

From Discussion to Confrontation
Defining Race Relations in Charlottesville
Before the Brown Decision

Bradley Charles Mittendorf
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

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Paul M. Garrison
Edward L. Rogers

¹C. Vann Woodward, *Thinking Back* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), pp. 82-83.

²C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. xvii.

Introduction

In October of 1954, the eminent southern historian C. Vann Woodward delivered the James W. Richard Lectures at the University of Virginia. Conceptualized and written in the months following the Brown decision of the previous spring, Woodward's lectures--entitled "The Strange Career of Jim Crow: a Brief History of Segregation"--challenged the prevailing notion that segregation as it was known in 1954 was part of the immutable folkways of the South. Woodward's most poignant remarks were those which revealed that the purported "way it had always been" was in fact not the way it had always been.¹ When the lectures appeared in book form in February of 1955, the dedication read "To Charlottesville and the hill that looks down upon her, Monticello" and the preface described the lectures as being "given before unsegregated audiences and received in that spirit of tolerance and open-mindedness that one has a right to expect at a university with such a tradition and such a founder."²

¹C. Vann Woodward, Thinking Back (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), pp. 82-83.

²C. Vann Woodward The Strange Career of Jim Crow (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. xvii.

Woodward's gracious description of Charlottesville and the university community may have eased whatever anxiety his white audience was feeling in the wake of the Brown decision. But as an accurate characterization of local race relations it was misleading.

The story of one woman's experience at the University hospital suggests quite different perspectives on Charlottesville's race relations. At the very time Woodward lectured, black patients at the University hospital were confined to the basement. Mrs. Imogene Bunn encountered the treatment of black patients in the segregated hospital when she took her father to receive medical treatment:

That basement room--my father was there once as a private patient--and I took him in. He had kidney stones--excruciating pain--and they said "sit him down over there" and I sat him down. I said "where is your bed? where is he going to be?" Well there was a bed but it was unmade because a patient had just left. He was doubling up in so much pain I finally--I asked them two or three times if they would put him to bed because he was in so much pain and call the doctor, and they did not--finally I went to the linen closet and--I'm a nurse--made the bed and put him in it and called the doctor myself.

The doctor came and the nurse asked "who made that bed?" and I said "I did." She said "well you were not supposed to" and I said "well you are not supposed to let my father sit here like this." The doctor came and he ordered his urine strained because he thought maybe he would pass the stone and he didn't

want to do surgery if he could get him to pass the stone and they never strained it. I got the orderly and I asked "will you do this?" and he told me he would so he strained it.³

Not suprisingly, when Mrs. Bunn later was part of a group asking for federal funds for the new hospital, she was determined that it be desegregated.⁴

Mrs. Bunn defined race relations in terms of equality. Her father deserved the same attention and treatment as any white patient. Her "spirit of tolerance" and "open-mindedness" coalesced in a desire for change. On the other hand, the white nurses' treatment of Mrs. Bunn reflected her low status in their eyes. They defined race relations in terms of inequality. Their "spirit of tolerance" and "open-mindedness" coalesced in a desire to maintain the facade of white superiority.

Mrs. Bunn's hospital experience reveals how differently people could view the reality and deeper meanings of race relations. In her case, one begins to see how discrimination came to be identified with segregation. But not all people saw this so clearly and the subject of race relations in the community before 1954 is complex and many sided. This paper is

³ Interview, Mrs. Imogene Bunn, March, 1991.

⁴ Ibid.

an attempt to describe how race relations were perceived in Charlottesville by various members of both the black and white communities and what they proposed to do to make their perceptions square with reality.

In Charlottesville the decade prior to the Brown decision, blacks and whites began to confront the inequalities that the black community suffered in employment opportunities, housing, and education. Concerned blacks, who prior to the 1940's voiced their displeasure only among friends and in their homes, and concerned whites established organizations that dealt with race relations and the welfare of the black community. A transformation in the nature of the city's race relations resulted.

World War II and the Korean War created an atmosphere in the South which allowed for--in fact demanded--open dialogue between the races concerning race relations. In Charlottesville, as well as in every other southern town, the town's culture embraced segregation; therefore, early ideas concerning the improvement of race relations usually revolved around ways of making the system more fair--the system itself remained unchallenged. But as thinking on race relations matured and the limits of what white moderates promised were exposed, blacks challenged the system. In

Charlottesville, a grass roots campaign to revive the local NAACP chapter in 1953 and 1954 stimulated the change. Segregation was now at the center of attack for Charlottesville's black community leaders. Thus, by early 1954, before the Supreme Court decision, the civil rights movement became possible in Charlottesville.⁵

⁵This essay is instructed by my reading of three important community studies: William H. Chafe's Civilities and Civil Rights--Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Robert J. Norrell's Reaping the Whirlwind--The Civil Rights Movement in Tuskegee (New York: Vintage Books, 1986; 1985); and J. Mills Thornton's "Challenge and Response in the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-56," Alabama Review 3 (July 1980): 163-235. Common to all three works is the insistence on the importance of geography. In Norrell's words, the civil rights movement "had a different experience in each place"(ix).

The set of historical circumstances which provided the possibility for the civil rights movement is also peculiar to place. But Greensboro, Tuskegee, and Montgomery all shared at least one thing in common: either the community had a black college in its midst (all three communities) which supported a sizeable economically independent middle class and provided a rallying point for the local black community, or the community enjoyed a black majority or near majority (Tuskegee and Montgomery) which made blacks politically significant.

The Charlottesville black community enjoyed neither of these advantages, but neither did it suffer from their weight. The small size of Charlottesville's potential black electorate (according to the 1950 census only 3,079 blacks were 21 or over while 17,842 whites were of voting age) insulated it from tactics of political intimidation and made mobilization easier when civil rights became a political campaign issue. Charlottesville's small black middle class meant that the likelihood of profound divisions between black leaders were negligible. This does not mean that black leaders acted and thought as one, but the small leadership group was drawn together by size limitations. There were not enough blacks in Charlottesville to foster hostile black splinter groups.

Charlottesville in the 1940's and early 1950's was not a hotbed of activity, but underneath a peaceful bucolic veneer were undercurrents of reform and change whose ebb and flow helped shape Charlottesville for the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's. The story of how the community reached the point when the civil rights movement was possible is the subject of this essay.

Pervasive Themes

To understand race relations in Charlottesville in the decade before the Brown decision requires, first of all, an understanding of white attitudes. Broadly speaking, whites expressed two main ideas about race: change should be gradual at best and local southern white men should be responsible for determining the nature and pace of whatever change might take place.

A survey of editorial comments concerning black activism in the 1940's and early 1950's reveals how deeply burrowed the two conceptions were in the white public's psyche. On December 5, 1945, Dr. B. A. Coles, a black dentist, filed as a candidate for the Democratic nomination for the

Charlottesville City Council.⁶ On the day before the primary election, a Daily Progress editorial slammed Coles's candidacy as an "unwise experiment" which had the effect of automatically removing "from consideration all questions as to the personal fitness of any of the candidates or the soundness of their programs."⁷ According to the editor, the timing of Coles's candidacy was the problem. "Until the time comes when a Negro can seek office not as a Negro but simply on his merits--and if that time is ever to come it certainly is far in the future--a Negro candidate cannot hope to be successful."⁸

The editor offered no suggestions about how such a time might come and his tone suggests that its arrival was not something he thought important. In effect, then, although his language tried to disguise it, he advocated the indefinite continuation of white supremacy government.

Ironically, the editor and Charlottesville's early civil rights leaders shared a common vision--the creation of a community in which individuals were judged on their own merits. While the editorial suggested that that time was "far in the future," Charlottesville's black leaders

⁶ The Daily Progress 5 December 1945.

⁷ "Tomorrow's Primary," The Daily Progress 1 April 1946.

⁸ Ibid.

were not content to sit and wait for white public opinion to catch up with their aspirations.

In 1948 Dr. Coles again sought the Democratic nomination for City Councilman, with the same results.⁹ Three years later the black leaders turned their attention to a vacancy on the School Board. Dr. J. A. Jackson, a black dentist, was nominated to fill Dr. A. G. A. Balz's vacated position. Although the Jefferson High and elementary schools' Parent-Teacher Association--an all black organization--endorsed Dr. Jackson and councilman James Barr supported his appointment, City Council selected a white man named Harry Wright.¹⁰

Following the appointment, an editorial appeared in an attempt to explain the Council's action. While claiming there was "no evidence in the record of the board in recent years to indicate an inclination to neglect the educational needs of the Negro population," the editor asserted that "no more could have been done if there had been a Negro representation on the board." But, the editor promised

⁹In 1946 he finished third in a three-way race with 448 votes out of 2,275 cast. In 1948 he finished sixth in a seven-way race by garnering 403 votes out of 2005 ballots. In 1952 George Hardy, president of the local NAACP, finished fourth in a four way race with 404 votes. The Daily Progress 7 April 1948, 2 April 1952.

¹⁰The Daily Progress 16 July 1951.

that if a problem "of keeping in sufficiently close touch with the work of the Negro schools" emerged then a black should be appointed.¹¹ The belief in white male determination of black ambitions and the sense that nothing was wrong anyway were assumptions that prevented most white Charlottesvilleans from empathizing with black townspeople. Absent empathy, white Charlottesvilleans could not hope to understand blacks' increasing anger and frustration over race relations in the community.

On March 22, 1952, a Daily Progress editorial assured readers that the 1951 opening of the new Burley High School went "far toward discharging the obligation of Charlottesville and Albemarle to provide full equality in educational opportunity for the Negro citizens."¹² According to the paper, "so far as Charlottesville is concerned, equality was achieved with the opening of this school, which in some respects has facilities superior to those provided for white children at Lane High School."¹³ The sense of finality expressed in the editorial was probably shared by many white Charlottesville residents who hoped the "race question" would disappear with

¹¹The Daily Progress 19 June 1951.

¹²"The New Burley High School," The Daily Progress 22 March 1952.

¹³Ibid.

the opening of the new school. But black leaders would not allow the question to be brushed aside.

On January 4, 1954, Randolph White, black community leader and future editor of Charlottesville's black newspaper, and Charles Fowler, president-elect of the local NAACP, appeared before City Council to object to the council's proposal to shift \$70,000 of Burley High School's budget to Jefferson Elementary, also a black school. The two men claimed that the Burley facility was inferior to Lane High School, the white high school; therefore, the money should be used to upgrade Burley. While readily admitting the needs of Jefferson Elementary, Fowler compared the Council's proposal to robbing Peter to pay Paul.¹⁴

Ten days later a Daily Progress editorial attacked the NAACP for being "less concerned with the improvement of schools for Negroes than with the elimination of racial segregation in education and elsewhere." The editorial claimed that if the NAACP "could find no real deficiencies in schools for Negroes, it would necessarily have to invent some in the pursuit of its goal."¹⁵ The newspaper refused to acknowledge any connection between integration and the

¹⁴ "Burley Facilities are Inferior, City Council is Told," The Daily Progress 5 January 1954.

¹⁵ "Burley High School," The Daily Progress 14 January 1954.

improvement of education.

The response to White's and Fowler's initiative discloses the threat to whites' perceptions posed by determined black organizations. The editor's hostile and suspicious tone directed toward the NAACP suggested a desire to close ranks that many in Charlottesville's white community may have wanted in early 1954. After all, in the previous three years their notion of how race relations should work had been challenged. In the fall of 1950, they had watched Gregory Swanson, a young black male, successfully enroll in the university law school after a brief court struggle. Later in that same year came an announcement from the Virginia State Conference of the NAACP that the state organization was preparing to launch an all-out attack on the dual education system. Two years later, in 1952, they watched university president Colgate Darden take the stand to defend segregation in the Prince Edward County case. And now, after building a new black high school, they read that two members of the local NAACP were challenging the white school board's proposal. By early 1954 many whites were probably growing more suspicious and fearful of any changes in the community's race relations.

Unbeknownst to most white city residents in 1954, challenges to the community's social fabric dated back to

the early 1940's. Three types of thinkers shaped these confrontations: white moderates, who took a reformist stance within the segregation system; black gradualists, who challenged the segregation system, but were willing to work for slow change; and black radicals, who demanded prompt change. The remainder of this essay fleshes out what it meant to be one of those thinkers in Charlottesville before the Brown decision.

A University President and The Limits of White Moderates

Colgate Darden completed his term as governor in 1946. One year later he assumed the presidency of the University of Virginia. Darden was a remarkably intelligent man and humane leader, but he was a prisoner of his culture. Reared in the Southside where the "traditions" of the Lost Cause and Uncle Remus shaped his earliest racial assumptions, Darden, as Mark Hamer writes in his remarkable study, was never able to "loosen the intellectual shackles which his society had placed on him since birth."¹⁶

Darden's racial thinking can most aptly be described as

¹⁶Mark Hamer, "A Modest Step Forward: Colgate W. Darden and the School Desegregation Crisis" (Senior Honors Thesis: University of Virginia, 1988), pp. 1-2.

moderate. Although he recognized the injustices perpetuated by the system of segregation, he limited his thinking on race relations to the improvement of that system. He was convinced that the "best" racial policy was one which provided genuinely equal facilities and opportunities for the black community. And he believed that segregation did not make the achievement of equality impossible.¹⁷ An analysis of Darden's racial thinking prior to the Brown decision reveals the limitations of white moderates.

Two important events during Darden's tenure as governor expose his thoughts on segregation. In the fall of 1942 he travelled to Norfolk to discuss the direction of race relations in Virginia with a group of black leaders.¹⁸ He came away from the discussion grateful for the opportunity "to learn from these Negro leaders themselves what the Negro in the South and elsewhere really wants. He wants to live his own life according to the genius of his own nature."¹⁹ Although Darden's discovery that blacks sought equal economic opportunity and housing conditions was important to the development of his thinking on race

¹⁷ Ibid., p.3.

¹⁸ Ibid., p.13.

¹⁹ Norfolk Journal and Guide, 26 September 1942, quoted in Hamer, "A Modest Step" p.14.

relations, more important was the fact that the system of segregation went unchallenged. The black leaders, perhaps out of politeness, did not discuss the problems of segregation. In his study of Darden, Hamer concludes that "they clearly left him with the impression that they favored a separate system."²⁰ Darden's racial views, while undoubtably modified by the conference, remained essentially the same.

Nearly a year later, Darden was the subject of a Richmond Afro-American article entitled "A Twentieth Century Confederate." In the interview Darden disclosed both sides of his racial thinking--the side which demanded humane segregation and justice for blacks along with the side which confirmed a deeply rooted belief in black inferiority.

In response to the question how segregation could possibly be consistent with democracy, Darden asserted that "separation of the races is the only way to live in a democracy. The difficulty is not in the system but in the abuses to it. There is no effort being made to afford equal facilities in some fields. Something should be done about that. It is when the system is exploited to oppress the colored man that it becomes undemocratic."²¹ When the journalist pushed him to reveal his

²⁰Hamer, "A Modest Step" p.15.

²¹"A Twentieth Century Confederate," (Richmond) Afro-American, 28 August 1943; quoted in Hamer, "A Modest Step" pp. 21-22.

personal opinion concerning whether whites and blacks should eat together, Darden disclosed that he held a "'positive revulsion' at the thought of eating with a black man, though he could enjoy the company of a 'clean, intelligent one.'"²²

Darden was a man caught in the middle. He recognized the need for change necessitated by the past abuses of the segregated system, but he was steadfast in his belief that racial separation was the best policy. Darden carried this intellectual baggage with him when he assumed leadership of the University of Virginia in 1947. His response to the crisis over school desegregation in the early 1950's illuminated the weight of that baggage.

In the spring of 1950, following the Supreme Court decision in Sweatt v Painter, which struck down a Texas law requiring graduate school segregation, Gregory Swanson, a young black attorney from Martinsville, applied for admission to the graduate program in law.²³ In July the Board of Visitors rejected Swanson's application, citing a provision in the state constitution which prohibited "race mixing" in schools.²⁴ Swanson contested the refusal of his admission

²² Ibid.

²³ Hamer, "A Modest Step" p. 28.

²⁴ "UVA Declines to Drop Race Barrier in Graduate Schools," The Daily Progress, 14 July 1950.

request before a Federal court and on September 5, 1950, the court ordered the university to admit, beginning with Swanson, qualified blacks to its law school.²⁵ On September 14, Swanson enrolled without incident.²⁶

Swanson's enrollment, which ended the university's all white tradition, evoked both celebration and guarded optimism in Charlottesville's black community. In a personal interview, Mrs. Geneva Anderson, who served as secretary of the local NAACP chapter between 1953 and 1959, remembers Swanson's victory:

We were just thrilled and overjoyed. We had house parties to celebrate. I never will forget the day he was admitted to the university and of course after that everybody met him.²⁷

T. J. Sellers, Charlottesville editor of the Roanoke Tribune, covered Swanson's registration. He reported that Swanson revealed his desire to concentrate his studies on insurance and corporation law. According to Sellers, after Swanson completed registration he was asked by reporters how he felt. Swanson replied he was hungry.²⁸ While Sellers recognized the historical importance of Swanson's enrollment,

²⁵ "Federal Decree Admits Negroes to Law School," The Daily Progress 5 September 1950.

²⁶ Roanoke Tribune 22 September 1950.

²⁷ Interview, Mrs. Geneva Anderson, April, 1991.

²⁸ "Gregory Swanson Enrolls at University," 22 September 1950, Roanoke Tribune.

his article suggests that the black community should keep in mind that Swanson was an individual and should not be treated as larger than life--a message that Sellers would drive home in his correspondence and conversations with Sarah Patton Boyle, a young university faculty member's wife, fledgling writer, and nascent liberal who supported Swanson's admission.²⁹

Darden's reaction to Swanson's enrollment was critical. As a symbolic community leader, his response would reflect the boundaries of white moderates' racial thinking. He did not shirk the responsibility.

On November 28, 1950, Darden made public his solution to school desegregation in an address delivered at the Southern Governors' Conference. While his proposal promised to blunt the edges of segregation by opening up graduate and professional schools to both races, the thrust of the address was aimed at provoking southern leaders to perfect the segregated system.³⁰

Darden claimed it was not difficult for him "to understand

²⁹Sarah Patton Boyle, The Desegregated Heart (New York: William Morrow Co., 1962), pp. 56-57.

³⁰Colgate Darden, Jr., "Patterns for Southern Progress: An Address at the Southern Governor's Conference," State Government Magazine, XXIV. (February 1951), 30-33; President's Papers, 1951 Series, Box 31.

the deep desire of the Negro people to break down segregation in the public school system. The Negro does not believe in equal but separate facilities because, while he has seen them remain separate, he has not, except in the most unusual situations, witnessed equality."³¹ "The Negro," according to Darden, had seen in countless instances "the segregation laws used as the shield of humiliation, exploitation, and oppression. It was not difficult to understand his aversion to them."³² Darden's response indicated that he, unlike the ever-defensive editor of the Daily Progress, was sensitive to the reality of segregation.

Despite his knowledge of the unfairness of the segregated system, Darden refused to endorse the idea of mixed public schools. He claimed "to undertake to set up mixed public schools in the face of this sentiment [the southern public's opposition] would be to open up a festering wound that would sap our strength and destroy that unity without which there is no hope for substantial progress for either race in the South." He urged Southern locales to follow the example of Charlottesville, whose consolidated high school for blacks was nearing completion, by providing genuinely equal facilities

³¹Ibid., 32-33.

³²Ibid, 33.

for both races.³³ Although as an ex-governor Darden realized the fiscal strain equalization would cause, his moderate vision could not extend beyond the horizon of segregation.

Between Swanson's admission and the Brown decision, Darden repeatedly called for the end of discrimination in segregation but maintained his belief in the system. In the opening speech of a three-day conference of educators at the university, Darden explained the existence of discrimination in Virginia as a consequence of unequal facilities which had "resulted in a lack of opportunity for the Negro race."³⁴ As a defense witness in the Prince Edward desegregation suit, Darden warned that "segregation has been, in many instances, used as a shield of oppression and discrimination," but he reiterated his belief that that result was not an inherent by-product of the system.³⁵

Two years later, in July of 1953, Darden, in his letter of resignation from the Southern Regional Council, reiterated his belief in the possibility of a fair and just segregated

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ "Schools Called Key to Future," The Daily Progress 18 June 1951.

³⁵ Dorothy E. Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia, quoted in Hamer, "A Modest Step" p.63; The Daily Progress 29 February 1952.

public school system.³⁶ While Darden, as the letter reveals, was reluctant to resign, he explained that the Council's decision to support publicly the desegregation of primary and secondary schools was one he could not support.³⁷ According to Darden, desegregation of that magnitude "would impede rather than improve public education in the Southern states."³⁸

Darden simply could not envision a workable society without segregation. Not until "separate but equal" was deemed unconstitutional and Virginia communities such as Charlottesville were faced with possible public school closings as a result of the state's massive resistance laws would Darden begin to abandon the intellectual baggage which bound him to the support of segregation. If the tenor of race relations in Charlottesville (or in Virginia or in the South as a whole) was dictated by white moderates like Darden then the pattern of race relations would remain unchallenged.

³⁶ Colgate Darden to George Mitchell, Executive Director, Southern Regional Council, July 25, 1953. Southern Regional Council Papers, Series 1, Reel 12, Microfilm collection.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

"Fertilizing the Ground"
Early Attempts to Improve Race Relations in Charlottesville

On December 16, 1942, Dwight Chalmers, pastor of Charlottesville's all-white First Presbyterian Church, sent a letter to Mrs. Jessie Daniel Ames, director of field work for the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, informing her of the organization of the Charlottesville Interracial Commission. In subsequent correspondence Chalmers outlined the nature of the organization. He disclosed the Commission's purposes as being "the improvement of those interracial attitudes out of which unfavorable conditions grow" and the "correction of interracial injustices and the betterment of conditions affecting interracial relations." According to Chalmers, the membership would consist of twenty persons from each race and the Commission would be divided into six Committees--"Schools, Public Welfare, Citizenship, Health and Recreation, Economic Security, and Education(for public forums and addresses)."³⁹

Two years later, in the winter of 1944, an NAACP chapter was organized to study the "race question" in

³⁹Dwight Chalmers to Jesse Daniel Ames, January 13, 1943, The Commission on Interracial Cooperation Papers, "Virginia", Series VII, Microfilm collection.

Charlottesville. One of its organizers was Benjamin Bunn, pastor of the all-black First Baptist Church. He and his wife, Imogene Bunn, had moved to Charlottesville in 1944 and were disturbed by the NAACP's absence in their new hometown. Mrs. Bunn explained the circumstances surrounding the chapter's founding:

I rememeber when we came here he woke me up in the middle of the night one night and said "I can't work in a place where there is no NAACP" and he was all excited and worried about it. I told him "there is something you can do about it" and he asked "what?" I said "you can organize one" so the next weekend he got busy to do that.⁴⁰

The Interracial Commission, along with the NAACP branch in its early years, represented a new chapter in the story of race relations in Charlottesville. They provided the initial arenas where members of Charlottesville's black and white communities struggled to redefine race relations. But the two organizations--the leading race relations groups in the community--were ineffective instruments of change because they were dominated by white moderates and black gradualists. Gradualists recognized the injustices perpetuated by segregation and suggested--albeit subtly--that the problems were inherent in the system. Rather than advocating drastic changes, however, they were

⁴⁰ Interview, Mrs. Imogene Bunn.

content to follow policies which quietly and effectively nibbled away at the edges of segregation. Following such an approach prevented gradualists from stimulating and sustaining the black community's support. A close examination of the Commission and the NAACP chapter in its early years reveals why the civil rights movement was not possible in Charlottesville in the 1940's. The Interracial Commission was a thoroughly middle class organization. A survey of the 1943 membership roll reveals that of the eighteen white members there were five affiliated with the university, four clergymen, three businessmen, two doctors, two city government employees, and one reporter. The seventeen black members included six businessmen, four educators, three doctors, and three clergymen.⁴¹ While membership grew over time, the increase in numbers did not increase diversity. The 1947 Commission consisted of fifty nine members, thirty one white and twenty eight black, with the vast majority drawn from same

⁴¹The 1943 membership list can be found in the Charlottesville Interracial Commission papers, Special Collection, Alderman Library, University of Virginia. The members' occupations were listed in the Charlottesville City Directory, 1942. There was no listing in the directory for one white and one black member.

class.⁴²

The Commission's class composition was no accident. While it did not have an exclusionary membership policy, the Commission actively recruited from the ranks of the middle class. In a discussion over the Membership Committee's policy, commission members indicated that a familiarity with downtown business leaders should be a prerequisite for those on the Membership Committee.⁴³ Saddled with a homogenous class membership and an evenly divided racial membership, the Commission's plans of action were left to be decided by white moderates and black gradualists. While this combination limited the Commission's alternatives, the mere fact of working in an interracial organization changed the way some members

⁴²"1947 Membership List," Charlottesville Interracial Commission papers, Special Collections, Alderman Library, University of Virginia. Charlottesville City Directory, 1947.

	<u>White</u>	<u>Black</u>
University	9	1
Educator	2	7
Businessmen	3	6
Doctor	2	2
Clergy	3	2
City Gov't.	2	-
Nurse	-	1
Laborer	-	1
No Listing	10	8

⁴³Minutes from Meeting held March 20, 1945. Charlottesville Interracial Commission papers.

defined race relations.

Frank Daniel, a local white physician, was a member of the Commission from its inception. He was recruited by his minister, Dwight Chalmers. Daniel's involvement with the Commission included working on a nursery project with Mrs. J. A. Jackson, the wife of a black dentist.⁴⁴ In an interview conducted by Charles Moran, Daniel revealed Mrs. Jackson's effect on him:

Mrs. Jackson opened up a new world to me--a world I had never realized existed. Until I went to that first meeting I had never addressed a Negro by any courtesy title. I didn't think I was unchristian, I didn't think I was undemocratic. I just didn't do it.⁴⁵

Daniel's new attitude was an example of the way in which interracial contact could in and of itself be a force for change.

According to Daniel, the Commission toiled in virtual anonymity in the early 1940's:

In those days we were unknown, unnoticed. We had to meet--not in secret--but we could not meet in public places. After Dwight [Chalmers] left--Dwight had been given permission to hold whatever meetings he

⁴⁴The nursery project was the Commission's attempt to move the black nursery school to a larger facility. See The Daily Progress 15 October 1945.

⁴⁵Dr. Frank Daniel, Oral History Interview with Charles Moran, University of Virginia Archives.

wanted in the church annex--he said "I think it would be wise for you to get a formal statement from the Board of Deacons of our church requesting the use of that space for our meetings." There was no conflict of time--nobody else wanted it.

So I wrote a letter to the Board of Deacons and formally requested it. I remarked that eight of our twenty members were ministers and every meeting was opened with prayer and nothing was said in the meeting which could not be properly said from any pulpit in the country. And I felt that in these days when times were being tested as to men of good will that the Presbyterian Church should welcome the opportunity to further good will in this way. So the Board of Deacons met for three hours and flatly refused to give permission for the group to still meet in the annex. So we had to find some other place.

Strangely enough, where we ended up meeting was in the County Board of Supervisors building on Court Square which was really suprising because there was much more objection--open objection--from the political people than there was in church, but that church group was adamant.⁴⁶

In the course of the interview, Daniel also revealed a lull in the Commission's activity. "Well this sort of fell apart when we felt that we were not really doing--accomplishing-- anything. It really was not revived

⁴⁶ Ibid.

until 1954-55 when schools were about to be closed."⁴⁷

Daniel's recollection supports the interpretation that the Commission was nibbling away at the edges of segregation, but keeping a distance from its core. His reference to the propriety of what was said in meetings suggests the degree of changes advocated by the Commission. But one can not belittle the significance Daniel posited in his experience of working alongside blacks. His involvement with the organization permanently affected his thinking on race relations.

Professor Frank Finger's impression of the Commission reveals the limits of the organization. He describes as an important benefit "the fact that middle class whites and middle class blacks interacted politely [and were] oriented toward pursuing a common goal--better race relations."⁴⁸ While we do not know if each group attached the same meaning to "better race relations"-- one assumes that they

⁴⁷Ibid. In fact, schools were not "about to be closed" until 1958. Massive resistance legislation passed in 1956. Paul Gaston and Thomas Hammond. "Public School Desegregation: Charlottesville, VA, 1955-1962," A report presented to the Nashville Conference on "The South: The Ethical Demands of Integration," a consultation sponsored by the Southern Regional Conference and the Fellowship of Soouthern Churchmen, December 28, 1962.

⁴⁸Interview, Frank Finger, February 1991. None of the black Council candidates during this time was a member of the Interracial Commission.

did not-- the vagueness of that goal allowed each group the flexibility to define its intentions without disrupting the Commission.

Three objectives of the Commission stood out in Finger's memory: the promotion of the use of courtesy titles for blacks in public, private, and print; the reporting of black weddings and engagements in the Daily Progress; and the election of a black member to City Council.⁴⁹ With the organization's energy funneled toward the correction of such problems, there was little incentive to tackle segregation head on. The Commission had not yet concluded that segregation itself was the principal cause of discrimination, that equality itself required for its achievement the elimination of segregation.

Finger ended his affiliation with the Commission in the early 1950's:

These were middle age people and I was a young squirt at the time. I was a busy guy and I had a feeling that we were meeting and talking to each other some and that was about it. We really were not doing much. I just sort of hung it up. But I had many things to do and I did not think that that group was accomplishing much and I did not think that I was contributing much and I guess I have to confess for the most part I

⁴⁹ Ibid.

just wanted to listen.⁵⁰

The scenario he describes is important because it reveals two critical facets of the organization. First, the Commission attracted members, like Finger, who "just wanted to listen" and discuss the race "problems" in Charlottesville. While the whites who joined were surely motivated by some act of conscience as well as a thirst for education and dialogue, Finger's description leaves the impression that for ambitious young white professionals, the Commission's activities may not have been engaging. Second, the activity which consumed the Commission's time and energy was discussion. Whether addressing the issues of "Negro Hospitalization in Charlottesville," "Negro Education," "Employment for Negroes," or "Professional Life in Charlottesville," the Commission acted as a fact-finding group with an emphasis on developing a dialogue on the issues.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the Commission's activities should not be denigrated. Given the opposition it faced in the community along with the ideological orientation of its membership, looking for radical leadership from the organization is perhaps looking for what could not have

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ January 11, 1946, November 11, 1947, March 10, 1949, June 16, 1949. Charlottesville Interracial Commission papers.

been.

The early years of the NAACP chapter in Charlottesville also indicate the limited effectiveness of research and discussion in expediting change. Although the chapter was not burdened by a large number of white moderates, its inability to sustain a large popular following magnified the limits of gradualism. On July 14, 1945, Charles H. Bullock wrote a letter to the NAACP headquarters in New York expressing his pleasure over the founding of a chapter in Charlottesville. "We finally have a new branch of the NAACP here in Charlottesville with a membership of over four hundred members. The branch bids fair to become a real force in the community."⁵² As Bullock's letter indicates, the initial organizing was greeted with enthusiasm. But as the chapter's agenda became apparent, the black community's enthusiasm waned.

Mrs. Imogene Bunn, who was partially responsible for the chapter's founding and who remained a steadfast supporter, describes the chapter's agenda in its early years: "Now when it was first organized, it was organized to study the situation-- the segregated system--to see what really

⁵²Charles H. Bullock to National headquarters, July 14, 1950, NAACP Papers, Series II-C, box 204.

needed to be done and could be done."⁵³ While the initial response to the chapter indicates that Charlottesville's black community could readily support the organization, the chapter's ensuing decline suggests that it was not striking the appropriate chords.

The existing information on the early chapter's leadership consists of a list of the 1948 elected officers and executive committee members. Their class status was remarkably similar to that of the black members of the Interracial Commission. The twenty one men and women included twenty blacks and one white. The one white held the conspicuous position of President elect. The twenty blacks consisted of five educators, four clergymen, two University hospital employees, two University employees (positions not specified), one doctor, and one businessman.⁵⁴ Six members appeared on the 1947 Interracial Commission rolls.⁵⁵ However, the chapter's decline between 1947 and 1952 can not be explained by class conflict in the black community. When the local branch was revitalized in

⁵³ Interview, Mrs. Imogene Bunn.

⁵⁴ Report of Election of Officers, December 16, 1947. NAACP Papers, Series II-C, Box 204. Charlottesville City Directory, 1947. The list included five names for which there were no listings.

⁵⁵ 1947 Membership List, Charlottesville Interracial Commission Papers.

1954, the leadership was drawn predominantly from the black middle classes.

A more plausible explanation for the decline from 447 members in 1945 to 103 members in 1948 to zero members in 1952 rests in Mrs. Bunn's description of the chapter's agenda in its formative years.⁵⁶ The emphasis on the study of segregation, which she identified as the major activity of the organization in its early years, may not have satisfied Charlottesville blacks who had outgrown the talk and courtesy title era.⁵⁷ The fact that the organization's decision to attack segregation head on in early 1954 (before the Brown decision) resulted in 867 new members supports the explanation.⁵⁸

Two articles by Charlottesvillean Herman Watts in the 1950 Roanoke Tribune suggest the frustration many blacks may have felt when they reflected on their status in Charlottesville. In the first article, Watts compares the indignation Americans expressed when they learned of American soldiers being murdered in Korea with the lack of indignation they expressed over the daily injustices

⁵⁶ Membership Statistics. NAACP Papers, Series II-C, box 211.

⁵⁷ Personal Interview with Mrs. Imogene Bunn, 1991.

⁵⁸ 1954 Annual Report of Branch Activities. NAACP Papers, Series II-C, box 277.

American minorities suffered:

The minorities of this country know what it is to be dragged out of their homes, to be tied to automobiles and dragged up and down the streets. The victims' loved ones have seen the officers of the law look upon such atrocities with indifference or to lend a helping hand.

If, for the most part, no real attempt is made to bring these half civilized criminals to justice in the land of the "free," how absurd it is to even talk of justice for international criminals.⁵⁹

In the second article, Watts examined the present condition of race relations. While he was quick to admit that progress had been made, he warned against those who advocated slow change:

All is not darkness and despair in race relations. Even the gloomiest prophets must admit that there are areas of progress. But many people like myself are slow to admit improvements because those who resist progress keep saying that everything will be peaches and cream, but it just takes time.

Of course there are those who feel that they can hold back the dawn; by saying that these ills will be corrected in time. I am sure that the Negro was ready for full citizenship when the first boat load landed in Jamestown.⁶⁰

While neither of Watts's articles was critical of the local NAACP chapter, they do suggest why Charlottesville blacks lost interest in the organization. The changes they were beginning to envision were larger and more

⁵⁹ "As I See It," Roanoke Tribune 11 August 1950.

⁶⁰ "As I See It," Roanoke Tribune 15 September 1950.

ambitious--although not clearly articulated--than what the local association was offering.

While the NAACP chapter in its early years and the Interracial Commission provided new terrain for the discussion of race relations on which many attitudes were changed, their existence did not signal Charlottesville's readiness for an all-out assault on segregation. One should not, however, denigrate their importance as indicators of potential change. Mrs. Rebecca McGinnes, a long time black resident of Charlottesville who began teaching there in the fall of 1914 and was a member of the NAACP in its early years, describes the process of change in race relations with an agricultural metaphor.

Just like planting corn, you have to give it time to grow. Anything that is worthwhile it takes time to get it done. You have to wait till it grows and if you want your corn to produce you have to fertilize it--and watch it grow--and after a while you get your corn off of it.⁶¹

The NAACP and the Commission fertilized the ground in the 1940's, but not until gradualism was abandoned and the black community was solidified into a powerful bloc could blacks reap the rewards.

⁶¹ Interview, Mrs. Rebecca McGinnes, March 1991.

From Discussion to Confrontation

In the fall of 1950, Sarah Patton Boyle, a white Charlottesville moderate, sought out T. J. Sellers, Charlottesville editor of the Roanoke Tribune. She wanted an explanation for Gregory Swanson's tepid response to her letter in which she had revealed her support of his ensuing enrollment in the University law school. Sellers answered Boyle's query in a letter in which he explained why Swanson had responded coolly to her paternalistic overtures. Sellers announced that "there is a New Negro in our midst who is insisting that America wake up and recognize the fact that he is a man like other men. He is entirely out of sympathy with the gross paternalism of the 'Master class' turned liberal."⁶² While this exchange marked the beginning of Boyle's "education" under Sellers which would result in her "desegregated heart," it also highlights the importance of Sellers's views on race relations. If Charlottesville's black community was discouraged by the local NAACP and the Interracial Commission's failure to attack segregation head

⁶²T. J. Sellers to Sarah Patton Boyle, 1950, quoted in Sarah Patton Boyle, The Desegregated Heart (New York: William Morrow Co., 1962), pp. 82-84.

on, it found solace in Sellers's frank editorials.

T. J. Sellers returned to Charlottesville upon completing his college degree in 1941. By 1943 he was district manager of Richmond Beneficial Life Insurance Company and an initial member of the Interracial Commission. In 1950 he assumed the position of Charlottesville editor of the Roanoke Tribune. Sellers now describes his role in the 1940's and 1950's as one who was there to "help inform" and says that "he did not think" his "views were that different from others." An analysis of his approach to the "race question" proves otherwise.⁶³

In the course of his teacher-student relationship with Boyle, Sellers stressed two important aspects of his racial thinking: blacks' right to be treated as individuals and blacks' need to rely on themselves as agents for change. In her book, Boyle remembers Sellers's reaction when she asked him whom the blacks vote for in the city's elections:

I saw in his eyes the familiar burning which I evoked in so many Negroes' eyes. "The capitalists-- of which there are a few-- will vote for the same man white capitalists vote for. Each individual will vote for the candidate he considers the best man and whom he thinks may further his particular aims--

⁶³T.J. Sellers to Brad Mittendorf, May 8, 1991; 1943 Membership List, Charlottesville Interracial Commission Papers; Roanoke Tribune 13 October 1950.

just as white voters will. Of course if civil rights were an issue in this election, you would see some lining up by race. But there are even some Negro segregationists. Negroes aren't a bag of potatoes, as the white man likes to think."⁶⁴

In a later conversation, Boyle describes him emphasizing the relationship between equality and individual liberty:

"Put it this way: the Negro needs, has earned, and is entitled to equality. This consists in his being thought of, and treated exactly as any other American. Anything beyond that smells"-- he bore down on the word-- "of charity."⁶⁵

Sellers would simply not accept a society in which all individuals were not judged on their own merits regardless of race.

Boyle's attempt to explain to Sellers why blacks were mistreated and misunderstood in Charlottesville is worth noting because it reveals the limit of racial thinking in the white community. She claimed that whites were illiterate in the area of racial thought: "95% of the contempt, injustice, and cruelty which Negroes receive is unintended and unconscious. We were raised in a framework of white supremacy, remember, without ever having had anybody call it that to us. Naturally we take it all as a

⁶⁴Sellers to Boyle, quoted in Boyle, The Desegregated Heart, pp. 110-111.

⁶⁵Ibid., p.115.

matter of course until it's called sharply to our attention." Sellers responded by pointing out that "it has been continually called to the attention of whites for a little matter of 85 years. Their attention is conveniently occupied."⁶⁶ Implicit in Sellers's response was the conviction that blacks must be the principal agitators for change. A reliance on whites translated into little or no change at all. With this in mind, Sellers challenged his predominant black audiences to confront the oppressive nature of segregation.

Sellers left no doubts about his views on segregation. While a member of the Interracial Commission, he was not a gradualist. In his editorial on December 8, 1950, he made clear that "we have always been opposed to every form of segregation--not because we saw any special blessing in mingling with our white fellow Americans and not because we favored intermarriage either. But because segregation has meant discrimination, oppression, and double standards of justice."⁶⁷

But even Sellers--the most strident voice we find in Charlottesville in the early 1950's--was hesitant to

⁶⁶ Boyle, The Desegregated Heart, pp. 136-137.

⁶⁷ Roanoke Tribune 8 December 1950.

endorse the state NAACP's decision to attack the dual education system. In the same editorial in which he declared segregation to be the cause of all discrimination, Sellers publicized his fear that most Virginia black children--as a result of past discriminatory policies in education funding--were not prepared to compete with white children:

No self respecting Negro could approve of segregation and most decent white Americans are against it.

But despite all of these facts we sincerely wish that the Virginia State Conference of the NAACP had not found it necessary to press the fight for the elimination of our dual public educational system right at this time.

We just don't believe that the average Negro student coming from the average substandard school in the average Virginia city or county could adjust himself to his own best advantage at this time.⁶⁸

Sellers's stand on the issue is important, not because it seems to contradict his other assertions, but because it demonstrates how community leaders, particularly in the black community, had to struggle with the potential consequences of their public positions. There is no doubt that Sellers understood that for equality to be achieved segregation had to be eliminated, but in December 1950,

⁶⁸ Ibid.

with the new Burley High School under construction and planned to open in the fall of 1951, he may have decided that the most responsible public action was to remind his readers of segregation's inherent evils while not jeopardizing in any way the new school.

While Sellers may have tempered his criticisms of segregated education in late 1950, he remained an agitator for change. The impression Sellers made on University librarian Jack Dalton, a fellow member of the Interracial Commission, illustrates how Sellers challenged the public. In a 1977 interview Dalton recalled:

Only in talking with him over the last two or three years have I understood fully the T. J. Sellers whom I used to see from time to time. Once, for example, I was the only white in a black audience at the local high school and when the time came for T. J. Sellers to read what amounted to a current events report bringing the large audience up to date on what was taking place, it was all slanted, you see, from the point of view of a black who was looking at how things were going in the white community.

Either T. J. or whoever was presiding said, "our white friend, Mr. Dalton, is going to have to forgive us if some of this doesn't come sweetly to his ears." And he lit into the community. But it was a point of view which I not only understood but sympathized with in terms of what they were trying to do, but only now do I understand why T. J. was reacting as he was in Charlottesville. It

[change] takes a long time.⁶⁹

In 1953 T. J. Sellers left Charlottesville to pursue a newspaper career with the Amsterdam News in New York. In a telephone interview, Sellers offered no further explanation for his departure, but Mrs. Geneva Anderson, who was an employee of Sellers's at Richmond Beneficial Life Insurance in the early 1950's, suggests other reasons which may have influenced Sellers's decision to leave his hometown:⁷⁰

I was really angry that he had to leave in order to do what he wanted to do because he was such a great asset to Charlottesville. And I thought it was a shame that Charlottesville had to lose him. His wife left and went to New York to teach school. She left first and then he decided of course to follow her. They had a daughter--just one child--and they wanted her to get a better education than what was here. So she took her to New York so she could get involved in the culture part of the city like operas and plays--that is what she wanted for her daughter.⁷¹

While it is likely that a combination of reasons--both professional and personal--resulted in Sellers's decision to leave Charlottesville, his departure reflects the limited alternatives that were available for many educated

⁶⁹Jack Dalton, Oral History Interview with Charles Moran, University of Virginia Archives, 1977.

⁷⁰Telephone interview with T.J. Sellers, March, 1991.

⁷¹Interview, Geneva Anderson, April, 1991.

and ambitious young black men and women in the South at that time.

When Sellers left Charlottesville, the black community lost its most insistent racial leader. Although his stand on segregated education indicates that he recognized the need for pragmatism--particularly in issues which concerned children's welfare--his correspondence with Sarah Boyle, his editorial which highlighted segregation's consequences, his public demand for change, and perhaps even his departure illustrated that his racial thinking had outgrown black gradualism.

When Eugene Williams left Charlottesville in 1944, the local NAACP branch had not been organized. Upon his return in 1953, he joined Ray Bell and Charles Fowler, both recent returnees, at an NAACP meeting at the Ebenezer Baptist Church. In a personal interview, Williams describes himself as a man who had "always been against segregation," ever since he "was able to know the difference between segregation and treating people like people." For a man with his predilections, the meeting must have been depressing. Twelve members were in attendance and, according to Williams, they "showed no drive at all in trying to do anything about all the evils of discrimination

and segregation."⁷²

Following the meeting, the three men strolled over to the corner of Sixth and Main--segregation prohibited them from entering most diners and bars--and discussed the state of race relations in their hometown. They decided, as Williams remembers, that "they should try to make a difference" and get more involved. They reached the conclusion that the NAACP would serve as their vehicle for involvement. Later in the year at the local branch elections, Charles Fowler was elected President; Ray Bell accepted the chairmanship of Press and Publicity; and Eugene Williams accepted the headship of the Membership committee. Faced with a 1953 total of 24 members, increasing membership was the organization's first goal.⁷³

Consequently, the chapter issued its first newsletter, which included a message from Fowler urging blacks to join.

Every Negro should be a 'card carrying member' of the NAACP. This represents strength. It signifies collective action on mutual problems. It means better education, better jobs, better community relations, and the first step toward removal of all economic, social, political, and civic

⁷² Interview, Eugene Williams, April, 1991.

⁷³ Ibid.

barriers.⁷⁴

The message struck a responsive chord in Charlottesville's black community, for when the campaign culminated with a speech delivered by Thurgood Marshall on March 30, 1954, 867 memberships had been secured.⁷⁵ Williams recalls the drive's significance: "Of course that [the successful drive] gave us speaking power--the most important thing. We were one of the largest branches in the state of Virginia. That surely said something. [It] gave people pride and dignity."⁷⁶ The campaign's success indicated that the black community was mobilized behind black leaders who demanded peaceful confrontation with segregation. At that moment, the texture of race relations in Charlottesville changed--the attack on segregation took center stage in the black community.

Conclusion

When the Brown decision was handed down in May of 1954, an editorial appeared in The Daily Progress which faulted the court for moving too fast. The editor found it

⁷⁴The Charlottesville NAACP Newsletter, February 1954, NAACP Papers, Series II-C, Box 277.

⁷⁵Annual Report of Branch Activities, 1954, NAACP Papers, Series II-C, Box 277.

⁷⁶Interview, Eugene Williams.

"encouraging to note that extreme haste will probably not be necessary" in making the adjustment to the decree. "And it would seem reasonable to expect that full compliance with it will not be required for some time after that[1954-55 school term]." ⁷⁷

One year later forty three black parents, advised by the local NAACP branch, petitioned the School Board to desegregate its city schools. When the School Board failed to act, the NAACP filed suit on behalf of the school children. ⁷⁸

The nature of race relations in Charlottesville no longer allowed for the acceptance of delay by the black community. As the insulation which had been provided by gradualism was stripped away by the burgeoning civil rights movement, the suppressed anxieties of Charlottesville's white community were exposed and a whole new dynamic of race relations emerged. In the decade before the Brown decision, Charlottesville's racial leaders struggled to the conclusion that equality necessitated the elimination of segregation. Reaching that conclusion was not easy. Black gradualists, who were hesitant to push for too much, and

⁷⁷ "The Segregation Ruling" The Daily Progress 18 May 1954.

⁷⁸ Paul Gaston and Thomas Hammond. "Public School Desegregation: Charlottesville, VA, 1955-1962."

white moderates, who were unable to envision a world without segregation, were unable to effect--in fact could not effect--substantial change. Nevertheless, by institutionalizing concern over race relations and airing their beliefs, they altered the way in which some Charlottesvilleans thought about race. But not until a new group of racial leaders emerged in 1953 did segregation become the black community's center of attack. With a reorganized and numerically strong NAACP behind them, these racial leaders began a new phase of the civil rights movement--one in which confrontation accompanied conversation.

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A Note on Sources

At the beginning of this project I was intimidated by the paucity of traditional historical sources. A quick survey revealed that there were holes in the written records-- holes that had to be filled if I wanted to reach some understanding of race relations in pre-Brown decision Charlottesville. With this in mind, I entered the waters of oral history. When I emerged, I had ample information for the paper.

Oral history retrieves historical voices which are unlikely to appear in written sources. For example, Rebecca McGinnes, a long time black resident of Charlottesville and a former school teacher, told me stories which helped establish a context for my analysis of much of the written sources. Without oral history, her voice would be accessible only to those with a personal memory of her. But by employing oral history, her voice-- and voices like hers-- is preserved.

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¹Unfortunately, the 1950 issues were the only ones which survived when the paper moved to its present location in Roanoke. These issues are quickly deteriorating in the newspaper's archives and unless put on microfilm they will not be available for future researchers.

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