From Brown to Green

School Desegregation in Roanoke, Virginia

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Introduction:

Law at the Grassroots: Desegregation in Roanoke

On June 17, 1970, the United States Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the Roanoke school board had, “failed to dismantle its dual school system and is not presently operating a unitary system.” To remedy the situation, the Appeals court ordered the District Court to “direct the school board to prepare and file a new plan for achieving a unitary school system by July 15, 1970.” The decision in *Green v. School Board of City of Roanoke, Virginia* effectively ended a sixteen year struggle over the desegregation of the schools in Roanoke.

The story of the city’s path to desegregation began on May 17, 1954, when the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, et al.*, that “separate” was “inherently unequal.” Almost immediately, white political leaders in Virginia began openly calling for the state to resist the Court’s decision and save their segregated way of life. The state legislature likewise tried to prevent the integration of the state’s schools. Unwilling to accept any more delays, the black community in Virginia organized and began to attack segregation in the schools. In Roanoke, the black community succeeded in pushing the school board to continue making improvements to schools for black students, and when the city consistently ignored the *Brown* decision, twenty-seven black families sued the school system to force desegregation.

Driven by grassroots pressure within the black community and resisted by Virginia whites at both the grassroots and in high office, desegregation took more than sixteen years to complete. Between 1954 when the US Supreme Court first declared the

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“separate but equal” standard to be unconstitutional, and 1970, when a federal district court finally ordered the Roanoke school system to desegregate, the city’s black community struggled to gain facilities that would help their children have the best education. At first, they worked to gain equal facilities, but this fight eventually became one for integrated facilities. To them, desegregation meant a better education leading to a better future for their children. Even before Brown, the black community had come together to push the city’s all-white school board to make improvements to the black schools. In response, the white community continued to delay desegregation plans for almost two decades arguing that desegregation would mean a poorer education for their children. Throughout this period, Roanoke residents, black and white, fought to control the meaning of desegregation.

Like most southern cities, Roanoke schools were thoroughly segregated. From the founding of public schools in Roanoke in late nineteenth century, the city had operated separate schools for white and black children. As the city’s population grew over the course of the twentieth century, the education system grew to serve the larger number of children. Since Virginia law required separate schools, the city built a dual school system – one for white students and one for those who fit into the “non-white” category. The school system, as well as the city, played a part in the civil rights battle that erupted over school desegregation in the mid twentieth century. In 1950, 91,921 people lived in Roanoke; the vast majority of them (84 percent) were white.³ Because of the small overall population, few historians have focused on Roanoke’s history of desegregation. The school system did not shut its schools for any period of time, nor did resistance to

³ United States Census Report, 1950. When census data was collected at the time, these were the only distinctions made between races.
desegregation produce violence. But, school desegregation did not occur smoothly; it was a drawn-out and fiercely contested process. After the decision, the school board continued its tactics of delaying and stalling any further efforts by the black community to change the school system both legally and socially.

School desegregation played a key role in the Civil Rights Movement of the mid twentieth century. Beginning with cases such as Sweatt v. Painter⁴ (1950) and McLaurin v. Oklahoma⁵ (1950), and culminating with the landmark Brown decisions in 1954 and 1955, school desegregation had led to riots and violence around the country between black and white residents, in places like Little Rock, New Orleans, and later, Boston.⁶ Overt violence rarely erupted in more rural areas, but the absence of violence did not mean whites fully accepted the Brown mandate. Indeed, Roanoke, managed to hold off desegregation until the federal courts ordered the city to comply with the Brown decision in 1970.

On May 17, 1954, the US Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice Earl Warren, ruled in favor of the plaintiffs in four NAACP cases collectively known as Brown v. Board. The decision transformed public education in America. In Brown, the Court overturned the almost sixty year-old “separate but equal” standard established in the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson case. The court found that although Southern states had indeed established

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⁴ As James Patterson describes in Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy, Sweatt v. Painter, concerned Heman Sweatt who had been rejected by the state’s all-white law school simply on racial grounds. In June of 1950, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled that it could not “find substantial equality in the educational facilities offered white and Negro law students by the state.”
⁵ Patterson describes McLaurin v. Oklahoma in Brown v. Board as well. Also ruled in June of 1950, this case concerned a 68 year old black man who was attempting to earn his doctorate at the University of Oklahoma. Although the institution did accept him reluctantly into the program, they would not allow McLaurin to sit in classrooms with other students. Instead, it forced him to sit in the anteroom of the classroom.
separate school systems for black and for white children, these institutions were far from “equal.” Local school boards appropriated far more money and resources for white schools, leaving black schools with paltry budgets, second-hand books, and broken-down facilities. The result was an unequal society in which school boards oversaw dual school systems – one privileged and white, and the other poor and black. The Court ruled in Brown that the Fourteenth Amendment requires equal protection under the law.

The Court’s ruling in Brown threatened the very foundations of Southern society, and sparked almost immediate resistance. Massive resistance to Brown – from Orville Faubus’s failure to protect the Little Rock Nine to George Wallace’s stand in the school house door – has generated a great deal of historical study. Some scholars including historian Dan Carter have focused on how regional leaders shaped and directed grassroots anxiety over racial change for political gain. Such “top-down” analyses of the “Southern Strategy” later adopted by Richard Nixon in his 1968 and 1972 campaigns fails to explain the collapse of New Deal liberalism at the national level. Suggesting that the racial liberalism usually associated during the so-called liberal consensus began to collapse with the Great Migration of the 1940s, rather than the Great Society of the 1960s, scholars like Matthew Lassiter, Thomas Sugrue, Robert Self, and Kevin Kruse, have

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7 Legislators created, with the consent of the Court after Plessy, de jure segregation in addition to the already prevalent de facto segregation. White lawmakers knew they could legally maintain segregationist laws after Plessy. The latter of these refers to segregation that occurred in society without the help of law. For example, throughout the North and even throughout urban areas in the South, many neighborhoods were divided by race. Meanwhile, de jure segregation refers to the laws instituting a state sponsored discrimination. Brown disposed of the separate school systems for the races - thereby making this type of de jure segregation impossible any longer. The problem later realized by courts around the country adjudicating cases of school desegregation was that often the two types of segregation went hand in hand, making it difficult to fully rectify segregation.

focused attention on the grassroots politics of resistance, both in and outside of the American South.  

These historians have focused on the politics of resistance, but others have focused on the legal battle over desegregation. Legal histories tend to focus on the US Supreme Court and its actions to protect the civil rights of minorities. By focusing solely on the high court, these studies miss the fierce contests at the local level as well as the role that lower courts played in the struggle for civil rights. Of course, black resistance to the South’s racial order was hardly new in the post-WWII period. As historian Seven Reich has shown, African Americans in the South during World War One withheld their labor, fled the region, evaded the draft, stockpiled arms, formed local chapters of the NAACP, and altogether posed a “formidable threat to the status quo.” Indeed, the grassroots movement was quite active without the aid of the courts, and Roanoke schools might never have desegregated had the black community not had the resolve to sue the school board and keep pushing it to break down its segregated system.

Black Americans had long struggled to achieve equal rights and to resist the legalized system of white supremacy in the American South, but the black freedom struggle entered a new phase after the Supreme Court’s decision in Brown. The federal government was far from fully committed to the cause of civil rights, but the Court’s

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11 Some argue the rise of the NAACP in 1909 marked the start of the movement, while others have made arguments that black soldiers returning from World War Two had realized what equal treatment could look like, and therefore were ready to gain true equality upon return to America. For more, see Melvin Urofsky, “Among the Most Humane Moments in All Our History,” Black, White, and Brown (Washington, D.C.: Supreme Court Historical Society, 2004).
decision forced Southern whites either to yield to integration or come to the active
defense of segregation. The Court’s decision offers a clean, tangible marker of the civil
rights movement, the moment the movement shifted to a new gear in which the federal
government began supporting black Americans.

The Brown decision and the surrounding controversy exposed the primary
problem facing black communities and desegregation: white resistance, including but not
limited to official “Massive Resistance” strategies. The term referred to the tactics that
included shutting down the schools, rejecting federal funds, and challenging the court’s
ruling on the basis of the so-called interposition doctrine devised by Virginia Senator
Harry F. Byrd and Richmond Times-Dispatch Editor James J. Kilpatrick to oppose
desegregation. Many counties in Virginia followed such a plan. In Prince Edward
County, the public schools closed entirely depriving a whole cohort of black children of
educational opportunity. In Charlottesville as well as Norfolk, schools closed for a year
as a result of the actions of the governors, but also supported by Kilpatrick, Byrd, and
their movement. Roanoke did not close its schools, but its school board did use tactics
such as pupil placement to avoid desegregation throughout the 1950s and 60s.

Virginia’s white residents bitterly opposed desegregation, but the Brown decision
forced the issue of civil rights onto the region’s political agenda, when Southern
governments worked to follow, resist, or evade the Supreme Court’s ruling. As Lassiter
has pointed out, this process was often wrenching, and produced fundamental

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12 Paul Gaston, “Foreword by Way of Memoir,” The Moderates’ Dilemma (Charlottesville: University
Press of Virginia, 1998), x.

13 In the North, it took longer and complex methods in order to desegregate schools considering de facto
segregation divided black and white residents into separate neighborhoods. This type of segregation
occurred because of societal factors and discriminatory housing laws. Tom Sugrue argues that de facto
segregation arose from the federal and local governments’ actions, real estate agents, individual home
buyers and sellers, and community organizations— all working together through economic and social
structures acting as parameters. For more, see Sugrue.
transformations in the region’s social and political culture. Ultimately, the white South found itself unable to preserve its racial “caste system through a unified regional resistance.”¹⁴ Massive resistance failed to roll back the civil rights revolution.

This thesis examines the trajectory of desegregation between 1952 and 1970. The first chapter looks at the early years: the establishment of black schools in the city from the late nineteenth century through the years immediately after the Brown decision. It describes the black community’s efforts to force the school board to establish equal facilities and the politicization of that community around questions of educational justice. The chapter also includes a comprehensive examination of the Brown decision and the national reaction to it. Chapter Two focuses on the forms of resistance common in Roanoke during the sixteen-year span between Brown and Green. The final chapter examines the case that finally desegregated Roanoke’s schools: Green v. School Board of the City of Roanoke, Virginia. This case was originally filed in 1962 and remained in litigation until 1970 when the school system finally desegregated. This final chapter will complete the story of Roanoke’s journey from Brown to Green.

Roanoke is an example of the ways the Civil Rights Movement played out in most cities around the South. After Brown, white communities throughout the South had to face the choice of accepting integration or openly fighting to maintain segregation. The grassroots – mostly consisting of the black communities – fought for equal rights, and the Courts gave critical assistance at certain points during the fight. This teamwork ultimately defeated the most visible forms of resistance and abolished the South’s segregated racial system.

¹⁴ Matthew Lassiter, The Silent Majority, 39.
Chapter 1:
Delay: Roanoke’s Initial Reaction to Brown

On May 17, 1954, Chief Justice Earl Warren delivered the unanimous opinion of the Court in a packed court room in the case of Brown v. Board of Education. Based on psychological evidence but grounded in the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, the Court found that “Segregation with the sanction of law,...has a tendency to [retard] the educational and mental development of Negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racial[ly] integrated school system.” The Court concluded, “Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal,” and children in segregated schools had been systematically “deprived of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.” The Chief Justice recognized that the implications of the case went far beyond integrating the classroom. “We have now announced that such segregation is a denial of the equal protection of the laws.”

The May 17 ruling reversed a fifty year precedent established by Plessy v. Ferguson. Prior to Brown, Plessy shaped decisions in all cases concerning race relations. For the specific Brown case, the district court of Kansas had found that Topeka did provide equal schools, but “wrote that it believed the segregation of white and black children adversely affected black children.” As Bradley Hayes writes, the district court’s opinion implies “that had Plessy v. Ferguson and its doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ not

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1 Brown et al v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, et al, United States Supreme Court, 17 May 1954.
2 This case surrounded Homer Plessy, an African American man with a very light complexion who had refused to move to the “colored” car of a railroad. The Court ruled at this case on 18 May 1896 that separation of the races did not mean institutions would be unequal.
3 Bradley D. Hayes, 153.
been the governing precedent, the court would have ruled in favor of Linda Brown.\textsuperscript{4}

This was the justification the Supreme Court used to address the intangible factors in the segregation cases. This also meant it was difficult for the NAACP or any other civil rights activist to argue against segregation prior to \textit{Brown}, because \textit{Plessy} had made "separate but equal" legitimate law.

At the same time, the \textit{Brown} decision did little to provoke an immediate reaction because it did not include a plan of implementation. After the Court handed down the decision, it was another year before it officially remanded the case to the lower cases to handle each case individually in order to implement school desegregation. Ironically \textit{Brown} accomplished so much because it overturned \textit{Plessy}'s 48 year-old precedent. However, it failed to implement change – these would come in what was known as \textit{Brown II}. The first ruling was written plainly so that anyone could understand it and rooted in the Equal Protection Clause of the 14\textsuperscript{th} Amendment. In the ruling, Warren posed the question: "Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other 'tangible' factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities?" He answered this question simply: "We believe that it does."\textsuperscript{5} Thus, the psychological studies became the factor that pushed the Warren Court into supporting the plaintiffs.

Warren discussed how "tangible" factors were unconvincing because in many of the cases, the school systems had exhibited at least some effort to maintain equal schools (i.e. equal buildings, books, etc.). Warren cites this as the reason for looking "to the effect of segregation itself on public education." He argues that at the time \textit{Plessy} was written,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{4} \textit{Ibid.}
\end{flushright}
compulsory school attendance laws and educational expenditures were not at the level they were in 1954. As a result, Warren links success in life with the opportunity of an education. This, he believes, means that "such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms." In other words, segregated school systems did not meet the requirements of the Fourteenth Amendment and this was due to more than the obvious physical separation, but the emotional and psychological consequences unduly placed upon the black community.

In declaring "separate" inherently "unequal," the Court focused on both the tangible and intangible ways in which "segregation with the sanction of law" violated the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause. For Linda Brown, Topeka actually offered equal facilities - the tangible element. Brown lived in a multicultural neighborhood where she played with children of all races. However, when it came time to go to school, her white friends would walk only seven blocks to Sumner Elementary School - the all-white public elementary. Brown would instead walk "through an active railway switching yard for about five blocks to get to her bus station." The bus would sometimes arrive at the school before opening so that the children had to wait outside, even in cold and rainy weather. "According to Linda's father, she departed an hour and twenty minutes before school started in order to arrive on time." This meant Brown experienced intangible inequalities in the differences of the trips to school of white and black children.

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6 Ibid.
The importance of this discussion on the tangible and intangible factors that the Supreme Court described is that we will see how Roanoke's school board began working hard to improve its schools to be tangibly similar. Over the sixteen years between the Brown decision and when the schools finally desegregated the school board worked to improve the facilities. However, this could not be enough. Under Plessy, improving the tangible factors would have been enough to satisfy the Supreme Court. With Brown, this was not enough because of the intangible factors such as blacks being treated as an inferior class. As the expert witness testified, separate schools for the races reinforced prejudice and discrimination in the community. This meant desegregation had to eventually occur in the Star City.

The Court's opinion relied heavily on evidence of the psychological effects of segregation. In the South Carolina case, Briggs v. Elliott, three psychologists, Kenneth Clark, David Drech, and Helen Trager, testified on behalf of the NAACP. Their study of segregated school systems' effects on black children led them to conclude that the discrimination, prejudice, and segregation that accompanied segregated school systems have a "detrimental effect" on "the child's concept of his own self-esteem - basic feelings of inferiority, conflict, confusion in his self-image, resentment, hostility toward himself, and hostility toward Whites." Likewise, psychologist M. Brewster Smith

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8 This study included 253 Black children. These children were presented a series of questions concerning their reactions to White and Black dolls. The 253 children included both students in segregated schools in the South and integrated schools in the North. The results showed that 67% of the children preferred to play with the White doll, 59% believed the White doll was the "nice" one, 60% thought the White doll was a nice color, and 59% believed the Black doll "looks bad" (Stephan, 11). However, children from the North chose the White doll more frequently for the first three questions (Stephan, 12). Thus, the study was actually quite inconclusive in addition to it having too small of a pool of subjects. Nevertheless, the study was helpful to the Court and helped Thurgood Marshall win the case.

testified that “The effects of segregation...help perpetuate the pattern of segregation and prejudice out of which these effects arise.” Thurgood Marshall, the African American lawyer who worked for the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund which had taken the Brown case, used the testimony of these psychologists to show that segregation made equal opportunity within the schools impossible.11

As a result, the Court’s decision cited the psychological and sociological effects of segregation on the African-American community. Warren concluded, “Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.” Desegregating schools would be the only way to break down society’s structure that made African Americans into second-class citizens. Therefore, the Court found that segregation “deprived [the black plaintiffs] of the equal protection of the laws guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.”12 The separate schools for the races could not meet the standard of equality guaranteed in the Constitution.

Black Roanoke and the Struggle for Educational Justice

The same day the US Supreme Court handed down its decision in Brown, the Roanoke City School Board held a meeting. Strangely, no one mentioned the Court’s decision. At their next meeting, held three weeks later, the School Superintendent included a letter from the State Board of Education that advised local school boards on the appropriate response to Brown: “The local Boards of Education are hereby advised to proceed as at present and for the school session 1954-55 to operate the public schools of

11 The Legal Defense Fund served as the legal branch of the NAACP.
12 Ibid.
this State on the same basis as they are now being operated and as heretofore obtained.\textsuperscript{13} Faced with a direct challenge to the "separate but equal" doctrine that had shaped southern life for almost six decades, the Roanoke School Board chose at first not to act.

Unlike the cities that have dominated the historiography of the Civil Rights Movement, Roanoke had a relatively small African American population and the schools serving this population were a fairly new addition to the school system. When the Supreme Court handed down the \textit{Brown} decision, several schools, including two high schools, one junior high school, and four elementary schools, served the black population of Roanoke. Despite the requirement that separate facilities be equal, these schools failed to live up to that standard. \textit{Brown}, itself, offered additional complexities because of the cautious language the Supreme Court used.

Black education in Roanoke began in the late 1800s during the Reconstruction era. The first black public school was built in 1872 as a one-room log building dubbed the Old Lick School. Three years later, the district school trustees provided the money for the black community to build a two-room structure to serve the growing number of black children wanting an education.\textsuperscript{14} This became known as the Fifth Ward Colored School. By 1892, the number of black children wanting an education had grown so that the school system rented two rooms in the Methodist Episcopal Church while awaiting the construction of a new building to serve as the school. This new school was initially called the Third Ward School, but was later renamed Gregory Elementary School. In 1898, Gainsboro School, initially named the Fifth Ward School, was built and served as

\textsuperscript{13} Minutes of the Roanoke, Virginia School Board, 7 June 1954, School Board Office, Roanoke, Virginia.

\textsuperscript{14} Workers of the Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the State of Virginia, \textit{Roanoke: Story of County and City} (Roanoke: Stone Printing and Manufacturing, 1942), 275.
Roanoke's second black Elementary School. A bond issue, voted on by the white citizens of Roanoke, paid for these improvements.

In 1916, Harrison Elementary School was built, and Lucy Addison, a black woman with more than thirty years of teaching experience in Roanoke's Gainsboro School, was named principal there in 1917. Harrison was able to offer one year of high school when Addison joined the faculty, but she organized and developed the program so that by 1924, Harrison's high school was accredited by the state and held the distinction of the largest black high school with a female principal in Virginia. In addition to her work in education, Addison served as the superintendent of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Sunday School, as president of the Burrell Memorial Hospital Association, and a member of the Board of Trustees of Burrell Memorial Hospital. As a result of this notable work in the city and her dedication to ensuring that all black children received a strong education, the board named the new high school built in 1928 for her. Addison died in 1937, but her legacy lives on in Roanoke today.

Between 1900 and 1954, seven schools educated black children in Roanoke. These included Gainsboro, Gregory, Harrison, and Lucy Addison. Additionally, there were Gilmer and Loudon Elementary Schools. Gilmer was built in 1885, but only served white children. In 1935, a new school was built for the white children, and the building was then used by black students from Gregory Elementary School whose building closed that same year. Loudon was also originally built in 1900 for white students, but when a new school was built for those students, the building was recycled as a school for black children.

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16 Workers of the Writers' Program, 285.
17 Shareef, 13-14.
children. In 1941, white schools were valued at $2,200,000, while the black schools were valued at only $330,000.\textsuperscript{18} The school board increased its distribution of funds to the black community some over the next ten years. The only other addition to Roanoke's black schools before 1954 was the opening of Booker T. Washington Junior High School in 1952. As the black population had grown in Roanoke, the Lucy Addison High School had outgrown its facility. Thus, in 1952, a new Lucy Addison High School was built and the Booker T. Washington School was housed in the old Addison building.\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{Washington Square Park}
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African-Americans living in Roanoke lived in both slums as well as diverse neighborhoods. Northeast Roanoke was home to many in the black community. An 83-acre slum was located in the Gainsboro neighborhood south of Washington Park. In 1954, Roanoke's city council began making plans for slum clearance of this particular neighborhood. Orange Avenue, which runs along the southern border of Washington Park, was also a black residential area. This too would be on the list for slum clearance by the end of the 1950s.\textsuperscript{20} Though there were these pockets of mainly African-Americans in a few neighborhoods, there were also some neighborhoods that held racially diverse populations spread throughout the city.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} Workers for the Writers' Program, 284.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Reginald Shareef, 14-22.
\item \textsuperscript{20} Clare White, \textit{Roanoke: 1740-1982} (Roanoke: Roanoke Valley Historical Society, 1982), 115.
\end{itemize}
On the eve of the *Brown* decision, it could hardly be argued that the facilities serving black children were equal to those serving white children. Many black schools were simply recycled white schools used once a newer, more modern facility was opened for the benefit of white children. Yes, there were more white students than black, but this system of inheriting the outgrown facilities no doubt created a feeling of inferiority that segregation thrived upon. Furthermore, the black schools did not receive adequate upkeep as is later evidenced by the number of requests for improvements to the black schools. The improvements were not minor by any means, and the black community did its best to encourage the school board to make the necessary improvements. The school board made sure to keep the schools separate, but keeping them equal was not a primary concern.

What improvements were made usually came only after the black community demanded them. These demands ranged from requests for improvements to the lavatories to the large-scale projects of building completely new schools. At the September 18\textsuperscript{th}, 1950 school board meeting, a large delegation from the black community led by Dr. L.E. Paxton voiced their concern over what they deemed “inexcusable delay” of planning and building the new Addison High School.\textsuperscript{21} In 1950, some improvements were made at Addison High School and old toilets were torn out and new ones were installed in Harrison high school.\textsuperscript{22} The black community continued to push for further improvements. In 1953 the Pastor of Jerusalem Baptist Church, Reverend William N. Hunter, appeared before the School Board on behalf of black citizens from the Southwest section of the city to demand a new elementary school. These children attended the

\textsuperscript{21} Minutes of the Roanoke, Virginia School Board, 18 September 1950, School Board Office, Roanoke, Virginia.
\textsuperscript{22} Minutes of the Roanoke, Virginia School Board, 23 January 1950, School Board Office, Roanoke, Virginia.
Loudon School, but would have been better served by a new elementary school that could have reduced overcrowding of the schools. Once again, the board failed to act.23 Later that year, Reverend Hunter and his delegation returned with more evidence. A survey made in 1952 revealed 897 African American children under the age of eighteen lived in the Southwest section of the city. In addition, African Americans had purchased between 75 and ninety homes since the completion of this survey. Considering there was no elementary school in the area for these children, Hunter “requested the board give serious consideration to the construction of a new elementary school.” However, the board continued to deny this request. This time the board cited a lack of funds for new buildings, and referred the matter to the superintendent “for study.”24

The Southwest section of Roanoke was not the only area needing improvement in 1953. In February, the President of the Harrison School PTA, George Lawrence, presented a list of fourteen requests for improvements and service for this school.25 In March, MP Calfee, representing a delegation from the Gainsboro PTA appeared before the board to plead for a new school in the area to replace the present Gainsboro school, which he described as “obsolete and a fire hazard,” in addition to ten other points of “inadequacy.” The Board replied that there were not enough funds for a new school, but that the delegates could at least begin searching for a new tract of land where the school could be built.26

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24 Minutes of the Roanoke, Virginia School Board, 19 October 1953, School Board Office, Roanoke, Virginia.
One of the worst problems presented to the board in 1953 concerned a city dump situated very close to two schools serving the black community. Both the new Lucy Addison High School and the Booker T. Washington Junior High School were located near Washington Park. This also put them within close proximity of a refuse dump in the old city quarry. The fumes from the dump were reportedly very disagreeable at each of the schools making for a poor learning environment. Dr. F.W. Claytor spoke on behalf of a delegation representing both of these schools and called the dump "a problem and health menace." The board expressed sympathy, but failed to act in any way other than to refer the matter to the superintendent to be referred to the city manager. The school board simply continually excused themselves from improving conditions at schools in the black community.

The black community actively pursued improvements to their schools prior to Brown. In Roanoke, the black community helped to build its own schools. Key figures from the community itself such as Lucy Addison shaped the black education system for the better as it grew. African American leadership constantly pressed the board for improvements. Overall, the black community was mobilized and Brown would merely provided another avenue through which to improve education in Roanoke for black students.

Roanoke's Reaction to the Civil Rights Cases

The school board continued to watch the reactions to Brown of politicians and other school systems as they unfolded around the rest of the state. By October, each

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member of the school board was on the mailing list of the *Southern School News*, “the official publication of the Southern Education Reporting Service...designed to provide accurate and unbiased information to school administrators and others on developments in education arising from the United States Supreme Court Opinion of May 17, 1954 declaring segregation in the public schools unconstitutional.” The newsletter would have kept the Roanoke City School Board abreast of how the rest of the state was reacting to *Brown*, but the school board itself was careful to not respond publicly to the ruling, presumably in order to avoid any controversy.

A little over a year after handing down the initial *Brown* decision, Warren delivered the opinion of the Court concerning its implementation. This became known as *Brown II* and it outlined how school systems should transition from a dual system model to a single, integrated system. The ruling empowered the federal courts “to consider whether the action of school authorities constitutes good faith implementation of the governing constitutional principles,” and to take appropriate action. The ruling also recognized the logistical and political complexities of desegregation. “Courts of equity may properly take into account the public interest in the elimination of such obstacles in a systematic and effective manner.” The Court acknowledges in this point through “public interest” how difficult desegregation would be in a society where segregation was ingrained as a part of daily life. The Court acknowledges that the effects of the case would not have a simple resolution, but implementation would mean a difficult process of overcoming discriminatory behavior in American society, both in public schools and in the general society.

The second *Brown* decision was frustratingly vague about the timeline of implementation. Though the ruling required “that the defendants make a prompt and reasonable start toward full compliance,” it did not give a specific schedule. Furthermore, once a school system began working towards compliance with *Brown*, the courts could “find that additional time is necessary to carry out the ruling in an effective manner.” Instead of defining this time, the Court only stipulated that the defendants comply at the “earliest practicable date” while taking into consideration items of the public interest such as school transportation, personnel, attendance areas, and the facilities themselves. At the end of the decision, Warren wrote that the school systems specifically noted in *Brown* desegregate “with all deliberate speed.”\(^{30}\) The ambiguity in this language would come to haunt the Court as Southern school systems worked to delay complying with the ruling. Though the Court by no means created the resistance, the haziness of the ruling certainly encouraged such behavior.

As Roanoke finished the 1954-55 academic year, the future of its school system remained unknown. The Supreme Court under Warren had officially ordered that segregated school systems cease to exist. However, the implementation process of such a decision would be difficult. Southern society had been grounded in a system of white supremacy for more than three centuries. Since society was ingrained with its segregated living, changing such a structure would affect more than schools. The ruling would open the door for other civil rights gains including challenging the foundations of white supremacy. However, the path was not easy because the South quickly began defending its societal structure and illustrating that desegregation would not be an easy task.

\(^{30}\) *Ibid.*
Chapter 2:

Resisting Brown in Roanoke

Like many Southern cities, Roanoke did not adjust easily to a desegregated social structure. Indeed, the school board and white community resisted the desegregation process. The all-white school board did all it could to stall desegregation, or avoid it altogether. Members of the white community openly defended racial segregation. In some areas of the state such as Norfolk or Charlottesville, massive resistance led to the closing of entire school districts. Although Roanoke was not as radical, its white residents did try to maintain segregated schools. As a result, in the decade following Brown, the city’s schools made little tangible progress towards desegregation.

Resistance at the Top

White Virginians’ fear of integration spawned massive resistance. Two years before the Brown decision, Attorney General and future governor J. Lindsay Almond, Jr. warned that integration “would destroy the public school system of Virginia as we know it today. That is not an idle threat." This thought stayed with Virginia’s leaders as the decade progressed. Senator Harry Byrd’s political machine all but controlled Virginia’s state politics, and due to this influence, determined the state’s response to the Court’s ruling for desegregation. Under the sway of Byrd and his minions, the state focused on delaying and resisting desegregation for as long as possible. After Brown, many white conservative Virginians supported these tactics, which prevented schools from

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2 Ely, 30.
desegregating in most areas of the state until the 1960's. In Roanoke, the school board would be able to resist integrating the school system until 1970.

Many Virginia whites complained that the black community was pushing for desegregation to occur too quickly. An editorial in the Richmond Times-Dispatch in the immediate aftermath of the Brown decision concludes: “Since the Supreme Court has rendered the antisegregation ruling which the NAACP leaders sought, those leaders can well afford not to try to push the white people of the South too fast and too hard. Yet they appear to be doing just this. It is not a happy augury.” The Roanoke Times ran a headline: “Negro Leaders Plot Strategy in Talks At Altanta Saturday.” The idea of the NAACP “plotting” was certainly a way for the newspaper to cast the NAACP lawyers in a negative light and work against the desegregation movement. Apparently, finally giving equal rights to blacks one hundred years after the Civil War was moving too quickly for some Virginians. Understandably, the change may have been astounding to those who had been used to dual school systems. However, complaints that the NAACP was pushing too hard seems only a way for whites to whine and delay the desegregation process.

Virginia’s political elite was bound and determined to resist integration. According to Senator Harry Byrd, the de facto leader of the Virginia Democratic Part, “If we can organize the Southern States for massive resistance to this order I think that in time the rest of the country will realize that racial integration is not going to be accepted in the South.” On the legal front, Byrd and his supporters revived the Civil War-era

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3 Richmond Times-Dispatch, 25 May 1954.
5 Harry Byrd as quoted in Ely, 43.
doctrine of "interposition." According to the advocates of interposition, a "state could nullify an unconstitutional act by the federal government within its boundaries."\(^6\) In the case of Brown, interposition denied the legitimacy of the Supreme Court’s ruling. As James Kilpatrick, the editor of the News Leader and a key figure in Virginia’s massive resistance movement wrote, "every State has a right to interpose its sovereignty, under certain circumstances, as a challenge and check against encroachment by the Federal government upon reserved powers of the States."\(^7\)

Virginia leaders helped to sell "massive resistance" to the rest of the South. Senator Byrd, for example, was one of the principal authors of the Southern Manifesto of March 12\(^{th}\), 1956, which asserted that the Supreme Court’s desegregation ruling was "a clear abuse of judicial power" and praised "those States which have declared the intention to resist forced integration by any lawful means."\(^8\) This recalcitrance at the top effectively positioned Virginia leadership for years of court battles and delaying tactics to avoid school desegregation. In 1956, Virginia’s General Assembly went into a special session and eventually produced legislation that would have nullified Brown if successfully applied.\(^9\)

The August 1956 segregation package included a provision to create a Pupil Placement Board. Under the new law, the Placement Board would have the power to place students at various schools and process school transfer requests. As such, the Board could create elaborate criteria for assigning students to different schools, thereby preventing much change in the demographics of public schools. Rather than a good faith

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\(^6\) Ely, 39.  
\(^7\) Kilpatrick as quoted in Ely, 39.  
\(^8\) "Declaration of Constitutional Principles" as quoted in Ely, 39.  
\(^9\) Ely, 44.
effort to comply with the *Brown* ruling, the new state agency instead allowed for increased opportunities for legal delays and permitted the state to exhaust all “administrative remedies” or state sponsored methods of resistance for *Brown*.\(^{10}\) Roanoke adopted this program soon after the legislature passed it into law. As a result, the Roanoke school board was able to use this form of massive resistance to delay desegregation by recommending to the state board whether a student should be able to transfer. With this power, the school board could prevent uncomfortable levels of desegregation. The program also served as one of the catalysts for the lawsuit, *Green v. School Board of Roanoke, Virginia*, that forced the school system to desegregate.

Governor J. Lindsay Almond, Jr. won the gubernatorial a few years later in 1958, having won on a massive resistance platform. For his first task, he organized a meeting of southern states to discuss integration and how to fight the Supreme Court’s ruling. The Southern Governors’ Conference — separate from this meeting — repeatedly avoided the topic of desegregation in its meetings during this time period.\(^{11}\) The idea of the Southern states meeting and agreeing to the same course of action appealed to many white Virginians. Such action would strengthen Virginia’s fight against the *Brown* decision. In his letter, H. Gordon Lewis of Roanoke writes, “I certainly hope that Virginia and the rest of the Southern States will get together and strongly fight for state rights and segregation, as we Southerners know this is the only way to be fair to both the white and the colored.”\(^{12}\) This meeting of southern governors, like the Southern Manifesto, represented a top-down, region-wide commitment to massive resistance.

\(^{10}\) *Ibid*, 45.

\(^{11}\) *Ibid*, 106.

\(^{12}\) Letter from H. Gordon Lewis to Governor J. Lindsay Almond, Jr., 13 January 1958, Roanoke. Governor J. Lindsay Almond, Jr.’s Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.
Other Virginians advocated amending the Virginia Constitution so that education was not compulsory. B.F. Pinkard of Roanoke argued this by encouraging Governor Almond in a letter to give Virginians a chance to vote to change the state’s constitution so that schools are not mandated and that integration cannot be enforced. Mr. and Mrs. B.F. Harvey of Staunton similarly advised Governor Stanley to “turn” the schools over “to private concerns” in order to preserve segregation. A.W. Powell encouraged Governor Albertis Harrison – Almond’s successor – to decline federal aid for Virginia schools so that the state’s schools could remain segregated. “I assure you that I will welcome higher State taxes, which I assume will be needed, and I will urge the members of our legislature from this area to fully support higher taxes to be used for school needs.” Elizabeth Graham of Roanoke wrote that desegregating schools would be “selling out” to the federal government, especially the Kennedy administration.

Kilpatrick favored allowing a city or county to end some or all public education if voted by public referendum. In order for this to occur, Kilpatrick suggested repealing Section 129 of the Virginia Constitution mandating a public school system, which would then legalize the privatization of education. If this had actually passed, the lower-income families would have felt tremendous negative effects due to the expense of paying tuition for private education. Kilpatrick’s second idea was a new form of state

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13 Letter from B.F. Pinkard to Governor J. Lindsay Almond, Jr., Roanoke, Governor J. Lindsay Almond, Jr.’s Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.
14 Letter from Mr. and Mrs. B.F. Harvey to Governor Thomas B. Stanley, Staunton, Governor Thomas B. Stanley’s Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.
15 Letter from Mr. A.W. Powell to Governor Albertis S. Harrison, Jr., Salem, Governor Albertis S. Harrison Jr.’s Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.
16 Letter from Miss Elizabeth A. Graham to Governor Albertis S. Harrison, Jr., Salem, Governor Albertis S. Harrison Jr.’s Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.
17 Ely, 88.
funded tuition grants that did not associate with segregation, integration, or closed schools, thereby providing an alternative to school desegregation.\footnote{Ibid.}

The courts systematically rejected these legal defenses of segregation. On January 19\textsuperscript{th}, 1959, “the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals and a three-judge federal district court declared the package of school closings laws unconstitutional.”\footnote{Ibid.} The court regained control of the situation by preventing politicians from continuing to lead massive resistance through legal means. However, Governor Almond was not about to give up the fight. The day after the ruling, “he delivered a blistering denunciation of integration and the federal courts and vowed to continue the struggle.”\footnote{Ibid, 89.} The fighting and delays only continued through his term as Governor which ended in 1962.

Egged on by their elected leaders, ordinary white Virginians too resisted integration. The court’s order, many feared, would undermine the bases of Southern society. For many, integration provoked visceral fear. Eighty-five year old white Roanoke resident Olive Goodman, for example, insisted that the black community’s motive for suing for integrated schools was to marry whites.\footnote{Goodman begins this letter with the phrase: “I am 85 years old [and] never talked to a Negro...” Olive C. Goodman to Governor J. Lindsay Almond, Jr., 11 August 1958, Roanoke, Governor J. Lindsay Almond, Jr.’s Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.} This fear of “mongrelization” reached a fever pitch throughout the South in the wake of the \textit{Brown} decision. The Defenders of State Sovereignty and Individual Liberties – a group that developed to support massive resistance efforts throughout Virginia – wrote to Governor Harrison condemning any individual or organization “actively advocating miscegenation,” warning “that racial integrity of a family or nation once lost is lost
forever."\textsuperscript{22} Society for white conservative Virginians was transforming too quickly because of Brown’s progressive precedent, and these citizens deplored it.

Many Virginians believed that the Federal government was infringing on their basic freedoms. Ella Robertson of Roanoke wrote, “Forced mixing is, in actual fact, the Government choosing the friends for the little children of ‘free’ American citizens.”\textsuperscript{23} Convinced that the Supreme Court had taken away the rights of white citizens, and unconcerned with the rights of black Americans, men and women across the white South mobilized to protect and defend their own interests and “rights.” The logic of free choice as Robertson defines it only benefits white Roanoke residents. Robertson only defends the interests of whites, and she expects her government to do the same. Historian C. Vann Woodward explained, “all over the South the lights of reason and tolerance and moderation began to go out under the resistance demand for conformity.”\textsuperscript{24}

White Virginians across the state feared desegregation and often supported their arguments favoring segregated schools with reference to their understanding of Christian teaching. Fearful of “mongrelization,” white Virginians wrote to their elected officials, including the Governor, and protest the Supreme Court ruling. Robertson, for example, reminded the Governor that “God made the different races, and set them apart to live on different parts of the globe. If He had wanted them all to be alike, I think He would have made them alike in the first place.”\textsuperscript{25} The Harvey family wrote similar thoughts a few years prior: “The Lord Almighty made us white. If He had intended us mixing He would

\textsuperscript{22} Letter from the Executive Committee of the Defenders of State Sovereignty and Individual Liberties to Governor Albertis S. Harrison, Jr., Salem, Governor Albertis S. Harrison Jr.’s Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

\textsuperscript{23} Ella V. Robertson to Governor J. Lindsay Almond, Jr., Roanoke, Governor J. Lindsay Almond, Jr.’s Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.

\textsuperscript{24} C. Vann Woodward, as quoted in Lassiter, 31.

\textsuperscript{25} Ella V. Robertson to Governor J. Lindsay Almond, Jr., Roanoke, Governor J. Lindsay Almond, Jr.’s Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.
have at the beginning of the world."\textsuperscript{26} "When God has drawn a line of distinction,"
televangelist Jerry Falwell told his viewers in a sermon in 1958, "we should not attempt
that line."\textsuperscript{27}

During Governor Almond's tenure, the Virginia legislature proposed a bi-racial
committee to problems associated with desegregation. Both white and black clergy
supported this committee. Pastor John E. Davis, Jr. of Mount Pleasant Methodist Church
in Roanoke wrote to Governor Almond, "I respectfully request your support to the
proposed legislation calling for a study of inter-racial problems in Virginia. My prayer is
that you shall, as the leader of the people of Virginia, be attuned to Divine Guidance in
all matters placed before you."\textsuperscript{28} Minister John Wynn Myers of Greene Memorial
Methodist Church in Roanoke wrote, "We are grateful for all that is being done for the
colored people of our State." He goes on to lend his support to the establishment of a bi-
racial committee to study inter-racial problems.\textsuperscript{29} However, having the support of
churches did not necessarily affect the outcome of decisions or proposals made by this
committee. It simply allowed for conversation in a political setting.

White Virginians saw segregation as integral to their past, present, and future.
Convinced that Jim Crow and dual segregated school systems were a defining
characteristic of Southern society, Virginians rose up in defense of their cherished
traditions. In the Southern Manifesto, Southern politicians declare that segregation was "a

\textsuperscript{26} Letter from Mr. and Mrs. B.F. Harvey to Governor Thomas B. Stanley, Staunton, Governor Thomas B.
Stanley's Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.
\textsuperscript{27} Falwell was also known for making statements against Martin Luther King, Jr., such as "Preachers are
not called to be politicians, but soul winners." For more, see Blumenthal's article; Jerry Falwell,
"Segregation or Integration: Which?" 1958, as quoted in Max Blumenthal, "Agent of Intolerance," 16 May
\textsuperscript{28} Pastor John E. Davis, Jr. to Governor J. Lindsay Almond, Jr., Roanoke, Governor J. Lindsay Almond,
Jr.'s Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.
\textsuperscript{29} John Wynn Myers to J. Lindsay Almond, Jr., Roanoke, Governor J. Lindsay Almond, Jr.'s Papers,
Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.
part of the life of the people of many of the States and confirmed their habits, traditions, and way of life." Some like L.H. Irby saw the battle against desegregation as defining for the country. "The eyes of the Nation are upon Virginia and its leaders. Our success in preventing integration is the South’s last hope. I respectfully request you to immediately exhort the Virginia Pupil Placement Board to act." Irby inadvertently unmasks the Pupil Placement Program for what it was in this letter. The program was not a good faith effort to comply with *Brown*, but a desperate effort to evade its mandates.

Other white Virginians simply voted with their feet, abandoning the city of Roanoke and its schools for the safety of the racially-homogenous suburbs. According to a study by sociologists Pamela Smock and Franklin Wilson, whose study of white flight includes Roanoke, the mere threat of integration was enough to make many parents withdraw children from a school. In Atlanta, white flight occurred on a more dramatic scale as more than 1600 white students left the city school system for the suburbs in only one academic year. As desegregation progressed in the city, white neighborhoods “self-destructed” as white families fled to what racially-homogenous neighborhoods that they perceived were safer and would offer better educational opportunities for their children.

The numbers in Roanoke do show a fairly dramatic shift in the demographics. In 1960, the population in the city of Roanoke had grown from its 1950 level to 97,110 – a growth of about 5,000. Meanwhile, in the county, the population had nearly doubled from

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31 Telegram via Western union from L.H. Irby to Governor J. Lindsay Almond, Jr., Blackstone, Governor J. Lindsay Almond, Jr.’s Papers, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia.
33 *Ibid*, 165.
14,761 in 1950 to 27,642.\textsuperscript{35} Then, in 1970, the population in the city of Roanoke decreased by 5.1 percent — down to 92,115. Meanwhile, the county’s population increased 9.2 percent to 67,339.\textsuperscript{36} Clearly, over the period of twenty years, the population was shifting from urban to suburban. The Big Lick District, Catawba District, and Vinton Town District of the county — the districts closest to the city limits — experienced the largest growth of any of the other districts during the period from 1960 to 1970. In fact, Catawba went from a population of 2,390 in 1960 to 21,440 in 1970. Big Lick grew from 13,901 in 1960 to 17,349 in 1970. Vinton Town held a population of 3,432 in 1960, but had a population of 6,347 by the end of the decade.\textsuperscript{37}

Within the city limits, the demographics of the city changed as well. In 1960, the white population numbered at 80,568. Meanwhile, the “non-white” population was a mere 16,542.\textsuperscript{38} By 1970, the white population had shrunk to 74,167 — nearly an eight percent decrease within the city limits. Meanwhile, the “Negro” population in the city had grown to 17,784 — a 7.5 percent increase. The overall population in the county had increased 9.2 percent from 1960 to 67,339 people.\textsuperscript{39} Such a drop in the white population matched by an increase in the size of the black community and an increase in the overall population of suburban neighborhoods suggests that the white community responded to \textit{Brown} and the potential of desegregated schools by leaving the city and relocating to areas with larger white majorities.

\textsuperscript{35} 1960 United States Census
\textsuperscript{36} 1970 United States Census
\textsuperscript{37} 1960 and 1970 United States Census
\textsuperscript{38} 1960 United States Census
\textsuperscript{39} 1970 United States Census
Roanoke County

Above: Contemporary map shows Roanoke County with the city limits of Roanoke and Salem outlined in gray. Districts such as Cave Spring, Vinton, and Catawba, all experienced population growth as white families moved to racially-homogenous neighborhoods where they believed they could provide their children with better educations. Source: http://www.weichert.com/images/counties/VA-Roanoke.gif

After the second Brown decision, the Roanoke school board made some improvements to black schools in what may have been a last, desperate effort to comply with Plessy and avoid the implementation of Brown. On April 18th, 1955, the school board received a request from the Star City Council for Retarded Children that “facilities be made available for the use of Negro retarded children in the vicinity of Roanoke.” Based upon this request, the school board recruited a teacher and had her trained – with the National Council for Negro Women covering the expenses – to teach these children. The class was then opened for the 1955-1956 academic year at the Harrison School with

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an expected enrollment of approximately ten pupils.\textsuperscript{41} In addition, the school board made motions to purchase more land adjacent to Addison High School for future growth.\textsuperscript{42} These small, necessary advances were among several examples of the school board making an effort to improve African American education in Roanoke. However, they were insignificant when the ultimate goal was desegregation, so the school board could not avoid Brown's effects.

In 1956, the Virginia General Assembly held a special session during which they passed the Pupil Placement Act. According to the new program's defenders, complete desegregation would impair the ability of Virginia schools to perform efficiently and successfully. Properly seen as a way to resist integration, the pupil placement program became a centerpiece of Massive Resistance and helped maintain segregated school systems for two more years.\textsuperscript{43} In March of 1957, the Roanoke City School Board received from the state board of education a description of the plan with instructions to begin partaking in it.\textsuperscript{44} As a result, Roanoke began its plans to establish in the Pupil Placement Program as a chance to join the rest of the state in resisting desegregation.

At the June 20\textsuperscript{th}, 1960, meeting, the Roanoke school board included the details of their pupil placement program in the minutes. The Superintendent "stated that the assignment of pupils is made by the State Pupil Placement Board, according to law and that in the past these applications have been processed as an administrative matter and

\textsuperscript{41} Minutes of the Roanoke, Virginia School Board, 20 June 1955, School Board Office, Roanoke, Virginia.
\textsuperscript{42} Minutes of the Roanoke, Virginia School Board, 9 January 1956, School Board Office, Roanoke, Virginia.
\textsuperscript{44} Minutes of the Roanoke, Virginia School Board, 18 March 1957, School Board Office, Roanoke, Virginia.
forwarded to the Pupil Placement Board.”\textsuperscript{45} In other words, when families of black students applied to attend a formerly all-white public school, their applications were forwarded to the state board, removing most of the responsibility from the local school board. However, this practice still failed to fulfill the requirements of desegregation outlined in the \textit{Brown} decision and would be challenged when \textit{Green} was filed in 1962. This means that the state law itself allowed for the state and Roanoke to illegally prolong segregated schools.

And black residents in Roanoke realized this. Reuben E. Lawson, the lawyer representing thirty students who wished to transfer to “non-segregated” schools, petitioned Dr. E.W. Rushton who was serving as the Superintendent of Roanoke City Public Schools. Lawson was a local lawyer affiliated with the Roanoke chapter of the NAACP. After assuring the superintendent of the “desire of all of these applicants to cooperate with you and the School Board of Roanoke, Virginia in any and all lawful ways in effectuating the process of desegregation in the City of Roanoke,” Lawson called on the Board “to take immediate steps to reorganize the public schools under your jurisdiction, so that children may attend them without regard to their race or color.”\textsuperscript{46} Referring to \textit{Brown}, Lawson reminded the Superintendent of his duty to “take immediate concrete steps leading to early elimination of segregation in the public schools.”\textsuperscript{47}

The Roanoke School Board ignored the petition – opting instead to blame the state government for any rejections of applications for pupil placement. Of the thirty students who applied for placement in white Roanoke schools, only nine students,

\textsuperscript{45} Minutes of the Roanoke, Virginia School Board, 20 June 1960, School Board Office, Roanoke, Virginia.
\textsuperscript{46} Minutes of the Roanoke, Virginia School Board, 20 June 1960, School Board Office, Roanoke, Virginia.
\textsuperscript{47} Minutes of the Roanoke, Virginia School Board, 20 June 1960, School Board Office, Roanoke, Virginia.
representing four families, were transferred. The motion of the state board read that only the applications of these nine students “are regarded by this Board as valid and reasonable.” It continued stating that “through the application of these criteria and standards the local school authorities are not in a position to legally oppose the following assignments and transfers.” The language of the ruling suggests that the local board would authorize the transfer of the students. In fact, the board was happy to blame the state law for the rejection.

And desegregation was still a distant goal for the black community in Roanoke. Massive resistance had succeeded, at least in the short term, in preventing southern schools from integrating. As time slipped into the 1960s, Roanoke was barely any closer to desegregation than before Brown. The Board had made a few improvements to the black facilities to make them closer in similarity to the white schools. A few examples of token desegregation occurred through the school board’s use of the Pupil Placement Program. Now that the black community had exhausted its means of challenging the school system’s dual school system, and resistance blocked any further progress, the community turned to the courts for assistance.

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Chapter 3: 
Desegregation through *Green*

In 1970, the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals issued a ruling that finally compelled Roanoke to desegregate its schools. Throughout the late 1950s and 1960s, the city’s black community had looked to the Courts for resolution to the desegregation crisis, exerting a great deal of political pressure from the grassroots. The white community, and the Roanoke school board, fought integration every step of the way. For eight years, the school board had sought to evade the *Brown* decision’s mandate, submitting several problematic resolutions to the courts for review over the eight years the case was in litigation. In the 1970 ruling, the court finally outlined a short timetable in which Roanoke Public Schools were to desegregate. The court delivered the ruling in June, and by August, the Roanoke school board was putting into effect a comprehensive plan for desegregation. This chapter follows the court battle from the time the lawsuit was first filed to the fateful summer of 1970 when the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals forced complete desegregation with the assistance of busing.

Arriving at *Green*

In November of 1960, after having helped get nine students into formerly all-white schools, Reuben Lawson, an African American attorney, sent a strangely worded letter of protest to the Roanoke City School authorities. The black children, only recently transferred to formerly all-white schools, had each paid $.25 to attend a concert held at a Roanoke school. On the day of the concert — after they had paid — these children found out that they would not be able to attend the event. The superintendent, Dr. E.W. Rushton
told the mother of one of the children that there “would be other affairs that Negro students would not be able to attend.”

Lawson accused school officials of “unlawful and illegal discrimination.” The school board brushed the incident off as a “misunderstanding” and put the blame on the “Roanoke Symphony Orchestra Society and others…” Lawson and the rest of the black community immediately realized that this was no misunderstanding. The school system openly discriminated against the black students who had transferred to majority white schools – and promised to do so again.

The School Board’s response did not satisfy Lawson or the families he represented. At the January 16th, 1961 school board meeting, the parents of the children prevented from attending the concert appeared to hold the school board accountable and to prevent similar problems in the future. As one black parent noted, “another concert is scheduled for February.” Once again, the board simply ducked its responsibility, and simply advised the Superintendent to “vigorously” pursue the matter. Unwilling to let the matter drop, Lawson again addressed the board on the matter a month later, admitting his frustration that he had not been kept “informed” on the issue. In the end, none of the children in the city’s schools were invited to the upcoming Roanoke Symphony Orchestra event, although the Roanoke County children had been invited. Although the black community failed to force the School Board to actively support an integrated event, this incident does speak to the ways in which the Brown decision had mobilized and

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politically the black community. Despite the School Board’s stonewalling, the parents of the affected children had hired counsel and were willing to push the school board for equality.

Frustrated in their attempts to move the Board, the black community turned to the courts. In 1962, Reverend Emmet L. Green filed suit on behalf of his daughter Cynthia asking the Court to require the School Board to transfer her to a majority white school. James M. Nabrit, III, a lawyer associated with the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund, represented the Greens and 27 other members of Roanoke’s African-American community. Other key civil rights figures filed briefs with the court, including Jack Greenberg of New York and Lawson who had been involved with these families from the beginning.⁵

According to the plaintiffs, the state Pupil Placement Board, and the city’s School Board had systematically denied black students’ requests to transfer to majority white schools. Through the lawsuit, the plaintiffs wanted the Court both to require the school board to transfer black students to white schools and to issue an injunction against the continued operation of racially segregated schools in the city, or at the least a plan for desegregation that could be implemented immediately. Despite the Board’s insistence that all placement decisions were made by the state through the Pupil Placement Board, the Court found that Roanoke City school officials made recommendations to the Pupil Placement Board concerning the assignment of every pupil in the city.⁶ Once a student was assigned to one section, that student remained there until they finished high school.

⁶ Ibid.
Once black students began elementary school at a segregated school, it was nearly impossible for them to transfer to an all-white school that would be in a different section.

Moreover, the Court realized these sections "serve[d] no specifically defined areas." Although school officials insisted that the initial assignments were based on a "neighborhood" system, the Court could find no map to support this claim. The Court could not find a relationship between the sections and the "geographical neighborhoods." What was more, no whites attended schools in section II – the section that served the majority of the black community. "In other words," the Court found, the so-called "neighborhood" served "by section II schools consists of the entire Negro community in the city." The court's findings stripped bare the school board's defense of both "neighborhood schools" and the pupil placement system.

Nor could the Board defend the process by which students had been denied transfers to historically all-white schools. The board had denied the first eleven for geographic reasons, claiming that these students lived closer to black schools than to white ones. However, the court found that at least one of the affected students lived a block closer to the white school and another lived equidistant between the white and black schools. The Board also claimed that many of the students had been rejected because their performance on aptitude and achievement tests had shown them to be in the "median of the comparable white classes." The school board refused to transfer the students due to the fear that they "would be failures." The Court rejected these arguments since no evidence supported the school board's claims.

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
Unconvinced by the Board’s arguments, the Circuit Court ruled that the city of Roanoke’s use of the pupil placement program, as well as its practice of school assignments, violated existing precedent which held that school assignments could not be based “in whole or in part on considerations of race.”\(^{10}\) The Court further stated that the pupil assignment system in effect in the city was “infected throughout with racially discriminatory applications of assignment criteria.” Nor could the School Board claim – as education officials had done in other areas throughout the South – that the pupil placement system was a temporary measure to be lifted when a full-scale desegregation plan could be put into effect. Indeed, the Court could find no evidence that the Roanoke school board had even begun to consider such a desegregation plan. Instead, black students were simply facing “hurdles to which a white child, living in the same area as the Negro and having the same scholastic aptitude, would not be subjected.”\(^{11}\) The Court found that Roanoke maintained a dual school system based upon race in complete violation of the *Brown* decisions.

Finding in favor of the appellants, the court ordered the city to formulate a plan for desegregation, advising city officials that “any such plan” must “provide for immediate steps looking to the termination of the discriminatory practices ‘with all deliberate speed’ in accordance with a specified time table.”\(^{12}\) Despite the Court’s clear directive, the superintendent and school board continued to delay desegregation. The school board only slowly formulated and sent plans for desegregation to the Court. These plans included many of the same desegregation proposals that had already failed to meet the court’s requirements, including minority to majority transfers.

\(^{10}\) *Ibid.*
\(^{11}\) *Ibid.*
As the court battle wore on, the black community continued to challenge these plans in the courts, refusing to accept anything but full desegregation. In March 1965, Reverend Isaac Lester and Reverend R.R. Wilkinson addressed the city school board to demand just, "just, positive and immediate action." Unless such action were "thrown" their "way," the two men pledged "under the guidance of God to do what we feel is necessary to bring about such action." In response to their speeches, the Superintendent simply stated that planned additions and improvements to the schools in Section II had been delayed because of inadequate funds. These delaying tactics continued for another eight years.

Towards a Resolution

By 1969, the Roanoke City School Board was congratulating itself for a job well done. At a school board meeting in 1969, the board adopted a resolution that noted the progress the city schools had made on the civil rights front. By September 1st, 1966, the board had completely implemented a grade-by-grade desegregation plan. In 1967, the two "local teachers' professional groups," merged. These groups had once been segregated on a racial basis, but according to the resolution, they were now "working cooperatively as one organization." The Board also pointed to its sponsorship of a summer workshop to assist teachers in the "understanding and teaching of all children in a desegregated school system." As a result the school system claimed it had made positive steps towards desegregation.

The school board also claimed it needed assistance with desegregation and time to prepare the social climate in Roanoke residents, both black and white, for change. These preparations meant further delay. In 1968, “a committee of the school administration and professional staff began work to develop a curricular guide from improvement of social studies in the field of Negro history.” That same year, the School Board “requested the Consultative Resource Center on School Desegregation at the University of Virginia to assist the Board in completing a comprehensive plan for school desegregation.”\(^\text{15}\) Furthermore, by this time, all extracurricular activities such as athletics were offered on “an interracial and nondiscriminatory basis.”\(^\text{16}\) The Board did have evidence of moving to a desegregated school system.

Board members believed they must let their white constituents know what exactly was soon to occur in Roanoke because of the court case. According to the newly elected superintendent, the “Board had not communicated to these citizens just what its determination is in this matter [desegregation].”\(^\text{17}\) The Board responded to this challenge the following Spring, by issuing a resolution that traced the history of desegregation in Roanoke schools. The Board also highlighted “Operation Insight,” “an in-service education course planned by the school administration in cooperation with other agencies, [that] enrolled over 400 teachers [during 1968 and 1969]. Each of the thirteen weekly televised course programs was followed by small group discussions emphasizing the problems of poverty and prejudice among the different races.”\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{17}\) Minutes of the Roanoke School Board, 25 February 1969, Roanoke, Virginia.
The Final Ruling

On May 6th, 1970, the court heard the case Cynthia D. Green et al. v. School Board of the City of Roanoke, Virginia, et al, for the final time. Green, other appellants, and the larger black community in Roanoke had grown tired of the constant delay.

Sixteen years after the original Brown decision and ten years into litigation, the Roanoke school board still seemed to be stalling. Meanwhile, the Court had consistently struck down the city’s desegregation plans for their failure to effectively integrate the schools. Although some schools, including “Monroe Junior High School” with its “364 Negros” and “866 whites” could be called “fully integrated,” the city had not yet achieved a “unitary school system.” Finally at this spring, 1970 date, the Court at last resolved the case and forced Roanoke to completely integrate its public schools immediately by submitting “a new plan for achieving a unitary school system by July 15, 1970.”

The Court’s ruling in Green built on and resembled similar rulings in other desegregation cases. In 1969, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals had ruled decisively against the continuation of dual school systems. In the Mississippi case, Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education, the Court ordered that the Board of Education create a “unitary school system for all eligible pupils without regard to race or color,” and pledged to monitor actively the progress toward a unitary school system.

The Court also looked to Green v. County School Board of New Kent County. In this case, the US Supreme Court struck down any form of pupil placement. Decided on May 27th, 1968, the Supreme Court’s Ruling found that despite the area’s pupil placement program, 85 percent of black children still attended the county’s all-black
school. According to the majority opinion, written by Justice Brennan, the state, "acting through the local school board and school officials, organized and operated a dual system, part ‘white’ and part ‘Negro.’... It was such dual systems that, fourteen years ago Brown I held unconstitutional, and, a year later, Brown II held must be abolished." In other words, New Kent County’s “freedom of choice” plans did not “effectuate a transition” to a unitary system.21

That same year, in Monroe v. Board of Commissioners of City of Jackson, Tennessee, the Court had found that “freedom of choice plans” failed to desegregate school systems. Indeed, according to the Court’s Monroe ruling, these plans actually prolonged segregation because white students were not going to switch schools through this plan, and only a scattering of black students were sent to white schools.22 The court’s decision went even further by requiring the School Board to draw school zones in a way that would ensure full – rather than token – integration. For Roanoke, this meant that the school system needed to draw school zones so that each would be fully desegregated, not necessarily based on neighborhoods.

The most significant desegregation case “controlling” the Court’s ruling in Roanoke’s Green case was Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education. Throughout the 1960s, the city of Charlotte, North Carolina – which had long prided itself on its racial moderation – and its school board had fought to protect neighborhood schools as the best approach to providing quality education.23 The defense of neighborhood schools allowed local school board members to avoid taking responsibility for a school system that remained segregated. What segregation remained, Board

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21 Green v. County School Board of New Kent County, Supreme Court of the United States, 27 May 1968.
22 Monroe v. Board of Commissioners, Supreme Court, 27 May 1968.
23 Lassiter, 135.
members claimed, could be traced to residential choices, rather than to the law.  

This defense of neighborhood schools had a hollow ring. As Judge James B. McMillan of the federal district court noted, "when racial segregation was required by law, nobody evoked the neighborhood school theory to permit black children to attend white schools close to where they lived....The neighborhood school theory has no standing to override the Constitution." Because the neighborhood defense no longer worked, and in fact reinforced existing patterns of educational segregation that followed patterns of residential segregation, the Swann decision required the Charlotte school board to implement a new and radical plan in order to effectively desegregate by ordering busing between various school districts in the metropolitan Charlotte area.

Indeed, by the late 1960s, busing seemed the only way to overcome well-entrenched residential segregation. In his decision, Judge McMillan argued, "the quality of public education should not depend on the economic or racial accident of the neighborhood in which a child's parents have chosen to live - or find they must live - nor on the color of his skin." Claiming that "there is no reason except emotion to oppose busing," the judge ordered that the school board produce a plan that would include such a remedy. This case in turn created the precedent for busing as a tool for school systems

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24 Postwar GI bill benefits, in combination with Depression-era housing programs, such as the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) helped to underwrite the housing boom of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Such programs caused a growth of the suburbs where affordable housing was readily available for the growing middle class - most of whom were white. This led to the racialization of metropolitan space. For more information, see Self and Sugrue.


26 Ibid, 137.

27 Ibid. Interestingly, Swann was moving through the Courts at the same time that the Court reached its final decision in the Green case ordering the Roanoke schools to fully desegregate. It was not until August 3rd, 1970 that Judge McMillan ruled that Charlotte's proposed two-way busing plan was "expressly found to be reasonable." Of course, the white residents in Charlotte resisted this ruling and appealed to the US Supreme Court. The Court's ruling was split though it did agree with McMillan's ruling. The reason for the split decision was that the case instituted Affirmative Action and approved using busing as a remedial tool for desegregating a school system. Some justices such as Warren Burger wanted to follow the Nixon
to use while desegregating so that racially divided neighborhoods did not hinder the process.

Meanwhile, as the courts established legal precedent, the Roanoke school board and Fourth Circuit Court negotiated the terms of city's desegregation plan. Over the course of eight years, the school board submitted several plans and the court subsequently found it impossible to approve them. Each plan the board submitted retained elements far too similar to segregationist institutions such as pupil placement. As these negotiations continued and the school system still did not desegregate, the black community grew frustrated. Finally under pressure from the black community, and with legal precedent supporting their ruling, the court was ready to make a final decision and force Roanoke to completely desegregate.

The Fourth Circuit reached much the same decision in the Green case as Judge McMillan did in the Charlotte case. After considering legal precedent, and well aware of the continued inequalities apparent in the city of Roanoke's school system, the Fourth Circuit ruled in favor of the complainants with five specific directions. First, the court set the district court with the responsibility of directing "the school board to prepare and file a new plan for achieving a unitary school system by July 15th, 1970." The plaintiffs would review the plan and file objections by July 22nd. The Circuit Court also demanded that the plan being designed over the summer of 1970 would be implemented in the fall for the start of the new school year. The fifth point directed the school system to desegregate the faculty. The ratio of black teachers to white teachers at each school was administration's anti-busing platform; others fully supported McMillan's Plan. This latter side won the majority opinion, but attempted to compromise with the justices who opposed busing. The result was an oddly worded ruling that still reaffirmed McMillan's lower court order. Despite the ambiguity, this case would reinforce the use of busing in Roanoke, even though it was decided after the Star City had instituted the tool.
ordered to reflect the total ratio of black teachers to white teachers in the entire school
system. 28 The Court outlined a fast-track schedule for the city of Roanoke in order that
the school system could quickly desegregate both its students and faculty.

Most important of the five points of instruction was the fourth directive. In this
point, the school board was ordered to “explore every reasonable method of
desegregation, including rezoning, pairing, grouping, school consolidation, and
transportation, including a majority to minority transfer plan.” In other words, the Court
was willing to accept any method of reaching a unitary school system. In fact, the Court’s
decision mirrored the decision in Swann by endorsing, “any and all reasonable means to
dismantle the dual system and eliminate racial characteristics in the Roanoke schools.”
Setting a tight time schedule, and pledging to hold the Roanoke school system
responsible for failing to meet these deadlines, the Fourth Circuit mandated that “no
person is to be effectively excluded from any school because of race or color.” 29 Busing,
new zones that were not necessarily based upon neighborhoods, and the consolidation of
schools became acceptable as tools for the city of Roanoke to fully desegregate.

The school board could see the proverbial writing on the wall and acted
immediately to comply with Court’s ruling. At a special meeting of the school board on
August 14th, 1970, the city of Roanoke adopted a resolution that effectively desegregated
the school system. 30 Ironically, despite acting on a slow pace towards desegregation for
the previous ten years, Roanoke was able to quickly put together a plan for desegregation
that the complainants in the Green case could approve. After moving so slowly for so

28 Cynthia D. Green, et al. v. The School Board of the City of Roanoke, Virginia, et al., United States Court
29 Ibid.
30 Resolution of the Roanoke City School Board, 14 August 1970.
long, the school system moved surprisingly quickly under pressure. In a flurry of action during the short span of two months, the school system managed to prepare itself to operate a unitary school system beginning in the fall of 1970.

**Roanoke Desegregates**

The schools at last opened on a desegregated basis in September of 1970. Area newspapers closely followed the first days of school, watching for how the schools, the children, and the parents would act. “It was thought that some white parents in the Westwood-Wilmont Farms area, who feel their children should be assigned to the new Ruffner Junior High, might boycott Monroe but most students apparently were there today.”

Busing worked fairly well, though students attending Monroe did not realize there would be three buses and therefore squeezed into two, making them crowded. After ten years stuck in the legal system the schools desegregated without any incident – the worst problem coming from disorganization rather than racial conflicts.

Lucy Addison High School received the most attention considering its history as the black high school in Roanoke. “Lucy Addison High School, all-black since it was built nineteen years ago, is expecting more than 400 white students with a minority of 250 blacks.” But when the bell rang on the first day of school, all students “walked in, orderly, quietly.” The students were met by Charles Day, the black principal, shaking hands and signs on the walls stating “Let’s Get Together Again,” and “Addison Is A

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33 Chamberlain.
34 Gilliland and Atkin.
Place of Peace.” In the Roanoke Times, Joe Gilliland and Jerrie Atkin captured the importance of that first day. They note how Lucy Addison High School had only remained open because of a federal court order, was located in “the heart of Roanoke City’s black core,” and it was at last opening to students of all races. Despite years in court fighting, the school day was marked simply by “kids going to school. Together.”

Eight years after litigation began, the public schools in the city of Roanoke at last opened on a desegregated basis without any dramatic event – the black community had won their fight for a desegregated school system.

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36 Gilliland and Atkin.
Epilogue:

“Smooth as Silk:” Roanoke as a Desegregated School System

“Smooth as silk,” said one school administrator on the first day Roanoke schools were fully desegregated. After a long journey and a frustrating court battle, the school system desegregated peaceably. The new principal of Roanoke’s Patrick Henry High School, Edward Boley, commented, “The mechanics of integration are easy. It’s the long pull that counts.” Roanoke had certainly made the process a “long pull,” sixteen years of delays, the last eight in court, the school system integrated the schools without violence, making the final chapter in desegregation smooth and successful, albeit long delayed. The black community’s grassroots movement ending in litigation in Federal courts finally destroyed Roanoke’s dual school system. The court forced the Roanoke school board to desegregate its schools completely. Each of the schools in the district now had a student population that reflected the general population – majority white, minority black. The victory was possible because of the dedication of the black community that consistently pushed the school board to improve the educational system for black students in the city.

Brown served as the turning point in the civil rights movement in Roanoke and created the precedent for Green. The lawsuit forced the white community to face the problems of a segregated society, and helped the black community win its campaign for equal rights. The case overturned more than fifty years of legal segregation and opened the door for desegregation throughout the country. It also led to a mass of litigation attacking segregation. The court’s action in Brown and other civil rights cases forced the white South to alter its traditional social system – something that was difficult for many

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whites to accept and many chose to resist the ruling. In Virginia, the Byrd machine created massive resistance, but the Pupil Placement Program, school closings, and calls for interposition could not change the landmark Supreme Court decision.

The Affects of Desegregation in Roanoke

As a black teacher transferred to a nearly all-white elementary school in 1968, Glenice Cottman recalls that she had to earn the white population's respect during her first year before she was truly accepted. Her first action was to sit down with the principal, Leon Coleman, and ask for no favoritism, but simply to be treated fairly. Then, one white parent sent her a set of math problems to test whether she was fit to be a teacher. Cottman solved the problems and sent them back to the parent with a note: "Dear Mr. Vaughan, I am happy that I was able to work these problems out for you. Even though I am not a 7th grade teacher, I am teaching the 3rd grade, and I did not realize that you could not work problems on this level. And I am glad that I was able to help you." After this incident, Cottman did not face any more difficulties from parents or the community.

As a part of the desegregation plan, the Roanoke school board implemented a busing system. In section (g) of the 1970 school board resolution desegregating the schools, the board authorized the use of school resources for "free transportation" for "each and every student in a 'non-integrated' school who desires to attend the nearest or most convenient 'integrated' school or school attended by another race." Earlier in the resolution, the board promised to transport "free of charge" students in order to achieve

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3 Glenice Cottman, Interview by Daisy Ball, 27 September 2004.
4 Ibid.
5 1970 Resolution of the School Board of Roanoke, Virginia.
integration. The school board pledged, “Transportation routes will be established for these students with adult supervision on busses will be provided for the first two or three weeks of school in order to ensure a thorough and calm orientation of these students to their new school.” This two-way busing was necessary because at least two schools in 1969 were still untouched by Roanoke’s other attempts at desegregation. After implementing busing, the school system reached full integration…at least for a little while.

During the next few years, the school system consolidated as the city of Roanoke continued to see a drop in its white population. Nancy Guynn, a former resident of Roanoke who was enrolled in the school system during desegregation remembers that by 1973, the school system closed Lucy Addison High School and then did the same to Jefferson High School the following year. This left William Fleming and Patrick Henry High Schools as the two school clusters within the public school system. Over time, the schools have partially re-segregated as busing ended and the white population settled in the county more often than the city. Fleming has the larger black population, while Henry has more white students. Today, the city’s population is 69.4 percent white and 26.7 percent black, while the county is 91.1 percent white and 5.6 percent black. Guynn commented, “There was ‘white flight’ and most of the Roanoke County Schools are primarily white.” The present school system includes 24 schools consisting of seventeen elementary schools, five middle schools, and two high schools.

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6 Ibid.
7 Nancy Guynn, Former Resident of Roanoke, Virginia, Interview on 16 May 2010.
8 Ibid.
10 Nancy Guynn.
Final Thoughts

Understanding Roanoke's desegregation process is like understanding many of the most important segments of America's desegregation. The small city in the middle of otherwise rural southwestern Virginia serves as a microcosm for desegregation in other areas. There were of course no riots or school closings like Atlanta or Prince Edward County – these were the exceptions, not the rule. Instead, Roanoke is a strong example of what often occurred around the South. The white population stubbornly resisted integration. The black community organized, and with the help of the NAACP, attacked segregation as an institution. Through a combination of this community's resolve and the progressive attitudes of the Courts, the segregated system of public education finally crumbled.
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