Cecelski, *Along Freedom Road*.

submission veil dissident political acts created within “hidden transcripts” or “a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant.” Yet these hidden acts often emerge in spaces controlled by the dominant groups. In tandem, public and private acts of resistance form what Scott identifies as *infrapolitics*.⁹⁵ The framework of infrapolitics helps us contextualize the split in black political strategies in Halifax County by 1956. All shared the goal of providing black children an adequate education. But they divided according to their geographical location in either relatively more rural areas or in the county’s towns, and how they earned their livelihood. Analyzing the different movements on their own terms, we can ascertain why black farmers pursued equalization and control over their own schools and why black businessmen pushed for desegregation. A more nuanced examination of these infrapolitics also clarifies both the short term and long run ramifications that such diverging approaches had for black education in Halifax County.

* * *

Ruth Johnson had only been in Halifax County several years before she began to work in schools throughout the area. After her father died in 1934, Ruth’s mother, Rosa B. Stewart, had decided to relocate from Hertford County to Halifax County to take advantage of a federal program that distributed land to sharecroppers. Stewart’s late husband also had family in Tillery. Hence, moving to the area offered the recent widow familial support and the financial means to take care of her children. Ruth quickly adjusted to the move. In 1936,

⁹⁵ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), xii-xiii; On the use of infrapolitics to investigate black working-class dissident culture in an urban setting, see Robin D. G. Kelley, “‘We Are Not What We Seem’: Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South,” *Journal of American History* 80:1 (June: 1993): 75-112.

she graduated from Weldon High School and two years later, she married Louis J. Johnson, a fellow church member and landowner in Tillery. Ruth Johnson soon began teaching at black schools in Enfield, Roanoke Rapids, and Scotland Neck. Taking up work as a substitute teacher provided her a respectable career and a way to supplement the income from the farm. The variety of schools in which she taught allowed Johnson to witness the state of black education throughout the county, while also positioning her to fight the poor conditions of black rural schools in eastern North Carolina.⁹⁶

When Johnson began her teaching in Halifax County, African Americans represented the majority of the population, with more than half of black residents living on farms in the Conoconnara Township, the location of the Tillery Resettlement Farm, and the Enfield Township, a few miles away from the Joseph Keasby Brick School.⁹⁷ However, by the 1940s, landownership opportunities that existed when Johnson moved to the county had dwindled as the federal government rolled back New Deal programs and white landowners continued to exploit black labor through sharecropping. After World War II, Halifax remained much as it had been prior to 1941: an agricultural county controlled mostly by wealthy whites that attracted few investors and little industrial development, thereby limiting black and poor white residents' job prospects. Furthermore, farm mechanization, which developed in full force after the war, provided new economic gains for white landowners but narrowed economic possibilities for many black and white sharecroppers and tenant farmers,

⁹⁶ Ruth Johnson Interview.

⁹⁷ In 1940, approximately 15,794 African Americans and 12,180 whites resided in the Halifax County. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940 Population Volume II Characteristics of the Population*, << <http://www2.census.gov/prod2/decennial/documents/33973538v2p5ch4.pdf> >> (Accessed April 4, 2012).

ultimately pushing them off the land. In some cases, African Americans migrated to the North or to nearby southern cities, but for those who stayed in the Halifax County job opportunities remained dismal.⁹⁸

The lack of resources in African American classrooms reflected the large disparity between whites and blacks in many aspects of southern life. When recounting some of her experiences as a teacher, Johnson lamented that “the schools didn’t have enough books” and “their seats were worn.”⁹⁹ Whites’ unwillingness to funnel tax dollars back into African American communities remained tied to the disenfranchisement of black men and women at the turn of the century. In North Carolina, a statewide campaign culminated in the 1898 racial massacre in Wilmington, and after 1901, no black elected officials served in the federal congress, the state legislature, or in any county.¹⁰⁰ With regard to education, this meant that school board policies would favor whites, who subsequently channeled inequitable amounts of tax funds into white schools.¹⁰¹ Lacking the vote, black people in Halifax County had little recourse but to turn inward and support their schools as best they could. In so doing, they established a lasting tradition of self-help.

World War II did, however, create new opportunities for African American activism and fundamentally changed blacks’ political strategies when confronting segregation. The hypocrisy of fighting for democracy abroad while Jim Crow laws limited political, social, and economic equality at home led many African Americans to confront injustice directly

⁹⁸ See Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right these Wrongs*, 198; and Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land*.

⁹⁹ Ruth Johnson Interview.

¹⁰⁰ See Cecelski, David S. and Timothy Tyson, eds., *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

¹⁰¹ Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*, 56.

and renounce accommodationist tactics. During the war, Ella Jo Baker, a North Carolina native and Director of Branches for the NAACP, led a successful campaign to increase the organization's membership, chartering many new local chapters in the South.¹⁰² As Barbara Ransby writes, Baker's "first goal as director of branches was 'to increase the extent to which the present membership participates in the national and local activities.' She also pledged to transform the local branches from being centers of sporadic activity to becoming centers of sustained and dynamic community leaders."¹⁰³ In North Carolina, Baker also supported J. Francis Price's request to establish a state branch, the North Carolina State Conference of Branches (NCSCB), during the summer of 1943.

From its inception, the NCSCB identified the northeastern black belt and the mountainous regions of the state as key sites in their membership campaign. In these areas, the Klan's illicit claim to law and order terrorized blacks, instilling the fear that kept them from publicly associating with the NAACP. T. V. Magnum of Statesville and Reverend A. C. Matthews of Weldon would become early members of the NCSCB executive board. If the board wanted to accomplish its mission of organizing new branches and reinvigorating existing ones, members recognized that they would have to reach out to African Americans living in rural North Carolina. The farming piedmont region reaped the benefits of this new

¹⁰²Harvard Sitkoff, "Racial Militancy and Interracial Violence in the Second World War," *Journal of American History* 58 no.3 (Dec 1971): 662-663.

¹⁰³ Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 141.

strategy with “rural areas account[ing] for 56 percent of the chapters and 42 percent of the membership.”¹⁰⁴

The political energy surrounding the war spurred a reemergence of the NAACP in Halifax County. In 1921, approximately 100 black Halifaxians had held membership in the local branch. Thomas Sewell Inborden, principal of the Brick school, had also built a relationship with the national office. In the early 1920s, Inborden wrote the *Crisis* and Assistant Secretary Walter White to confirm the details of local whites’ lynching of a black man in Norlina, located in nearby Warren County.¹⁰⁵ A little over twenty years later, the NAACP galvanized community support again but this time two branches emerged in separate parts of the county. African Americans in Halifax and Northampton Counties chartered a joint-branch, headquartered in Weldon, in 1942. Early on, organizers expressed their concerns about building a strong base in eastern North Carolina. In correspondence between the national office and the state branch during the spring of 1946, Reverend Matthews, Executive Secretary of the NCSCB, and Baker agreed that maintaining a joint branch with two administrative units would “do more effective work” in both counties. They, most likely, understood the power in numbers and feared that two small branches in this part of the state would not fare well in the face of white intimidation. Accordingly, membership campaigns ranked high, if not first, on the Halifax-Northampton branch’s agenda during the 1940s. By

¹⁰⁴ Price was the Executive Secretary of the Raleigh NAACP branch. See Ella J. Baker to J. Francis Price, June 24, 1943 and T. V. Magnum to Ella J. Baker, Nov. 16, 1943, Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (microfilm), M5001, Part 26, Series A, Reel 16 Perkins & Bostock Libraries, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina (Collection hereafter cited as NAACP Papers); and Gavins, “The NAACP in North Carolina during the Age of Segregation,” 160.

¹⁰⁵ Barksdale, “The Indigenous Civil Rights Movement,” 91; Assistant Secretary of the NAACP to T. S. Inborden, January 21, 1921, NAACP M5001, Part 7, Series A, Reel 15.

the end of the war, the branch claimed great success, boasting of more than 700 hundred members.¹⁰⁶ Just three years later, both counties counted enough members to formally split, with each sustaining its own branch. In the Weldon chapter, many of those who held membership in the NAACP owned companies in the city's black business-district. J. A. Tinsley, the first branch president, operated a medical and dentistry practice. Similarly, Augustus Cofield's funeral home business was situated in the center of this black entrepreneurial hub. Ten years later, Tinsley's and Cofield's middle-class standing would push them to the forefront of the movement and shape their political strategies.¹⁰⁷

The surge of militancy following WWII did not pass by black farmers in Tillery. As the end of the decade neared, they began organizing the Lower Halifax County NAACP branch and attending meetings sponsored by national office. The community elected Matthew Grant, a third generation resettlement farmer, and Ruth Johnson as the first President and Secretary, respectively. Attuned to the community's needs, particularly in regard to education, Johnson saw the NAACP as the organization needed "to move [blacks'] citizenship from second class." When recounting her experience decades later, Johnson proclaimed that the NAACP "began to sort of push us into our right to speak, and right to do."¹⁰⁸ In the early 1950s, the Lower Halifax County branch exercised their political rights in a voter registration campaign. When Tillery's registrar refused to register Grant, he called upon his wife, Florenza, and other women in the area to appear before the registrar to

¹⁰⁶ Ella Baker to Reverend A. C. Matthews, June 11, 1946 and "Membership Record State Conference of Branches: January 1- September 30, 1946," NAACP Papers M5001, Part 26, Series A, Reel 16 Perkins & Bostock Libraries, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.

¹⁰⁷ Barksdale, "The Indigenous Civil Rights Movement," 82-83.

¹⁰⁸ Ruth Johnson Interview.

registrar to vote. According to the Grants, Florenza became the first woman from the resettlement community to register to vote.¹⁰⁹

African Americans in Halifax County also looked beyond the NAACP and participated in other grassroots activism to equalize public education. In 1948, “a delegation of black parents” from Enfield requested that the HCPS board build a black high school in the community so that their children would not have to travel to Edgecombe County to attend the Brick Tri-County High School. Apparently, they no longer deemed the arrangement established in the 1930s between the American Missionary Association and the surrounding county superintendents sufficient. Although no black high schools existed in the southern part of the county, the board refused to build the school despite the fact that it would have saved money on transportation costs by doing so.¹¹⁰ Pursuing a strategy of equalization in terms of nearby access, these parents also challenged the county’s “double taxation,” which required that blacks pay property taxes in a county that did not service them even as they also raised money to personally fund black schools.¹¹¹

Rural members in Halifax followed in the footsteps of the national NAACP, whose legal campaigns of the 1930s and 1940s had also focused on integration in higher education and equalization of black teachers’ salaries. The association first made inroads in North Carolina with *Hocutt v. Wilson* (1933). By the 1940s, it had expanded the equalization campaign to include elementary and secondary education. In 1944, the North Carolina Teachers Association (NCTA), the state’s black teacher organization, used Thurgood

¹⁰⁹ Florenza Grant, Interview by Sonya Ramsey, June 27, 1993, Tillery, N.C., BTV, Duke.

¹¹⁰ Barksdale, “The Indigenous Civil Rights Movement,” 96, 97.

¹¹¹ Anderson, *The Education of Blacks*, 179, 183.

Marshall's success in *Alston v. Norfolk* (1940), as leverage when negotiating with North Carolina's state leaders. The *Alston* case held that to deny equal pay on the basis of race constituted a "violation of due process and equal protection clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment." Avoiding law suits and bad press, North Carolina became the only southern state that equalized teachers' salaries through negotiations outside of the courtroom.¹¹²

Ten years after the *Alston* case, Marshall would shift the focus of the NAACP's legal campaign from equalization to integration. Reasoning that "separate but equal" would never be equal, Marshall began honing his arguments in five separate cases that would collectively become *Brown*. In 1952, Kelly M. Alexander, president of the NCSCB followed suit, announcing that it, too, would include integration in its political action plan.¹¹³ Even so, the NAACP's decision to turn its gaze from equalization toward integration did not generate immediate consensus from African Americans. Some sought to maintain autonomy over their schools and others feared whites' responses to ending segregation in the public schools systems. Blacks and whites had to face the music in 1954, when the NAACP legal campaign against segregation entered a new phase.

As the *Brown* decision neared, blacks across the South remained ambivalent toward integration. Realistically, while they understood that integration could result in better funding, many also feared that white teachers would discriminate against their children in the classroom or that the school buildings that once served as cultural centers, similar to the

¹¹² See Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 168-170, 247, 248; and Percy E. Murray, *History of the North Carolina Teachers Association*, (Washington, D.C: National Education Association, 1984), 46-48.

¹¹³ Tushnet, *The NAACP's Legal Strategy Against Segregated Education*, 136-138.

black churches, would be destroyed.¹¹⁴ For example, Vera Plummer, an Enfield resident, imagined that integration would provoke white violence. Remembering white Georgians' lynching of a black man for violating southern racial etiquette, she also considered repercussions for black North Carolinians if black and white children attended the same school. Plummer stated, "you hear about [lynching] and you know about [lynching] and you say...I don't want to see them integrated" because "once they're integrated it is going to be worse." As black communities weighed the pros and cons of desegregation, Plummer reiterated "I definitely was against it." Others tried to convince Plummer that her children would have better books and "access to everything that's better for education." Still, she refused, with the caveat that "if it becomes a reality...then they will go. And that's what happened, I never pulled them out."¹¹⁵

White southern leaders also watched the court in the years leading up to 1954. Aware that the gross inequality of segregated education was no longer sustainable, they initially sought to equalize by increasing the funding of African American schools.¹¹⁶ Planning the school budget for the 1953- 1954 school term, educational leaders in Halifax County for the first time allotted blacks schools \$20,000 more than white schools. Perhaps, this action influenced those black activists in the county for whom equalization would emerge as the preferred strategy.

The day after Chief Justice Earl Warren announced the unanimous Supreme Court ruling that legally overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) the *Brown* decision made front-page

¹¹⁴ See Cecelski, *Along Freedom Road*, 9.

¹¹⁵ Vera Plummer, interview by Chris Stewart, Halifax, N.C., July, 25, 1993, BTV, Duke.

¹¹⁶ Charron, *Freedom's Teacher*, 212-215.

news in the Tar Heel State. Raleigh's *News and Observer* claimed that the court's ruling was "an invasion of states' rights" and a *Raleigh Times* headline called the decision a "Historic Ruling Regarded Equal to Lincoln's Emancipation in its Sociological Significance."¹¹⁷

These two newspapers expressed the concerns of many white southerners while also invoking the arguments of the Old South. Beyond asserting that *Brown* served as a usurpation of states' rights, the articles exemplified white southerners' fear that *Brown* would change American society by dismantling the social, economic, and racial hierarchy through providing equal education. The papers also raised the questions: Who would decide how the desegregation process should proceed? How soon would desegregation take place? Posing these types of questions in the days following the Supreme Court's dramatic announcement spoke to both white and black anxieties.

The Roanoke Rapids *Daily Herald*, the local newspaper in Halifax County, reflected the same concerns as newspapers in urban North Carolina in the days following *Brown*. Not only were local whites concerned with the issue of when implementation of the decision would take place, they also questioned whether or not it applied to all tax-funded public spaces. The paper accurately predicted that "Negroes now will try to end segregation in places set up with tax funds, such as hospitals, bathing beaches, state parks, and public housing."¹¹⁸ Many of the articles also evoked a southern past undergirded with racial violence; suggested ways to maintain the social hierarchy; and appealed to whites' fear of

¹¹⁷ "Declared Unconstitutional Chief Justice Earl Warren Reads Historic and Unanimous Decision," *News and Observer*, May 18, 1954; and "Historic ruling regarded equal to Lincoln's Emancipation in its Sociological Significance," *The Raleigh Times*, May 18, 1954.

¹¹⁸ "Plan Effort to End Other Forms of Segregation," *Roanoke Rapids Daily Herald*, May 18, 1954.

miscegenation. One, entitled “Segregation Circulars Appears,” recounted an incident where whites passed out leaflets in the business district of nearby Rocky Mount, North Carolina. The circulars called on “White Southern Citizens” to uphold segregation in public schools, stating that “We are being cheated out of our heritage ...Band together in one strong common bond of fellowship to establish public schools for our white brothers and sisters. The North waits with open arms to welcome any dissatisfied Southern darkie who so desires to mingle and intermarry with whites. Our Southern decency will not permit us to do so.”¹¹⁹

In another article, the *Daily Herald* reported that Ernest R. Tyler, the speaker for a Roanoke Rapids Rotary Club meeting, had decided to comment on the decision instead of delivering his prepared speech. Tyler told the crowd that “the Supreme Court decision is ‘the saddest thing to happen to the South since the Civil War’” and “I feel sure that the various states will work out some solution as they have solved other problems in the past.”¹²⁰ The county paper took its official stance in an editorial stating: “There will be grave dangers in the implementation of this new policy.” The editor questioned how desegregation would work in a county where “Negro pupils will outnumber white pupils four or five to one.” The editor also lamented: “This paper is disappointed in the ruling as handed down. North Carolina has been working fast to provide facilities for the races now that effort has been to some extent, nullified in the light of the new ruling.”¹²¹

¹¹⁹ “Segregation Circulars Appear,” *Roanoke Rapids Daily Herald*, May 23, 1954.

¹²⁰ Ernest Tyler quoted in “Tyler Predicts Solution in Segregation Problem,” *Roanoke Rapids Daily Herald*, May 18, 1954.

¹²¹ “How Will It Work?,” *Roanoke Rapids Daily Herald*, May 18, 1954.

In reality, Halifax County had not made large improvements in black education since the AMA and the Julius Rosenwald Fund transferred power over black schools to the county during the first quarter of the twentieth century. In April of 1955, for example, leaders of all three administrative units gathered to discuss the financial needs of the county's public schools. C. M. Moore Jr., a member of the HCPS board, described schools that had suffered long term neglect from the county. He reported that approximately forty did not have permanent structures, meaning that children attended school in "poorly and inadequately equipped [buildings] with old fashioned desks and equipment; they are without running water, sanitary facilities and central heating systems." "The other schools," Moore continued, "which are considered to be in permanent locations have need of additional classrooms, renovations and replacement of some buildings." The board concluded the meeting by voting to ask the Board of County Commissioners for a sum of \$4,136,000 and "by continuing the present Capital Outlay tax rate and also a school building bond issue to provide for \$2,000,000.00 to be divided on a per capita school population basis among the three administrative units."¹²² The board's request contradicted assertions by local whites, like Ernest Tyler, that the county had already made large improvements in education. Yet in their decision, board members signaled their belief that investing money in black schools could prolong desegregation. The Supreme Court's ruling, however, would force North Carolina's politicians and Halifax County's educational leaders to adopt new tactics to protect segregation.

¹²² HCBE Minutes, April 1955, SANC.

Before his unexpected death, William B. Umstead, the Governor of North Carolina, had created the Special Advisory Education Committee. Thomas Pearsall chaired the interracial committee of nineteen appointed leaders from across the state. Many of those on the committee also held leadership positions in the eastern counties and piedmont regions of the state. The *Greensboro Daily News* argued that the “committee’s make-up, in fact, represents a cross-section of North Carolina’s leadership – with emphasis on representation from the Eastern and Piedmont Carolina, where the more serious problem[s] lie.”¹²³ In eastern North Carolina, the more serious problem that the article alluded to was the overwhelming presence of a black majority. In 1950, African Americans constituted approximately 57 percent of the population in Halifax County; therefore, appointing members to the Pearsall Committee that represented their white constituents’ needs held the greatest import.¹²⁴

After studying a possible course of action for desegregation in the state, the Governor’s Special Advisory Education Committee recommended, and the state legislature passed, the Pupil Assignment Act in 1955, which relinquished state power and gave control to the local school boards to make decisions concerning the admittance of black students to white schools. Governor Luther Hodges, Umstead’s successor, contended that this shift in power to the local level protected states’ rights because it would prevent a “state-wide [desegregation] suit’ by the NAACP or others.” Without any mention of race, this new

¹²³ Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 50; “A Good Committee,” *Greensboro Daily News*, August 6, 1954.

¹²⁴ Institute of Government The University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, *Report of Supreme Court Decision of May 17, 1954* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina, 1954).

legislation shifted the responsibility of desegregation to black parents and ensured that black students, en masse, would not attend all-white schools.

Hodges took one more step that would delay substantial change in North Carolina for decades. In 1956, the Governor appointed a committee of seven state leaders, also chaired by Pearsall, to study desegregation in the state, but this time there was no representation from the black community. The group drafted the Pearsall Plan, which incorporated “a local-option clause permitting a school district or any portion thereof, to close its schools by public referendum if desegregation occurred, and a constitutional amendment granting state tuition aid for white students in those districts to attend private schools.” Southern states applauded North Carolina’s strategy of “gradual integration” because, as William Chafe argues, “it became an alternative to extremism” and violence. Yet, Chafe also clarifies that the Pearsall Plan “represented a subtle and insidious form of racism” due to the fact that black North Carolinians had to relinquish their constitutional right to an equal education in order to preserve racial harmony in the state.¹²⁵

As the Tar Heel State solidified its plan to postpone all but token integration, black North Carolinians did not remain idle. The NAACP capitalized on the groundwork that it had laid in the 1940s and channeled information to the local chapters. On July 13, 1954, Kelly M. Alexander sent out a memorandum to all of the NAACP branches in North Carolina, urging them to devise an integration plan. Alexander asked branch presidents to organize their communities and get as many people to sign a petition, so that they could present it to their local school boards. He reminded branch leaders when they met with school board members

¹²⁵ Governor Luther Hodges quoted in Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 50-56.

that: “IT SHOULD BE EMPHASIZED THAT THESE NEGOTIATIONS ARE RESTRICTED SOLELY AS TO HOW AND WHEN THE SCHOOLS SHOULD BE DESEGREGATED. We will neither negotiate, nor compromise on the question of segregation because segregation has been declared [unconstitutional].”¹²⁶

Thirteen months later, the Halifax County branch of the NAACP responded to Alexander’s missive. On August 1, 1955, branch president Woodrow W. Harvey and R. D. Manley, Chairman of the Education Committee, submitted a petition to the HCSB. Up until this point, black Halifaxians had only requested that the board equalize schools in the county. With no other recourse to ensure major improvements in black education, 280 parents and community members from across the county put their fears aside, embraced a new strategy, and signed their names to the petition. In it, the NAACP reminded the school board of the Supreme Court’s *Brown* decision and added “We further wish to point out our availability as parents and citizens of this community to be whatever assistance we can to you in devising and implementing a program of desegregation in accordance with Supreme Court decision.” Each person’s signature on the petition represented a moment when varying constituencies, divided by geography and class, united behind the common goal of providing black children an adequate education.

Some signees, however, had to protect their families and themselves, and soon changed their minds. For example, one month after the HCSB received the petition, Briscoe Savage presented a notarized statement to the board requesting “that his name be taken off

¹²⁶ Kelly M. Alexander, “Official Communication,” July 13, 1954, NAACP Papers, M5001, Part 26, Series A, Reel 17 (Emphasis in original).

the petition” due to a “misunderstanding” of its true content.¹²⁷ In his research on the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi, John Dittmer maintains that racist whites “waged an economic war of attrition” against blacks who had signed their names supporting the desegregation of schools. In all likelihood, a local white person in eastern North Carolina had threatened Savage, but the school board did not go on the record about any decisions concerning the removal of his name from the petition.¹²⁸

In response to the submission of the petition, the HCSB passed three resolutions that laid the foundation for white resistance to desegregation in the county. First, they voted against immediate compliance with the *Brown* decision; instead, they resolved that all children in the district would be assigned and enrolled to the same school that they had attended during the previous school year. Next, the HCSB appointed five representatives from Scotland Neck, Enfield, Halifax, and Littleton to an all-white committee that would study the “local problems” that had developed since the Supreme Court’s ruling. Most significantly, the board moved to contact the superintendents of the Weldon and Roanoke Rapids administrative units so that they could maintain a long-standing arrangement to preserve segregation in all three districts in the county. In 1921, John Armstrong Chaloner had donated land to the Roanoke Rapids administrative unit to build a K-12 school for African American children. Due to the school’s location on the perimeter of the RRGSD, many African American students from the county’s other two school districts attended the Chaloner School. Thus, with consensus from all three districts, the HCSB’s third resolution

¹²⁷ HCBE Minutes, October 3, 1955, SANC.

¹²⁸ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 51.

required that black students from Halifax County who would have “been of school age during the 1954-1955 school year” or who “would have attended school had they been of school age” continue their enrollment in the Roanoke Rapids administrative unit during the 1955-1956 school term.¹²⁹ This arrangement allowed Roanoke Rapids to provide a school for its small black population while also accommodating the needs of the other units, such as HCPS, who could avoid building a newer segregated black school in the northern section of the district.¹³⁰ Despite all the legal barriers erected by the state, to do so after *Brown* could increase the risk of a law suit.

In the face of resistance from the school board, blacks in Halifax County continued to push for desegregation. On September 1, 1955, community members in Tillery, with the support of the NAACP, tried to register two students at the all-white high school in Scotland Neck. Tillery residents debated which students they should send to represent their community, and settled on two fair-skinned girls. Considering the gender and hue of the individuals represented normal conversations that black communities had before testing a school’s integration policy. Being both light-skinned and female posed less of a threat to white communities; however, in this case the gender or color of the child did not matter. Whites in Halifax County adamantly refused to let any black children register to attend an

¹²⁹ HCBE Minutes, August 1, 1955.

¹³⁰ Dorosin, “Unless Our Children Begin to Learn Together,” 5.

all-white school. This rejection did not stop blacks in the county from supporting desegregation, but they did change their strategies.¹³¹

On December 5, 1955, Woodrow W. Harvey, NAACP Halifax County branch President, stood before approximately 100 North Carolinians to discuss desegregating public schools in Halifax County. School board members, along with Board of County Commissioners and State and County Advisory Committee on Education members, NAACP field secretary Charles A. McLean, and twenty-five black and fifty white community members peered back at him. One key difference between this speech and the branch's earlier petition lay in Harvey's underscoring African Americans' right to equal protection under the law. He concluded:

We do not expect racial violence in carrying out a desegregation program. We believe this is not an area in the state where there is a general disrespect for law and order. It is our opinion that the law enforcement authorities will assist school authorities in complying with the law.¹³²

Certainly, Harvey knew that local white authorities had no intention of either following or enforcing the law. Nevertheless, if the situation grew worse, he had to affirm publicly his faith in law and order. In reality, Harvey's denying the likelihood of racial violence inadvertently acknowledged its potential, and signaled how much more tense local race relations had become since the NAACP had submitted its original petition.

¹³¹ Gary Grant Interview; and Kelly M. Alexander, "A Discussion of Implementation of the United States Supreme Court Decision of May 17th by the North Carolina State Conference of NAACP Branches, c. 1955?", NAACP Papers, M5001, Part 26, Series A, Reel 17.

¹³² HCBE Minutes, December 5, 1955.

African Americans in Halifax County would continue to fight for adequate education; however, in the following years, the NAACP would no longer play a central role in the struggle. By the late 1950s, the NAACP had come under attack by segregationists who wanted to invalidate the association's claims for equality and tie it to communism. In a Cold War context, white supremacists wielded fears of the spread of communism to both dampen civil rights activism and fan resistance toward integration. In Halifax County, NAACP membership rolls dropped drastically between 1954 and 1960. For example, in 1954, the Halifax branch located in Weldon counted 248 members, and the Lower Halifax branch located in Tillery reported 92 members; yet by 1960, both branches had decreased by half.¹³³ As African Americans began to leave the NAACP, or continued support for it more surreptitiously for the sake of protecting their families and jobs, the belief that legislation and court decisions could solve the nation's race problems decreased.¹³⁴ The groundwork that NAACP members in the Halifax-Northampton and the Lower Halifax County branches had laid during the previous decade marked the last time that any semblance of united countywide black organizing around school issues would occur.

On March 5, 1956, H. R. Daniel, and R. D. Manley—the same men who had submitted the Halifax County NAACP petition to the local school board to force compliance with the *Brown* decision a year earlier—appealed to the HCSB to make more improvements

¹³³ “Statement of Membership North Carolina Branches January 1- October 18, 1955,” NAACP Papers, M5001, Part 27, Series A, Reel 17; and “Statement of Membership and Freedom Fund Contributions Received,” NAACP Papers, M5001, Part 27, Series A, Reel 13.

¹³⁴ See Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South during the 1950's*, 2nd ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1999); and Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948-1968* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2004).

at the Eastman School in Enfield.¹³⁵ Applying this kind of pressure, at this moment, signaled that black leaders now deemed equalization the best option to preserve a school that had been educating their children for almost three decades. In April, James L. Pittman made a similar request, this time on behalf of the all-black Brawley High School in Scotland Neck. Knowing that the board would not budge on desegregation, black leaders in this farming area of the county decided that any progress, even one that preserved “separate but equal,” was better than none. At the same time, such a strategy allowed them to preserve black control of black schools.

Indeed, as several scholars have demonstrated, poor facilities did not always reflect inadequate curriculum and instruction inside those buildings. As a result of “salutary neglect” in segregated schools, principals and teachers could develop their own curriculums.¹³⁶ Even after the legal dismantling of segregation, the black leadership at the McIver School, a four-room Rosenwald school located in nearby Littleton, embraced the freedom to tailor the courses to meet student needs. While he oversaw the all-black faculty and the K-12 student body during the early 1960s, Principal Johnny A. Freedman developed the first handbook for the McIver School. Referring to this part of his career, Freedman recalled that “We had a good situation in Littleton. I thought that we were able to focus.” He added, “My focus from

¹³⁵ In 1919, George Eastman, founder of the Kodak Company, philanthropist and property owner in the county, had built a public school for members of the black community that lived around his estate. Eastman had also recruited teachers from the well-known Hampton Institute and Tuskegee Institute. Scott Washington, “Audacity of Hope: George Eastman and the Eastman Community School,” np, Durham, North Carolina, October 6, 2009.

¹³⁶ Charron, *Freedom's Teacher*, 70-73; McKinney, *Greater Freedom*, 33-34; and Vanessa Siddle Walker, “Valued Segregated Schools for African American Children in the South, 1935-1969: A Review of Common Themes and Characteristics,” *Review of Educational Research* 70 3 (2000): 253-285.

day one is trying to surround myself with the very best people available and trying to come up with a top flight instructional program.”¹³⁷

Pursing equalization even after the Supreme Court handed down its ruling in *Brown* proved an astute political strategy for some rural blacks. Independence that stemmed from owning one’s land, perhaps, helps explain why black farmers wanted to maintain control over black schools. As Cecelski posits, African Americans, who fought to maintain control of their schools, saw it as a way to protect their children and community from white violence.¹³⁸ In Halifax County, white educational leaders had seldom acted within the best interest of its black students.

Meanwhile, African Americans elsewhere in the county continued their attack on segregated public schools through party politics. In 1955, the Progressive Civic Union (PCU) emerged as a key civil rights organization in Weldon. The PCU was aligned with the Eastern Council on Community Affairs (ECCA), which functioned as a communication network that linked more than twenty-five counties in eastern North Carolina. The EECA mainly focused on mobilizing blacks throughout the area while the PCU focused on disenfranchisement and other civil rights issues concerning African Americans in Weldon. Attorney James R. Walker, the founding president of the PCU, believed that the affiliate structure of these organizations would address local issues while also staying abreast of issues in surrounding

¹³⁷Fisk University, *Fisk University Rosenwald Fund Card File Database*, <http://rosenwald.fisk.edu/index.php?module=search> , (accessed July 18, 2012); and Johnny A. Freedman, interviewed by Goldie F. Wells, December, 27, 1990, M-0011, Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, N.C. [Collection hereafter cited as SOHP].

¹³⁸ Cecelski, *Along Freedom Road*.

counties. When the PCU needed more support to challenge white supremacy, it called upon its friends in the ECCA.¹³⁹

In the spring of 1956, four African Americans decided to run for political office in Halifax County. The PCU backed the political campaigns of all four men. On the state level, Thurston Brown and Augustus Cofield ran as Democratic candidates for the State Senate from the Third and Fourth District, respectively. On the local level, Dr. J. A. Tinsley, also a native of the county and an early branch president of the Halifax-Northampton NAACP, ran for the Halifax County Board of Commissioners, and Dr. John Salter Cochran sought election to the Halifax County Board of Education.¹⁴⁰ Due to their different backgrounds, Cofield and Salter had different relationships with the local black community and their reasons for running for local office reflected their experiences. Cofield, a Weldon native and well-known community member, inherited the funeral business that his father and two friends had established in 1910. As a business owner, he had the economic independence as well as the finances to intervene in community civil rights matters. On one occasion Cofield came to the aid of PCU president and black attorney James R. Walker. After being hired by a client who had been denied the right to register to vote by Helen Taylor, the white registrar in Northampton County, Walker went to the Seaboard precinct to investigate. When he witnessed Taylor capriciously register some black applicants and deny others, Walker confronted her. Taylor had him arrested and told police that Walker shook his finger in her face. One of Walker's many charges included the assault of a white female, a most serious

¹³⁹ Barksdale, "The Indigenous Civil Rights Movement," 114-115.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 110, 117-118; and "1956 Halifax County School Board Primary Elections," Records, Halifax County Board of Election 1924-1959, Vol.2, SANC.

offense that could have summoned a lynch mob. He, however, made it out of jail alive a few days later when Cofield paid his \$500 bond. As an undertaker, Cofield held the financial resources to protect those endangered by such challenges to white supremacy. Cofield's marriage to Mae Marie Cofield, the daughter of a black landowner in Tillery and a former Brickite and student at Eastman, also made him privy to the conditions of blacks in the farming region of Halifax County.

Cofield directly linked his candidacy to school conditions. Stating his purpose in pursuing a seat in the state legislature, he admitted that he decided to run because "Negroes are not being consulted or allowed to participate in the formulation of state policy on education." "If nominated and elected," Cofield continued, "I promise to work for the preservation of constitutional public school system and for the repeal of all anti-labor laws."¹⁴¹ Due to his connections in lower Halifax, Cofield understood that rural blacks' freedom intersected with the broader issues of education, labor, and voting rights. Simply put, a disenfranchised population had little to no recourse when challenging white Halifaxians' power to fund black education and to control black labor.

Dr. John Salter Cochran and his wife, Doris, had moved to Weldon to establish a health clinic. Even as outsiders, the couple emerged in the forefront of the movement in Weldon over the next decade. The Cochrans' educational background and middle-class status afforded them the opportunity to become involved in politics and openly advocate for desegregation. Education stood at the core of their upbringing. Doris's mother had earned a Masters in Social Work from the University of California at Berkley and her father became a

¹⁴¹ Barksdale, "The Indigenous Civil Rights Movement," 119.

professor at Howard University. John's mother, as a single parent, understood that her children's success depended on their level of education so she sent them all to Lawrence Dunbar High School in Washington D.C and pushed her son to become a doctor. In addition, Dr. Cochran's service in the Korean War transformed his opinions about democracy in the United States and prepared him for the freedom struggle in Weldon. "If I could fight on the front lines in Korea," he asserted, "I could certainly do the same here in Weldon."¹⁴²

Like Cofield, Cochran stressed the broader stakes in the fight for adequate education as he pursued a seat on the school board. For him, unequal access to education had limited the number of qualified people that could represent African Americans politically and the inequity in public education could only be championed through integration. In a dual press release issued by Cofield and Cochran, the doctor admitted that "it is necessary in eastern North Carolina for qualified Negroes to offer part of their time and assume responsibilities of public office because of the scarcity of qualified persons in general and for the contribution Negroes can make in solving problems." "If nominated and elected," he promised, "to discharge the duties of a member of the Board of Education to the best of my ability and to work for better schools for the benefit of all citizens of the county without regard to race, creed, or color." Cochran's middle class status also affected how he viewed some of his neighbors; for him, education could deconstruct the "slave mentality" that prevented many blacks from progressing.¹⁴³

¹⁴² Salter Cochran and Doris Cochran, interviewed by Karen Kruse Thomas, Roanoke Rapids, N.C., April 12, 1997, , R-0014, SOHP [Interview hereafter cited as Cochran Interview].

¹⁴³ Barksdale, "The Indigenous Civil Rights Movement," 119.

Pursing party politics did not prove fruitful. Due to the use of a loophole, incumbent white Democrats knocked Thurston out of the race early. According to a “ground rule,” the Democratic Party would only back one candidate from the three counties covered in the Third Senatorial district. Although, Cofield, Cochran, and Tinsley made it on the ballot for the Democratic primary, they had a bleak chance of winning when whites disenfranchised so many African Americans in the region. Despite the unsuccessful outcome, these men had proven something greater in their pursuit. They had shown that in the 1950s that black men could exercise their rights to run for political offices and not be killed.¹⁴⁴

On May 11, 1956, as the Chairman of the Education Committee, Cochran spoke at the Annual Conference of Negro Civic and Political Leaders of Eastern North Carolina laid out a plan of action that members adopted. In response to the Pearsall Plan, attendees resolved:

The “local option” and “tuition grant” provisions of the Advisory Committee on Education’s Report and recommendations are not in the interest of the preservation of the public school and therefore should not be adopted by the State. In the eastern section of North Carolina the urgent problem in education is the need of physical plants for our schools and that the public interest and the schools would be better served by a sectional policy of consolidation and new schools plants for our schools with such new schools open to all children without regard race, creed, or color.¹⁴⁵

Calling for consolidation on behalf of the NCPL, Cochran aligned the group with the idea inherent in the Supreme Court’s 1954 decision: that public school systems would best service black children if they attended school with white children. But he proposed a different

¹⁴⁴ Johns Island civil rights leader Esau Jenkins claimed the same thing when he ran for a position on the local school board in this era. See Charron, *Freedom’s Teacher*, 225.

¹⁴⁵ Barksdale, “The Indigenous Civil Rights Movement,” 123.

strategy from that which the NAACP pursued immediately after *Brown*. Initially, the NAACP had advised black parents to desegregate schools by enrolling their children in white schools. Cochran and NCPL saw that the “urgent problem” in Halifax County also lay in the operation of three separate school systems. Adopting a consolidation policy meant that the HCSB, WCS, and the RRGSD would merge into one school system, and redistribute both financial resources and black students accordingly. The NCPL reasoned that consolidation, which would include integration, offered a more lasting solution because it would mean that the tax poor HCSB would no longer have to split its meager budget between both races. Given that education is never a politically neutral issue, providing adequate education to black and white children had the potential to alter the social and economic relationships upon which the county was built.

Predictably, white Halifaxians stood their ground. Those in RRGSD, which had the best schools, and those in WCS refused to allow their resources to be redistributed to support HCPS. For its part, the HCPS charted a path that preserved segregation even at the expense of improving schooling for white children. The NCPL soon sent another memorandum to all three administrative units that reiterated its concerns. The HCPS board dismissed the NCPL’s appeal on the grounds that the memo did not relate to the schools in their district.¹⁴⁶ Members of the NCPL had listed the John Armstrong Chaloner School, located in the RRGSD district but serving black students in northern part of HCPS district, as one of the many schools with inadequate conditions that did not benefit the students in attendance. The NCPL believed that by consolidating, HCPS could better fund the schools that its black and white students

¹⁴⁶ HCBE Minutes, May 11, 1956.

attended. Thus, when the HCPS board claimed such issues did not pertain to its district, it conveniently overlooked the sharing system established with the RRGSD decades earlier. Essentially, the HCPS board saw the internal divisions among black residents within the county that shaped their decisions to pursue either equalization or more explicitly political solutions like running for office. The NCPL depended on town residents for its base, including those businessmen and professionals who spearheaded the political efforts. The HCPS's delay tactic thereby aimed to avoid any additional demands from African Americans *outside* of its school district. More broadly, because black leaders in lower Halifax had chosen equalization rather than consolidation or desegregation as their main goal, the HCPS board could easily disregard the NCPL's request. In such white maneuvering, the cost of the lack of unity among black strategists becomes all the more clear.

Many traditional narratives on post-*Brown* activism depict a monolithic consensus in the black community with regard to desegregation. Yet when one considers how African Americans support for desegregation changed in different places, during different times, and at the intersection of different class backgrounds, more complex narratives emerge. When actual strategies diverge from mainstream narratives of progress and political consensus, we should pay attention to how they broaden our understanding of the movement rather than dismiss them as an aberration.

As elsewhere, the infrapolitics of the black community in Halifax County in the immediate post-*Brown* era stemmed from daily life. Everyone understood the relationship

between the vote and educational improvement. But the divergence in tactical strategies among black residents from different parts of the county also reflected how daily life informed their decisions to act politically. Once it became clear that local school boards would not comply with the Supreme Court ruling, those who owned land in Tillery prioritized maintaining black control of black education, a choice that aligned with their long-held goal of maintaining their land as well. Middle class black professionals, who lived in Weldon, sought political office despite impossible odds and their pursuit of consolidation. In reality, the movement for educational justice in Halifax County has required multiple and multi-faceted approaches. It is a battle that continues to this day.

CHAPTER 3

Between Reality and Memory: Historical Constructions of the African American Past in Halifax County

On May 9, 2011, Mark Dorosin, the head attorney of the Center for Civil Rights at the University of North Carolina, stood on the steps of the old Halifax County courthouse. More than seventy-five people listened as he announced the recent findings in a study of the county's three school systems.¹⁴⁷ The report, "Unless Our Children Began to Learn Together: The State of Education in Halifax County," concluded that the preservation of three racially segregated school districts—Roanoke Rapids Graded School District (RRGSD), Weldon City Schools (WCS), and Halifax County Public Schools (HCPS)—has impeded any substantial educational reform. Halifax County, furthermore, "cannot meaningfully address the educational disparities that exist within its borders without taking the first step of dissolving the district boundaries that have served since their inception to entitle whites and oppress blacks in the community."¹⁴⁸

After almost five decades, history seemed to repeat itself. In the spring of 1956, Dr. John Salter Cochran and the members of Negro Civic and Political Leaders of Eastern North Carolina (NCPL) had proposed that the HCPS board adhere to the *Brown* decision and adopt a consolidation policy in order to redress the racial disparities in education in Halifax County. As in 1956, the school board and some community members in 2011 posited that a merger with HCPS would blemish the record of academic excellence established in RRGSD

¹⁴⁷ "3 School Districts Works Against the Halifax County Student, Report Says," *The Daily Herald*, May 9, 2011, http://www.rrdailyherald.com/news/article_d5824f8c-7a6f-11e0-894b-001cc4c03286.html?photo (Accessed September 1, 2012).

¹⁴⁸ Mark Dorosin et. al, "Unless Our Children Begin to Learn Together,"²⁸.

and WCS and disrupt “harmonious race relations” within the county.¹⁴⁹ Stirring up Halifax’s age-old problem of educating all citizens in a black majority, economically impoverished, and rural county, the release of the UNC report returned consolidation to the forefront of the county’s educational and political discourse.

Fifty-seven years following *Brown*, black Halifaxians still struggle to provide their children equal educational opportunities. The UNC report demonstrates that the racially distributed school districts remain much as they were in 1965 and that neither the state nor the federal government has made a serious attempt to enforce a desegregation plan in Halifax County. To be sure, following the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Department of Justice (DOJ) pressured educational leaders in Halifax County to comply with the federal mandate. However, the county’s limited “freedom of choice plan” ushered in few changes to the segregated school districts. During the three years following the civil rights legislation, all of the school districts’ desegregation plans only included the movement of black students and black faculty to all-white schools. White pupils, whose parents also had access to the “freedom of choice” student assignment option, stayed put. Even after the DOJ proposed that board members move to consolidate the three school districts in 1968, local whites did just the opposite and began formulating their plan to create additional school districts in the county.¹⁵⁰ These new districts would create white enclaves in southern Halifax County, where the majority of African American students were concentrated. How, then, can we best explain the unfulfilled promise of *Brown* in Halifax County? What narratives have county

¹⁴⁹ Barksdale, “The Indigenous Civil Rights Movement,” 123.

¹⁵⁰ Dorosin et al., “Unless Our Children Began to Learn Together,” 6-9.

activists constructed to explain this history? Why have their stories received scant attention? And what does this tell us about the broader silences in our collective memories of the civil rights era?

How the public remembers the movement accounts for some of the silences that have left local people, particularly rural blacks in the upper South, invisible in civil rights narratives. Typically, collective memories of the movement reflect a top-down approach that emphasizes the importance of *Brown* and the Civil Rights Act of 1965 in challenging segregation and downplays the role of local people's contesting segregation in their everyday lives. These narratives also highlight the successes of the movement—the Greensboro Sit-ins, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the Supreme Court's upholding *Swann v. Mecklenburg* in 1971)—and assume that the movement accomplished its initial goals without a nuanced analysis of those black communities where federal legislation court cases did not change the power dynamic between whites and blacks.¹⁵¹

Foremost, accounts of the freedom struggle in Halifax County remind us of the complexities of the movement and the necessity of more comprehensive frameworks to understand them. In his work on Alabama's Black Belt, Hasan Jeffries proposes the concept of "freedom rights" to examine African American dissent in Lowndes County that encompassed both the civil rights and Black Power eras. Jeffries roots his conception of "freedom rights" in Emancipation, and defines it as "the assortment of civil and human rights that emancipated African Americans identified as the crux of freedom." In the 1960s and

¹⁵¹ Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement," 1235; and Dwyer and Alderman, *Civil Rights Memorials and the Geography of Memory*, 52.

1970s, freedom rights would become the basis for black electoral political in Lowndes County. Jeffries's framework can also help us understand how blacks both defined and remember the movement in Halifax County.¹⁵²

Black Halifaxians have made significant attempts to add their voice to the historical record. Two documentary films, *The Brick School Legacy* (2007) and *We Shall Not Be Moved* (2007), illuminate local people's sense of the movement's deepest roots, its chronology, and its multiple goals.¹⁵³ An autobiographical essay penned by a local educator, "Teaching Students to Read the World," published in 1998, delves into one person's experience and involvement in black protest and points to the long-term collective impact of such individual acts.¹⁵⁴ Certainly, how these black Halifaxians have chosen to tell their stories in these documents does not yield a comprehensive account of the black freedom struggle in the county. However, their narratives do allow us to begin to uncover how they delineate the movement, and thereby stake a claim of ownership over the way this history is told and taught to future generations. By contrast, the UNC report, fashioned by outsiders, proffers another opportunity to interrogate our collective memory of this local movement and what it did and did not accomplish.¹⁵⁵ Altogether, these stories of the struggle for justice in Halifax County function as interventions against the silencing of events in eastern North Carolina and in the state's civil rights historiography.

¹⁵² Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, 4-6.

¹⁵³ Cofield, *The Brick School Legacy*; and Concerned Citizens of Tillery, *We Shall Not Be Moved*.

¹⁵⁴ Willa Cofield, "Teaching Students to Read the World," in *Seeding the Process of Multicultural Education*, edited by Cathy L. Nelson and Kim A. Wilson (Plymouth: Minnesota Inclusiveness Program, 1998), 101-110.

¹⁵⁵ See Dorosin et al., "Unless Our Children Began to Learn Together."

Uncovering these rural narratives, therefore, contributes to the expansion of our knowledge of North Carolina's freedom struggle beyond urban locales and demonstrates the ways in which geography shapes the defining principles and gains of the movement. Most importantly, it challenges the collective memory of the Civil Rights Movement as one that achieved racial consensus in the 1960s. More broadly, the Halifax story also contests North Carolina's narratives of progressivism and harmonious race relations. Without these stories, people that continue to fight for all that was purportedly gained by the movement are rendered invisible.

The African American authors of *The Brick School Legacy* and *We Shall Not Be Moved* took up the task of creating documents that represent who they are individually and/or collectively as well as the place they call home. The process of fashioning a cohesive narrative necessitated that they select which details to include and which to omit in order to convey a sense of their identity and role in the African American freedom struggle. Their choices also speak to their imagined audience—whether local, statewide, or national—and their position as residents in a poor, majority black county. Moreover, while not pre-determined, these narratives are shaped by the authors' social and economic location among those who have traditionally had the least voice in shaping local public policy.¹⁵⁶ The story that these black Halifaxians tell thus add to our understanding of both intra-communal relations and their relationship to external constituencies. In so doing, they provide additional insight into the contours of indigenous rural activism.

¹⁵⁶ On audience and provenance, see Charron, *Freedom's Teacher*, 9.

When creating narratives of the county's freedom struggle, black Halifaxians often place two themes at the core of the movement: landownership and education. Willa Cofield, a civil rights veteran, educator, and daughter of local activist Augustus Cofield, explores these themes in *The Brick School Legacy*. The film documents African Americans' role in Halifax County's educational movement during the early decades of the twentieth century. With the financial backing of the American Missionary Association (AMA), Cofield argues that local people established a leading private black academic institution in eastern North Carolina. Historians have traditionally focused on the importance of the black church in African American communities. *The Brick School Legacy*, however, looks more closely at the schoolhouse and demonstrates its importance in preparing rural blacks to navigate daily life in the Jim Crow South more successfully.¹⁵⁷

As the schoolhouse takes the main stage in Cofield's narrative, teachers also move to the forefront. She examines teachers not only in their capacity to develop class curricula that met the needs of the rural community but also as community leaders that headed farm extension programs, which taught black farmers how to keep up their land and preserve their ownership by not falling into debt.¹⁵⁸ Becoming economically self-sufficient and independent through literacy and landownership meant that black men and women could protect their families financially from local white landowners. Moreover, in situations where blacks had to

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 3; and Cofield, "The Brick School Legacy."

¹⁵⁸ Cofield, "The Brick School Legacy;" and Charron, *Freedom's Teachers*, 3, 4, 52 & 53.

interact with whites, owning land provided them another level of protection that black tenant farmers and sharecroppers did not have.¹⁵⁹

Cofield does not distinctly label these acts of defiance and resistance as the “Civil Rights Movement;” instead, she calls attention to the many men and women that resisted within their everyday lives by educating others at the turn of the twentieth century. Although more recent studies of the freedom struggle examine the groundwork laid by activists of the New Deal Era and those who came of age during World War II, Cofield highlights the important work accomplished by African Americans in this earlier era.¹⁶⁰

The testimonies of Brick alumni and their children show that the school’s legacy endures. Cleo Turner explains in the film that attending Brick had become a family tradition. Turner’s mother, Mary Exum, class of 1912, and her four sisters all matriculated at Brick. Her uncle even served as the president of the local Brick alumni chapter. Although, Turner may have never attended a class, she revealed that “I am Brick itself.” Katie Roberson also spoke to the legacy of Brick in her family. All seven of her sisters and brothers attended the school and pursued careers in education.¹⁶¹

Outsiders’ collective memory of African American education in Halifax County does not lend itself to Cofield’s narrative of black educational uplift. The UNC report, for example, argues that racial inequalities that have existed since the tripartite school system’s inception have rendered African American schools inadequate. Part of the reason the Center

¹⁵⁹ On land ownership and economic self-sufficiency as protection from white reprisal, see Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*; and Dittmer, *Local People*.

¹⁶⁰ See Lowery, *Lumbee Indians in the Jim Crow South*; Sullivan, *Days of Hope*; and Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*.

¹⁶¹ Cofield, *The Brick School Legacy*.

for Civil Rights' authors might have ignored the significance of the Brick School perhaps lies in the fact that it began as a private AMA school. Even so, it became a public institution in 1934. Additionally, when constructing its narrative of the history of black education in Halifax County, the Center relies heavily on school board records from all three school systems and reports from North Carolina's Division of Negro Education in the State Department of Public Instruction.¹⁶² For the majority of the twentieth century, only white North Carolinians at the state and county level created these documents and they focused largely on the financial aspects of black schools in the county. To be sure, the stakes for funding black education remained high for both black and white North Carolinians. Yet, because whites authored state and county documents, they provide little to no indication of what occurred on a daily basis in these classrooms.

Cofield's use of local peoples' oral histories renders a more comprehensive look at rural black schools. As a community insider and educator, she pays much more attention to the curricula that teachers crafted and the relationships that faculty members cultivated with the community and their students. In the documentary's interviews, alumni remembered the positive attributes of Brick such as the challenging curriculum, the supportive faculty, and the importance of Brick in the community. For example, when she graduated from Brick and began attending classes at Fisk University, Dorothy Inborden Miller, the daughter of T.S. Inborden, believed that the school's curriculum had more than prepared her for college. Upon her arrival at Fisk, Miller recalled being told that she would have to enroll in trigonometry, a

¹⁶² Brownlee, *Brick Rural Life School*; and Dorsin et al., "Unless Our Children Began to Learn Together," 42-46.

course that she had already completed at Brick. In order to bypass retaking the course, Miller went to the school's math professor, who gave her a trigonometry problem to solve. She recounted that "she worked the problem out so fast on the floor" that the professor confirmed "you don't need to take trigonometry." By focusing on personal accounts of past students, *The Brick School Legacy* turns negative depictions of African American education in Halifax County on their head.¹⁶³

Cofield locates the beginning of the decline in black education in Halifax County in the 1930s, when the AMA conferred with white school board members and transferred this school to the county system. Contrary the UNC report, which focuses solely on the laws of segregation and its enforcers to explain the educational disparities between black and white pupils, Cofield pinpoints the loss of black control of the lone independent school after the transfer as an equally important factor. Within the thirty years of the school's existence, Brick also emerged as an important community organization that trained future leaders. Therefore, Cofield deems the AMA's decision as an attack on black leadership because the programs that fostered self-reliance and autonomy would also end.¹⁶⁴

Receiving her training at the Scribe Center, an institution for inspiring videographers, Cofield incorporates its mission of utilizing "video and film as tools for self-expression and for representing their communities."¹⁶⁵ Even Cofield admitted that she felt embarrassed about where she came from, but added that uncovering the history of Brick restored a sense of pride in a place that had typically been remembered as impoverished. Her local focus in *The*

¹⁶³ Cofield, "The Brick School Legacy."

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.; Charron, *Freedom's Teachers*, 38-44; and Anderson and Moss, *Dangerous Donations*, 8, 9.

¹⁶⁵ Scribe Inc., <<http://www.scribe.org/about/aboutscribe>>> (accessed November 1, 2012).

Brick School Legacy thus confronts other negative depictions of African Americans and offers an important alternative memory of black education in the county. Cofield's primary purpose remains educating local people who are not familiar with the rich African American history in Halifax County.¹⁶⁶

When comparing *The Brick School Legacy* to one of her earlier writings, "Teaching Students to Read the World," it becomes clear that Cofield locates the beginning of the Halifax's Civil Rights era in the 1960s. In this autobiographical article, featured in *Seeding the Process of Multicultural Education*, she places her classroom and students at Inborden High School at the center of the county's direct action protest. Akin to popular narratives of movement, Cofield reveals how black protest of the 1960s radicalized many students. Though they were far removed from actual events, she situates her students in this pivotal moment of the black freedom struggle, positing that the media coverage of the Greensboro sit-ins and her students' attendance at the March on Washington transformed class discussions.¹⁶⁷ In this way, the classroom became a training ground that educated and encouraged black students to challenge the racial inequalities in their own community. In 1963, for example, students at Inborden High School staged a walk-in at the "whites-only" public library. That year, many of the same students also volunteered to help with the county's voter registration campaign. Although the majority of them could not vote, learning about the literacy test in a Language Arts course prepared students to teach those of voting age in their homes or other places throughout the community. Students also protested an

¹⁶⁶ Cofield, "The Brick School Legacy."

¹⁶⁷ For more on student activism in Greensboro, North Carolina, see Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*.

Enfield ordinance that banned blacks from the downtown area after nine o'clock at night. Their non-violent demonstration culminated with white police officers and state troopers arresting some black youth and injuring others with water that spewed from high pressure water hoses.¹⁶⁸ Unlike events in Birmingham, Alabama that same year, the protests in Enfield garnered little local or state media attention and none at the national level. Cofield thus provides another important marker of memory, both for her neighbors and for a larger audience.

Indeed, her decision to focus only on student activism tells us a lot about her intended audience. Cofield only briefly mentions other kinds of activism in the county, including: her husband Reed Johnson's decision to run for local office; the partnering of Lillie Cousins Smith, a school teacher, with Johnson to lead a voter's registration campaign; inroads made by national civil rights organizations in the area during the mid-1960s; and voting-age African Americans' involvement in the Halifax County Voters Movement. Pulling from her experiences as a teacher in the 1960s, Cofield shows that blending school and community issues makes the classroom a politicized space where teachers encourage students to think critically. Her article serves as a call to action for other educators to steer away from their "tendency to separate the school from the world," wherein the school becomes a place for "reading words" that lack applicability to real life problems and solutions. Quoting Ira Schor and Paulo Freire, Cofield notes that "In reading words, [the] school becomes a special place that teaches us to read only words not reality words." As a result, "the world of life, the world in which events are very alive, the world of struggles, the world of discrimination and

¹⁶⁸ Cofield, "Teaching Students to Read the World," 107.

economic crisis do not make contact with the students in school through words that the schools ask the students to read.”¹⁶⁹ Because this article appeared in a collection explicitly concerned with multicultural educational activism and critical literacy, it makes sense for Cofield to focus on student involvement in the movement and leave the telling of other kinds of civil rights activism in Halifax County for another time.¹⁷⁰

Cofield also demonstrates how applying “reading words” to Halifax’s collective memory empowers people. She explicitly interrogates “hierarchical systems” embedded in our society and emphasizes the need to deconstruct black Halifaxians’ marginalized role in the county’s history. Popular narratives written by local whites, such as School Superintendent W. C. Allen’s *History of Halifax County*, that depict African Americans elected to Congress during Reconstruction as incompetent misrepresent the importance of black leadership in such a transformative moment for the nation. Whites’ retelling a history that devalues the cadre black men elected to the Second Congressional District during Reconstruction perpetuates the notion that blacks have and should always be at the bottom of the social hierarchy. By contrast, Cofield highlights the likes of James O’Hara, a local black lawyer and founder of the *Enfield Progress*, a local newspaper, who served the black Second and his wife, Libby, who was well-versed in the classics.¹⁷¹ Ultimately, she debunks the myth that the ancestors of rural blacks in eastern North Carolina were uneducated and politically

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ On ideas of critical literacy, see Paulo, Freire and Donaldo Maceo, *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (Boston: Bergin and Garvey, 1987).

¹⁷¹ Cofield, “Teaching the World To Read,” 101 & 107. On North Carolina Second Congressional District during Reconstruction, see Eric Anderson, *Race and Politics in North Carolina, 1872-1901: The “Black Second” Congressional District* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1980).

incompetent and reveals the processes—the use of “reading words”—through which they have come to be constructed as such.

Like Cofield’s film and essay, the primary authors of *We Shall Not Be Moved* also frame their narrative of the county’s freedom struggle for both local and academic audiences. This documentary centers the perspective of members of the Concerned Citizens of Tillery (CCT), an activist group that has headed most campaigns for justice in Halifax County since its founding in 1978. The CCT started as a grassroots organization to protest the Halifax County Board of Education’s decision to close Tillery Chapel Elementary School. Almost forty years later, the CCT has expanded its mission beyond education and plays a leading role in the national fight against black farmers’ land loss and for environmental justice. To produce *We Shall Not Be Moved*, the CCT collaborated with filmmakers at Duke University’s Center for Documentary Studies (CDS). With the help of the CDS, and other philanthropic organizations, the CCT produced a film that features interviews, photographs, and songs to recounts Halifax County’s freedom struggle from their point of view.

Like Cofield’s documentary, *We Shall Not Be Moved* allows local residents to testify to the worth of their life experiences and designate past acts of significance worth remembering. In the film, Gary Grant, the director of the CCT and son of one of Tillery’s most prominent families, states that the collection of documents, photographs, and oral histories led to the establishment of a local history museum in Tillery. Grant asserts that these personal testimonies demonstrate that “there is a history that is a real history, and it is a true

history and it is the history of this community.”¹⁷² The use of personal photographs enhances their insider status as documenters of daily life while also preventing others from compromising the integrity of their story. The importance the CCT places on maintaining control over the portrayal of black Halifaxians makes even more sense given the reality that the group has led the protest over African American farmers’ treatment by the federal government and the white state. It also most likely informed their choice of Charles Thompson, undergraduate director at the CDS who has an academic career and personal commitment to agricultural and labor struggles, as the most appropriate director of the film.

Assistance from the CDS stemmed mostly from the research and production side, which facilitated the CCT’s situating the community’s story in a longer chronological context. Foremost, the CDS provided the funding that made the documentary possible. As activists engaged in multiple battles to protect their land and environment, members of the CCT had neither the equipment nor the money needed to produce such a film. The CDS could also call upon young scholars for research assistance and fact-checking, as it remains unlikely that CCT members had the time to invest in collecting information at state or federal archives. They probably also recognized that backing from Duke University would garner both the publicity and the distribution networks needed to move the film’s viewership beyond the community’s borders to academic and national audiences. The collaboration between the CCT and the CDS created a space to publicly challenge the collective memory of the Civil Rights Movement in eastern North Carolina and to generate awareness of the

¹⁷² Concerned Citizens of Tillery, *We Shall Not Be Moved*.

ongoing education, labor, land, and environmental struggles in Halifax County. As such, the film underscores the significance of this history to the present.¹⁷³

In *We Shall Not Be Moved*, the Concerned Citizens of Tillery document the community's struggle for landownership dating back to the 1930s. Tillery's elders remember the importance of the FDR's New Deal resettlement farms in providing their families the opportunity to own land. Their narratives reveal that the self-sufficiency established before the civil rights era proper gave them the tools needed to protect their schools and organize voter registration campaigns in the 1950s and 1960s. However, by the 1970s, black landownership was in precipitous decline due to the emergence of agribusiness and continued discriminatory practices by the Farm Homeowners Association within the USDA. Eventually black land loss campaigns led to the *Pigford v. Glickman* (1999) and *In re Black Farmers Discrimination Litigation* (2010), also referred to as *Pigford II*, where black farmers won a financial settlement for discrimination experienced in the previous decades. However, few farmers have actually received the payouts or debt forgiveness from the federal government.¹⁷⁴

Grounding *We Shall Not Be Moved* in recent historiographies of the Civil Rights Movement suggests that the CCT and CDS constructed their narrative of Halifax's freedom struggle for the academy. In line with current scholarship, the CCT identifies the continuities between the trailblazers of 1930s and 1940s, the activists of the civil rights era, and those who continue the fight today. *We Shall Not Be Moved* situates the New Deal as a critical

¹⁷³ Concerned Citizens of Tillery, *We Shall Not Be Moved*.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

turning point in black farmers' collective memory of their local movement, with Tillery's elders testifying about the importance of the opportunity to buy land. As a result of federal intervention, African Americans gained a sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency that many of their parents had never experienced before buying that first parcel of land. Like alumni in *The Brick School Legacy*, Tillery's resettlement farmers contend that landownership protected black farmers' labor from being exploited like those entrenched in systems of sharecropping. Owning land also allowed New Dealers to initiate grassroots organizations and form networks. Those activists who came of age in the 1950s would look to these older networks when responding to *Brown* and organizing voter registration campaigns. For example, CCT director Gary Grant posits that the New Dealers who created the Tillery Improvement Association to address community issues in the 1940s became the founding members of the lower Halifax County NAACP. Also, many of the people involved in the NAACP's campaign to desegregate Halifax County's school system in the 1950s would gather again, with their children, in the late 1970s to save the community's school.¹⁷⁵

Extending the county's movement beyond the Civil Rights Act of 1964, *We Shall Not Be Moved* also redresses declension narratives of the black freedom struggle.¹⁷⁶ The CCT's documentary shows that the county's movement did not come to a close; instead, the organization's platform transitioned from saving the community's schools to black land

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ On SNCC's decline, see Clayborne, Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), esp. part III; and Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, esp. Ch. 12 & 13.

loss in the 1980s.¹⁷⁷ Despite the ongoing grassroots commitment to education and agricultural issues, much of Tillery's movement has gone unnoticed. Those familiar with Halifax County's poverty blame the people. They argue that the federal government has provided black farmers in Halifax County with ample economic opportunities, especially during the New Deal, which should have provided them financial security. It then becomes black farmers' fault that they did not succeed. From this point of the view, the government had apparently done its job.

Yet such narratives do not account for the discriminatory practices stemming from different bureaucracies within the federal government that continuously set black farmers back. Why do most Americans remain unfamiliar with the history of black land loss? In the heyday of the movement, why did national Civil Rights organizations not amend their agenda so that it protected African American land ownership in rural areas? To be sure, Jefferies demonstrates that on the grassroots level Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) attempted to empower black farmers in Lowndes County by getting them elected to local office in the late 1960s. As a result of voter intimidation and the lack of support from middle class blacks, only three African American farmers managed to get elected to the Agricultural and Cooperative Extension Services in 1967. In addition, changes in SNCC's national agenda affected its ability to continue organizing rural black southerners. When SNCC moved on to other areas to continue its development of third party politics in black communities, the centrality of freedom politics shifted as veteran activists began to make

¹⁷⁷ Concerned Citizens of Tillery, *We Shall Not Be Moved*.

concessions with moderate whites. According to Jeffries, conferring with white moderates stifled the democratic process that African Americans had established when defining freedom rights for themselves. Now, select black political leaders would decide what was best for the whole, which did not necessarily align with the needs of black farmers.¹⁷⁸

Pete Daniel offers another explanation for the absence of land loss in American's collective memory of the movement. In his work on black farmers and civil rights, he holds media coverage of the Civil Rights Movement accountable for the public's lack of knowledge of the agricultural issues facing black farmers. "Depression, mechanization, and discriminatory federal programs devoured black farmers, but their fate," Daniel argues "was eclipsed by the press coverage of segregation, voting rights, and public accommodations." "They almost disappeared without a trace," he laments. Daniel contends that the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 should have equalized black and white farmers' access to credit, government subsidies and technological innovations. Yet, conditions for black farmers continued to deteriorate into the 1980s. Daniel purports that the drastic decline in black-owned farms stems from the discriminatory practices of local white farm agents, the emergence of agribusiness, or corporate-owned farm operations, and the lack of power given to newly-appointed black officials in the Department of Agriculture.¹⁷⁹

We Shall Not Be Moved offers us a blueprint to understand how such rural movements continued to evolve after the classic phase of the Civil Rights Movement. When

¹⁷⁸ On the decreasing presence of SNCC and the effect of concessions with moderate whites in Lowndes County, see Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes*, esp. chapter 7.

¹⁷⁹ Pete Daniel, "African American Farmers and Civil Rights," *Journal of Southern History* 73 (2007): 3, 7,-14, & 27.

the Halifax County School Board moved to close the Tillery Elementary School in 1981, Tillery's elders drew upon the tradition of landownership to redefine the core of the next stage of their struggle. Gary Grant surmised that the school board believed that removing the school would destroy the community, since the schoolhouse had served as the hub of community activism. However, once Tillery Elementary closed, the CCT emerged as the center of the activist community under which the Tillery's elders would coalesce.¹⁸⁰

In the early 1980s, the CCT protested the state's approval of building seventeen large-scale pig operations in eastern North Carolina, eight of which would end up in Halifax County. This time the CCT would use the media to its advantage. News cameras captured men and women as they spoke out against the harm that pig operations caused to black bodies, namely the pollution and health effects of disposing of hog waste. In addition to the bodily harm, local black farmers who could not afford to invest in massive hog operations did not benefit financially from this scale-up stemming from agribusiness power and interests. In fact, the arrival of large corporations overshadowed small pig farms. At the time, the CCT's protest did not fall on death ears; North Carolina passed a state-wide moratorium. However, only activists in Halifax County would keep farming corporations away. Rural folks in adjacent counties continue to confront large farm corporations.¹⁸¹

In the 1990s, the CCT also joined the national struggle against black land loss. Aligning with farmers in other states, the CCT publicly expressed its concern for the increasing number of farm closures in rural black communities and held the federal

¹⁸⁰ Gary Grant Interview.

¹⁸¹ Concerned Citizens of Tillery, *We Shall Not Be Moved*.

government responsible for their decline. They gave strong support to the *Pigford v. Glickman* case (1999), a lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Agriculture for discrimination in its lending and mortgage programs in the 1980s and 1990s. The CCT perhaps felt drawn to the case because its director's family confronted the real possibility of land loss for failure to pay back taxes. *We Shall Not Be Moved* situates the Grants as exemplars of how the federal government directly affected members of the Tillery Community in both positive and negative ways. To be sure, African American landownership across the nation had been steadily declining since WWII. Yet, the Grant family stands apart from other members of the community because they had initially held onto their land by not borrowing money from the federal government. When they did turn to the federal Farm Homeowner Association's office for assistance, local whites used this vulnerability as leverage to take their land. Pairing this family history with the *Pigford* case reinforces the blow that land loss had on black agricultural communities and underscores on-going freedom struggles in rural eastern North Carolina.¹⁸²

Beyond desegregation or integration, *We Shall Not Be Moved* expands both the chronology and the content of civil rights. The film documents black Halifaxians' involvement in the classic phase of the movement by reviewing local residents' campaigns for schools and voting rights. Insisting on the centrality of land ownership and economic autonomy, it harkens back to the New Deal years. Confronting environmental injustice and black land loss, it propels the narrative into the present day. This broader focus provides a

¹⁸² Ibid.

counterpoint to civil rights narratives in North Carolina's urban areas, where the movement's goals are assumed to have been met.¹⁸³

Outsiders have also inadvertently raised this issue by interrogating the disproportionate educational opportunities between black and white Halifaxians. A team of lawyers at the University of North Carolina's Center for Civil Rights released "Unless Our Children Begin to Learn Together" in the spring of 2011. The report compares data on student achievement, allotted resources and the history of public education in all three school districts—HCPS, WCS, and RRGSD—in Halifax County. The Center's attorneys paired the data collected with education and civil rights laws in order to build their case for why students in the county could only benefit from consolidating the county's school systems.¹⁸⁴

"Unless Our Children Begin To Learn Together" differs from local peoples' approaches to uncovering the African American past in Halifax County. Utilizing school board minutes, North Carolina Public Instruction records, and education court cases, the Center constructs a historical narrative of the county's school systems but frames it within a legal context. The attorneys first show that white educational leaders gerrymandered school district lines to legitimize segregation in Halifax County. When this strategy came under attack after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, local whites attempted to create new school districts, a tactic that protected whites in areas with higher concentrations of blacks. The

¹⁸³ See, for example, Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*; Douglas, *Reading, Writing & Race*; and Greene, *Our Separate Ways*.

¹⁸⁴ Dorosin et.al., "Unless Our Children Begin to Learn Together," 2-3.

Center concludes that defiance from local whites and school board members resulted in the little to no desegregation still apparent in the county today.¹⁸⁵

The Center next examines more recent court cases filed to remedy financial disparities between white and black pupils. Focusing primarily on the *Leandro* case, the attorneys argue that the tripartite school system represents a violation of the state's constitution. In *Leandro v. State* (1997), "plaintiffs challenged the constitutionality of the state's educational funding formula, alleging that low-wealth counties had access to fewer fiscal resources than high wealth counties." North Carolina's Supreme Court denied the inadequacy of the state's funding formula. Instead, the state emphasized that "the state constitution guarantees every child an equal opportunity to receive a sound, basic education in every public school." In *Leandro II* (1999), the state Supreme Court added that each child has a constitutional right to "well-trained teachers," "a well-trained, competent principal as the educational leader," and the resources needed to secure an adequate education.¹⁸⁶

Focusing mainly on the legal sanctions of segregation from the beginning of the twentieth century until 1964 and the education court cases that North Carolina faced in the decade following the Civil Rights Act, the report calls the public's attention to the ways in which the law has affected the quality of education that black and poor children in the state have received. Simply put, the Center uses this legal history to sway public opinion and convince North Carolinians to rally behind a cause that they may have never considered otherwise. The report does so in three ways. First, the Center released its findings when both

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 4-9.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., On the *Leandro* case and its implication for schools in Halifax County, see 30-36.

the federal and state government had to make educational policy adaptations due to budget cuts. Publicity from the report had the potential to make the government take the policy brief into consideration during a year when significant changes loomed. Second, the Center posits that the tripartite school district in Halifax County is a microcosm for other segregated counties in the state. “In North Carolina,” as its authors write, “White lawmakers determined where the district lines should be drawn, and they took advantage of residential segregation patterns and concentrations of wealth in the White community resulting from slavery and Jim Crow.” Moreover, “this strategy, revised in the wake of the Civil Rights Act, has its roots in the founding of public education in North Carolina, and is still reflected in the eleven counties in the state that still have more than one school district.”¹⁸⁷ Expanding the validity of the project positions the maintenance of multiple school systems to sustain segregation as a systemic problem that 10 percent of the state’s counties faces.

Building a case for consolidation shapes the Center’s historical narrative in particular ways. Its history of education in Halifax County focuses on local whites’ efforts to maintain a tripartite school system through gerrymandering school district lines to match residential segregation patterns; “school sharing;” and local whites’ attempts to create new school districts in the 1960s into the 1970s. To be sure, focusing on the wrongdoings of whites enhances their case for consolidation; however, their narrative paints African Americans as victims of the system and overshadows blacks’ tradition of self-help examined in *The Brick School Legacy* and *We Shall Not Be Moved*. “Unless Our Children Begin to Learn Together” also only uses academic indicators to measure the poverty within the county, insinuating that

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 4.

the school system is a chief reason for the poor economy. However, locals interviewed in *We Shall Not Be Moved* also attribute the county's poverty to black land loss and the emergence of agribusiness to explain why the majority of Halifax's population lives below the poverty line.¹⁸⁸

Narratives from and about Halifax County challenge urban narratives of the movement in key ways. Foremost, black Halifaxians regard black land ownership and land loss as equally important a platform as suffrage, integrating public facilities, and desegregating public schools. Examining locally-produced narratives, it becomes clear that geography shapes how communities define their movements. Next, traditional leaders in Halifax County, such as teachers, preachers, and business owners stood on the frontlines of the movement. However, more often than not these men and women also owned land. Though historians have called our attention to the relationship between landownership and activism, they have less frequently considered how it shaped African American responses to *Brown* and transformed rural movements into the 1980s.¹⁸⁹

The inextricable ties between the schoolhouse and landownership suggest that the movement's deepest roots lay in African American experiences at the turn of the twentieth century. Indeed, *The Brick School Legacy* illustrates that rural blacks understood early on that their independence rested in their ability to gain both an education and farm land in the Jim Crow South. Yet, in Halifax County, federal intervention during the New Deal offered a

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 10; Cofield, *The Brick School Legacy*; and Concerned Citizens of Tillery, *We Shall Not Be Moved*.

¹⁸⁹ On the connections between landownership and activism, see Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*; and Walker, *Their Highest Potential*.

new generation of farmers the chance to buy land. *We Shall Not Be Moved* illustrates that landownership renewed black farmers' chances for autonomy, thereby preparing black Halifaxians for the freedom struggle of the 1950s and 1960s. Narratives from local people also indicate that the movement did not end in the 1960s; instead the community expanded its platform to consider other agricultural issues as Tillery's most prominent family began to face losing their land due to white discrimination. Most importantly, these films underscore the importance of passing on this history to current generations that are unaware of the county's claim to many prosperous black landowners and the black schools that once flourished in the county.

Despite outsiders' focus on the shortcomings of black education during *de jure* and *de facto* segregation, the UNC attorneys still demonstrate the importance of uncovering rural responses to the end of segregation in public schools. Their report illustrates that despite the passing of federal legislation in the 1960s, black North Carolinians continued to contest the issue of unequal education in local communities through civil suits, such as the *Leandro* cases. Their ongoing fight ultimately questions the power of the federal government to mandate and enforce children's constitutional right to an adequate education as local whites, in regard to Halifax County, pursue loopholes that protect segregation. "Unless Our Children Begins To Learn Together" then, exposes those who have manipulated the law in order to perpetuate these educational disparities.

CONCLUSION

Even as historians continue to highlight the significance of local people in civil rights studies, few have examined the trajectory of the freedom struggle in the upper South's rural locales.¹⁹⁰ As Cecelski observes "The NAACP's long crusade toward *Brown*, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Greensboro sit-ins, and a handful of other civil rights events have received recognition." However, "they provide only crowded snapshots of a mass movement that continued into every corner of the South... In eastern North Carolina, survivors of the civil rights movement tell a story that indicates what has been missed elsewhere."¹⁹¹ Through documentary films, oral histories, and written documents, black Halifaxians add to our collective memory of the movement.¹⁹²

Contributing to the growing scholarship on North Carolina's Black Belt, this study interrogates how geography both shaped local movements and affected how local people defined the African American freedom struggle in Halifax County.¹⁹³ Paying the most attention to landownership and schooling, my work also examines how black Halifaxians organized to gain access to land and an adequate education before and after the movement's classic phase. Foremost, examining narratives of the black freedom struggle in Halifax County reveals that the story hardly commenced with the NAACP's landmark victory in *Brown* or concluded with the Voting Rights of Act 1965.

¹⁹⁰ For notable exceptions, see McKinney, *Greater Freedom*; and Barksdale, "The Indigenous Civil Rights Movement in North Carolina."

¹⁹¹ Cecelski, *Along Freedom Road*, 13.

¹⁹² Inborden, "Brick School in Retrospect;" Inborden, "History of Brick School;" Cofield, *The Brick School Legacy*; Cofield, "Teaching the World to Read; and Concerned Citizens of Tillery, *We Shall Not Be Moved*.

¹⁹³ Regarding the first case study on the movement in Halifax County, see Barksdale, "The Indigenous Civil Rights Movement."

Black protest of the civil rights era must be understood as a continuation of the groundwork laid by previous generations of activists.¹⁹⁴ In 1895, for example, when T.S. Inborden arrived in Halifax County, he had the foresight to adopt a pedagogy that embraced both landownership and education. Inborden knew that accumulating both was the best way black farmers could survive, and potentially thrive, economically in the rural South.¹⁹⁵ Due to the foundation that Inborden and the Brick School's faculty had laid for African Americans in eastern North Carolina, the federal government looked to this county when establishing the New Deal resettlement farms in the 1930s. Once the AMA transferred the Brick School to the county system, the fate of black farmers who depended on its extension program, and tenant farmers who leased land from Brick, stood on shakier ground. From the perspective of the interwar years, the federal government's intervention provided a new way for some black farmers to access land ownership.

The federal government would also undermine black landownership in later years. But in the 1930s and 1940s its actions did reinforce the economic self-sufficiency and independence in ways that impacted the next phase of the freedom struggle. Immediately following *Brown*, black Halifaxians joined together under the NAACP to try to force the county school board to desegregate. However, in 1956, a split in black political strategies created fissures in the movement.¹⁹⁶ The diverging political strategies and decreasing support

¹⁹⁴ Steven F. Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," *American Historical Review* 96 (1991): 456, 457, 464, & 465.

¹⁹⁵ Cofield, *The Brick School Legacy*; and Inborden, "Brick School in Retrospect."

¹⁹⁶ Brownlee, *Brick Rural Life School*; and Concerned Citizens of Tillery, *We Shall Not Be Moved*.

of the NAACP following 1956 underscores the significance of looking beyond national civil rights organizations to find the pulse of the local movement.¹⁹⁷

Abridged versions of the African American freedom struggle also bolster the “won cause” narrative of the movement. The won cause highlights *Brown* uncritically and fails to engage a critical analysis of places where school segregation remained untouched by the Supreme Court’s decision, or black resistance to integration. In this way, it characterizes any exceptions to this linear narrative of success as aberrations of the Civil Rights Movement.¹⁹⁸ Simply put, this shortened chronology cannot begin to examine how blacks in rural eastern North Carolina addressed the issue of inadequate education before and after the legal dismantling of segregation in the public school system. Nor does it acknowledge the ongoing political and economic oppression that sustains educational inequality in Halifax County. As a result, it has no power to explain or solve the problems of underfunded black majority schools in the county today.

Forty years after the Supreme Court legally dismantled segregation in the public schools in order to provide black and white children an equal education, North Carolinians continue to pressure the state government to protect all children’s constitutional right to an adequate education. Instead of framing its ruling in terms of race, as *Brown* did, the state Supreme Court couched the *Leandro I* (1994) and *Leandro II* (1997) decisions in terms of socio-economic status. These landmark school finance cases ruled that all students had a

¹⁹⁷ Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement,” 1235.

¹⁹⁸ Dwyer and Alderman, *Civil Rights Memorials and the Geography of Memory*, 52.

constitutional right to a “sound, basic education.”¹⁹⁹ Despite the additional funding and teacher support provided to Halifax County Public Schools during the 2004-2005 academic school year, students in the district continued to perform poorly academically. By evading the history of how schooling has been raced in Halifax County, North Carolina’s educational leaders failed to devise and implement a plan that would directly address the inability, or unwillingness, of all three county school boards to provide every student an equal education.

As the attorneys at the Civil Rights Center explain:

The existence of three separate school districts in Halifax County is a significant impediment to providing a constitutionally compliant education to the students currently enrolled in all three school districts in Halifax County. The DPI intervention plan’s focus on improving teachers and teaching ignores the most substantial impediments to progress of true educational reform in Halifax County... This racial separation and isolation directly impacts access to resources and academic achievement.²⁰⁰

For counties, such as Halifax, where African Americans constitute the majority of students, remedies targeting teachers and teaching actually conceal the root of the problem: the historical conditions of segregation that distributed all resources unequally. This not only led to the disproportionate poverty among black families in lower Halifax County but also concentrated their children in the HCPS district. As the report makes clear, not dealing with the laws established during the height of Jim Crow, that created the racialized socio-economic divisions that we see in the school district today, fails to solve the county’s academic disparities.

¹⁹⁹ Dorosin et al., “Unless Our Children Began to Learn Together,” 31.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 33.

Finally, we must return to the issue of autonomy generated by educational opportunity and land ownership and the federal government's complicity in undermining black freedom struggles. Too often, civil rights scholars identify the key battles in terms of the fight for suffrage, desegregating public spaces and schools, and the passage of legislation. Considering how place can alter what local communities recognize as most important to their movements expands both the chronology and the size of the battlefield. In Halifax County, the loss of the educational autonomy epitomized by Brick and black land loss also hold central places in the local memory of the movement. Willa Cofield highlights the undoing of Brick in her documentary while the Concerned Citizens of Tillery include black land loss in theirs. Thus, the link between education and land ownership provides the necessary insight to comprehend fully the economic state of African Americans in Halifax County, especially those in the farming areas.

By emphasizing black farmers' ongoing fight, starting with the New Deal and ending with *Pigford I* (1999) and *Pigford II* (2004), we can track the role of the federal government in the plummeting number of black farmers. To be sure, in the 1930s the federal government did give many farmers the opportunity to own land. However, granting local whites the power to make loan decisions counteracted the promise of the resettlement communities. In addition, the continued discrimination in the 1980s and 1990s and the emergence of agribusiness, supported by federal subsidies, crushed black farmers.²⁰¹ In Halifax County, this decline has had huge economic implications for a black community, whose

²⁰¹ Concerned Citizens of Tillery, *We Shall Not Be Moved*; and Daniel, "Black Farmers and Civil Rights, 27.

independence hinged upon their ability to maintain control of their land and who still fight to improve their schools.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

Map of Halifax County

