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THE LANGSTON SCHOOL EXPERIENCE: THE BLACK COMMUNITY

A Designated Paper

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Richard M. Keener
Richard M. Keener, Director
Archives of Appalachia

by
Harold G. Handy
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The Langston School Experience: The Black Community

Purpose. The main purpose of this study is to trace and explain the events which led to integration in the public school system of Johnson City, Tennessee, between the years 1961-65.

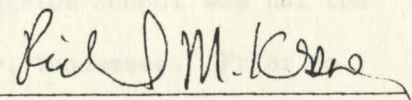
Procedure. Using the sources from the Johnson City Press-Chronicle, Johnson City School Board, and Science Hill School the issue of integration is traced in detail.

Summary and Conclusion. The issue of abolishing compulsory segregation in Johnson City, Tennessee, public school system was a gradual process despite the ruling of the Supreme Court in 1954.

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Johnson City



Richard M. Kesner, Director
Archives of Appalachia

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

With the establishment of the John N. Langston School, Black public education began in Johnson City, Tennessee, in 1892. "The city named the school after a noted Black Virginia lawyer and legislator."¹ The Langston School was a brick building erected at Myrtle Avenue and Elm Street. Concurrently, the building committee constructed two additional schools.

It secured a building site on Myrtle Avenue and New Street, on which was erected a brick school building. It was named the Martha Wilder School. Another site was secured on Pine and Roan Streets where a second school for white children was constructed. ²It has been called the Columbus Powell School from the beginning.

Prior to the inception of Black public schooling in Johnson City, Tennessee, Black school children went to a cottage on Roan Hill. "In this one room house students in grades first through tenth received instructions. Mr. Spurgeon served as the lone, Black instructor."³ Subsequently, when Langston opened in 1892, Blacks were schooled there. The founding of the Langston School was not the beginning of public education in Johnson City, Tennessee. Prior to the founding of Langston for the Black population, Science Hill

¹Interview with Mrs. Mamie Wilson, July 5, 1890.

²Cordelia Pearl Archer, "A History of the Schools of Johnson City, Tennessee, 1868-1950 (Master's Thesis, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee, 1954), p. 28.

³Interview with Mrs. Mamie Wilson, July 5, 1980.

School, established in 1867, served as the beginning of a public system of education for the White population of Johnson City, Tennessee.

In less than a decade after the founding of the Langston School, the Black school population rapidly increased. To address the needs of this growing school population, located in the western part of the town, a three-room building was erected at Elmo Street and West Chilhowie Avenue in 1902.

In 1915, the new Woolwine building was enlarged to include five rooms, an office, and a kitchen. About the same time, the name was changed to Dunbar. A brick grammar school for Negroes, for which D. R. Beeson was architect, was built in 1922. It was located in the Carnegie area and was named the Douglass School in honor of Frederick Douglass.⁴

The founding of Dunbar and Douglass Schools for the Black school population still left a miniscule number of Black school children living near Roan Hill with the task of walking a long distance to one of the three Black schools. The all-White school board building committee reported that, "there are approximately thirty Negro pupils living over on and near Roan Hill, who are under the necessity of walking a long distance to the present Negro school building be provided for those pupils, to cost about . . . \$2500."⁵ The members of the Johnson City School Board did not immediately act on the building committee's report. In the view of board members, the construction of a two-room building was more than the School Board could bear. The board members had temporarily ignored the building committee's report

⁴Archer, op. cit., p. 48. Frederick Douglass was a black abolitionist.

⁵Minute Book of the Board of Education, November 8, 1923.

for almost two years.

On October 2, 1925, the Johnson City Board of Education met at the residence of Jim Brown, a Black resident, for resolving the situation of the Black students living on Roan Hill. The members of the Board of Education decided to open a school at the Jim Brown cottage with some repairs, as soon as possible. It is not known whether the cottage was purchased by the city or Jim Brown gave the cottage to the city. The Board assigned the new "Roan Hill" School to be used as an elementary school for Black children. The school was opened in the fall of 1925, with classes for grades one through four. The Roan Hill School was in use until 1941. In that year the school closed, and the Board of Education provided transportation for the students to Dunbar School.

Thus, Black education in Johnson City began with the founding of a cottage on Roan Hill for grades one through tenth. With the founding of the John N. Langston School, however, Black public education in Johnson City, Tennessee, began in 1892. With the increasing Black school population in the early twentieth century, additional schools for Blacks were constructed. These schools included Dunbar, Douglass, and the Roan Hill School. Within almost a quarter of a century, the foundation for Black public education in Johnson City, Tennessee, began. The foundation of Black public education in the South, however, predates the establishment of the Langston School by more than a quarter of a century. As an introduction, a brief account of the evolution of Black public education in the South may prove useful.

The legacy of Black public schools in the South began during and

after the Civil War. Between the years 1863-1865, proposals were being made which would set in motion a more permanent institution of Black public education in the South. Significant among those proposals were an act creating the Agency of the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands. This act was passed by Congress one month before the close of the Civil War. General O. Howard, the first commissioner appointed by President Lincoln, mapped out a program of health, legal rights, and education for the new freedman. Besides the effect of the union government, benevolent societies and the freedmen themselves provided financial resources to meet the consequence. In order for such a system to continue, however, permanent support for Black education had to come from public funds.

The years 1865-1867 marked the beginnings of Reconstruction under Lincoln and Johnson. The lenient Reconstruction policy of both Lincoln and Johnson allowed Southerners the power to exercise control over Black education which exceeded the scope of tolerance set by Congress. As a result Southern governors, legislators, and constitutional conventions enacted Black Codes which struck at the 13th, and 14th Amendments. Such codes placed obstacles in Blacks' quest for educational opportunity.

In 1867, the period of benign Presidential Reconstruction ended. Thereafter, more vindictive Congressional Reconstruction toward the South replaced the conciliatory efforts of the Executive Branch of the Federal Government. The old leadership of the South was thrown out of and barred from office. All the Southern states except Tennessee and Kentucky set up new governments and new state constitutions.

The new state governments were now composed of Blacks, newly arrived Northerners who came South, and Southerners who aligned themselves with the Republican party. Congressional Reconstruction in a sense gave Blacks the political power to write some of their aims in the various reconstructed states. The establishment of a system of public education received welcome support from the new state constitutional conventions. During Congressional Reconstruction, each Southern state made three important changes in their constitution concerning education.

First, schools in all the states were opened to Negro children. Second, an attempt was made to provide greater centralization of authority and closer supervision by state officials. The office of the state superintendent was created in all the states, and provisions were made for local administration. The third important change was in the financing of the public schools. The permanent school funds were established, and additional funds were made available through heavy taxes levied directly upon the land. Small property owners were exempted and the taxes levied against the plantation owners were very nearly confiscatory.⁶

This type of education reform was anathema to Southern conservatives. Any type of public education supported by taxes caused Southern conservatives to resist such measures, but in the legislatures he was supported by a miniscule and powerless minority. Despite the attitude of Southern conservatives, the Reconstruction legislators of carpet-baggers, scalawags, and Blacks, supported by federal armies, rapidly brought into existence systems of universal public education for all school children.

⁶Truman M. Pierce, et al., White and Negro Schools in the South (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1955), p. 41.

The year 1877 marked the close of Reconstruction in the South. The leadership of the Southern states was in the hands of men, who had never been sympathetic to public education. "Retrenchment a policy causing bitter complaint in the South when applied by the federal government became the watchword of the Redeemers in their state and local governments."⁷ The policy of retrenchment was first applied to public education. Most Southern state legislators were of the mind that public education should be paid for by the people, and free education supported by taxation was socialistic. "In Texas, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Florida, reaction crippled the schools, and throughout the South public education suffered under the 'pinch of the Redeemers' policy of retrenchment as well as under the general poverty and depression."⁸

As the last quarter of the nineteenth century came to an end Black dreams and aspirations for full education took the same course. The Southern governors and legislators remolded their constitution which had a negative impact on Blacks' education. The Supreme Court ruling on Plessey v. Ferguson of 1896 institutionalized racial segregation for Blacks, including the field of education. Blacks were to receive a special kind of education, which was to be controlled for almost a hundred years by unsympathetic white school boards. The Supreme Court ruling took Blacks out of the mainstream of American

⁷C. Vann Woodward, Origins of the New South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), p. 58.

⁸Ibid., p. 61.

culture into a course regulated by new constitutional interpretation and limiting statutory laws.

The main purpose of this study is to trace and explain the events which led to integration in the public school system of Johnson City, Tennessee, between the years 1961-65. The evolution of integration in the city public school system will be examined in detail. This paper's main focus is the Langston High School but it also considers Dunbar, Douglass, Science Hill, North and South Junior High and other City schools as they relate to the decline of segregation as a factor to public education. To a lesser extent and quite briefly this paper explores the integration issue in the South.

CHAPTER II

THE LANGSTON ISSUE: THE BEGINNING OF INTEGRATION IN

JOHNSON CITY SCHOOLS

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court ruled on the legal status of segregation which had been in force for more than two quarters of a century. The Supreme Court under Chief Justice Warren dealt a death-blow to the dictum in the Plessey v. Ferguson case of 1896.

On January 3, 1961, the Johnson City Board of Education adopted a resolution initiating a plan of integration in the Johnson City Public Schools. The members of the Board of Education adopted a resolution abolishing compulsory segregation in the public schools. Under these new guiding principles, any student could transfer from one school to another if he or she had valid reasons for not attending the school in his or her zone. Such conditions included:

When a white student would otherwise be required to attend a school previously serving white students only. When a Negro student would otherwise be required to attend a school previously serving white students only. When a student would otherwise be required to attend a school where the majority of students in that school or in his or her grade are of a different race.¹

Despite the best intentions of the Board in implementing this plan, it must be pointed out that only a token amount of integration resulted. Other steps were needed to ensure the success of integration. Future efforts of the Johnson City School Board plan concerning

¹Minute Book of the Board of Education, January 13, 1961.

integration led to the adoption of the so-called Nashville grade-a-year plan. This program called for the integration of all grades in the Johnson City public schools by September of 1972. "School desegregation in Nashville, Tennessee, was court ordered, and Superintendent W. A. Bass began the institution of the city's grade-a-year plan in the fall of 1957."² Prior to the Johnson City Board of Education adoption of the grade-a-year plan,

In 1959, the Board of Education appointed a committee to study the question of the integration of the schools of Johnson City and to propose to the board the best method of so doing. The committee worked hard for over a year. It investigated the systems of integration which had been set up in communities in this and other states and finally advised the board to adopt the so-called Nashville grade-a-year plan.³

This policy of the Johnson City Board of Education stems from a visit to the Board of Education by the subcommittee of the Mayor's Advisory Committee on Human Relations.

During the school year 1960-61 when Johnson City adopted a plan for integration, only West Virginia and the District of Columbia had achieved integration. The states of Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina had not started integration. In the states of Arkansas, Florida, Virginia, and North Carolina token integration had begun. Concurrently, some success did take place in the states of Oklahoma, Missouri, Maryland, Delaware, and Kentucky. "By 1960 only 6% of the Black children in the South were attending

²Henry A. Bullock, A History of Negro Education in the South (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1967), p. 248.

³The Johnson City Press-Chronicle, May 24, 1964.

desegrated schools. It was apparent that the doctrine of gradualism that had emanated from the with-all-deliberate-speed principle was a major impediment to change."⁴

As the 1964-65 school year opened in Johnson City, Tennessee, the debate over integration reached a new level. Several groups in the community began to voice their concern over the speed of integration. A subcommittee of the Human Relations Committee met with the board on May 28, 1964, expressing their dissatisfaction with the rate of integration and urging total integration. A couple of days later,

About 100-125 persons representing the Johnson City Progressive League, a Negro organization, appeared before the board to ask it to reconsider its position on integrating the city's schools. The School Board had recently reaffirmed its grade-a-year integration policy.

Dr. Eugene Kilgore [dentist] told the board he had been a resident of Johnson City for 13 years and said I knew the people of Johnson City are understanding enough to permit a faster rate of integration.

He and other spokesmen for the group petitioned the board to abandon the policy of partial segregation and to integrate all grades of elementary and high school next fall.

School spokesmen declared that Langston High School and other schools attended only by Negro children do not offer equal opportunity in study.⁵

Credence must be given to the statement made by members of the Progressive League for indeed Langston's curriculum was shown to be lacking when compared to that of Science Hill. At a School Board meeting, Johnson City Superintendent of Schools, C. Howard McCorkle,

⁴James E. Blackwell, The Black Community: Diversity and Unity (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1975), p. 105.

⁵The Johnson City Press-Chronicle, July 2, 1964; Minute Book, Board of Education, August 27, 1964.

allowed seven students from the Langston Hill School to transfer to Science Hill High School. The students from Langston desired to take courses in Spanish, plane geometry, art, and shorthand business. The superintendent's change of policy was based on the Board's statement in its Newsletter dated May 28, 1964, which stated,

If at any time it can be demonstrated conclusively to the board that the present system results in any real inequities in the availability of quality education for any student regardless of race, such inequities will be dealt with on an individual basis and every effort made to correct them.⁶

Although the Langston High School had some inequities in the curriculum, "Langston and Science Hill Schools were fully accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Both schools, too, had earned the same rating."⁷ However, Langston High School did not have as broad a curriculum especially in terms of preparing students for university training. Without such courses, Black students would become less mobile in terms of occupational employment.

Dissatisfied with the slow rate of integration, disillusioned with the seemingly compulsory bi-racial school system in Johnson City, Tennessee, the members of the Progressive League asked Judge Charles G. Neese to set aside the Board of Education's present grade-a-year plan of integration and to integrate all city schools. The members present in Greenville, Tennessee, went on to add that the Johnson City Board of Education,

⁶Minute Book, Board of Education, August 27, 1964.

⁷Interview with Mrs. Rose Carson, February 13, 1980.

Acting under color of the laws of the State of Tennessee and under color of the laws of Johnson City, have pursued the policy, custom, practice and usage of operating a compulsory bi-racial system, consisting of a primary system of elementary and high schools limited to attendance by white children, except on a limited basis.⁸

The members who filed suit in Greenville, Tennessee, against the Johnson City School Board had some legitimate grievances. In the Johnson City schools, Black teachers taught in exclusively Black schools and White teachers taught in White Schools attended by White students. The only exception was the transfer of a few token Black students from Langston High School to Science Hill High School, the Progressive League, a highly vocal but minority group within the Black community, led the struggle for integration of all schools in Johnson City. Despite legal notice of a suit seeking full and immediate integration in Johnson City Schools, Superintendent C. Howard McCorkle said, "We believe our program of desegregation that we are following is in the best interest of all the children in Johnson City. We expect to present this program in detail to the court later."⁹

The dubious statement of Superintendent McCorkle along with members of the Johnson City School Board of a grade-a-year plan program did not meet the criterion for complete integration. Since the school year 1960-61 when compulsory school segregation was abolished by the board only a token amount of integration had been carried out. This amount of integration was very limited to only seven black students. The black and white schools were for all practical purposes

⁸The Johnson City Press-Chronicle, January 3, 1965.

⁹Ibid., January 6, 1965.

still segregated by the school year 1964-65. The new pace for the grade-a-year-program failed to achieve full integration. The Progressive League along with the subcommittee of the Human Relation Committee therefore asked for a reorganization of the entire school system into a unitary, non-racial school system which was favored by the court. The Johnson City School Board was ordered by U.S. District Judge Charles Neese to completely desegregate grades one through twelve by the beginning of the 1965 school year. Desegregation was also to include all facilities and teaching staff. To ensure that all school children enroll at a school of his choice, "it was proposed by the Board of Education to zone Johnson City on a geographic basis, subject to such changes in boundaries as may be necessitated by shifts in population."¹⁰

It was not long before Black parents objected to the proposed school zoning plan by the Johnson City School Board. Avon Williams, the attorney for the Black parents filed a suit claiming that the Johnson City School Board was circumventing the law and in fact maintaining school segregation. Williams also objected to the action taken by the Board in not allowing five Black students to transfer to Science Hill High School and thirty-three to transfer to North Junior High. Judge Charles Neese favored the parents in stating to the school Board,

In fact, this court is of the opinion that it is in the interest of all these pupils, as well as others in the system that the

¹⁰Ibid., January 15, 1965.

defendants further and finally accomplish the total and complete desegregation heretofore enforced at the commencement of the next school year.¹¹

Judge Neese further insisted that the Johnson City Board of Education provide the court with the necessary material on zoning of all school students. Adoption of a plan for zoning was not to show any form of gerrymandering. Superintendent C. Howard McCorkle in reply to the court order proposed two geographical zoning maps for elementary school students and junior high school students. The facilities and student capacity of each school was prepared, along with a news release showing school zones which parents of children living in the respective zones may decide what school they desire their children attend.

As for senior high zones, the school students in grades 10th, 11th, and 12th were to choose between Langston High School and Science Hill High School. There were some allegations that the Langston High School was, "substandard, under or inadequately staffed, or poorly equipped, with lacking and outdated libraries, cafeterias, and health facilities, curricula, textbooks, and educational programs."¹² However, Mr. Cox read a letter which he had written to the chairman of the Board, setting out certain additions to Langston High School in the amount of \$2679.80, which he recommended to the Board for their consideration, and which additions were not included in the original plans.¹³

¹¹Ibid., February 27, 1965.

¹²Ibid., January 15, 1965.

¹³Minute Book, Board of Education, September 24, 1956.

In less than a decade after the Johnson City School Board had unanimously passed for the additions to Langston High School, members of the Progressive League charged that the conditions at Langston High School was substandard. "By the beginning of the integration issue, the Langston High School was not a substandard building, nor lacking in the material for teaching students and the staff was not inadequate."¹⁴ An evaluative study of the school in May of 1963 by the National Study of Secondary School rated the Langston High School as being very good in all areas. However the curriculum at Langston High School was limited in the fields of foreign language, mathematics, science, and business courses. The limited curriculum is also attested to by the seven girls who transferred to Science Hill.

The issue of integration was settled in Johnson City, Tennessee, by July of 1965. In the case of the Langston High School, it was settled by April of 1965 and resulted in the school demise. The desires of parents to choose the school they wanted their children to attend in the fall of 1965 was indeed clear. The results for grades seven to nine were seven-hundred-eighty-eight students chose North Junior High as compared to fifty-four students wanting to attend the Langston High School. The results for grades ten to twelve were 1209 students choosing Science Hill High as compared to fifty students who chose Langston High School. The miniscule enrollment at Langston High School prompted Superintendent McCorkle to close Langston High (grades

¹⁴Interview with Mrs. Rose Carson, February 12, 1980; Interview with Ms. Sandra Sylvers, February 11, 1980.

7-12) at the end of the 1965 school year, "because of the anticipated exorbitantly high and the impracticality of operating the school for 50 senior high, and 54 junior high pupils."¹⁵ A principle and teacher at Langston High School remarked, "Langston closed because of the meaningful absorption of students into Science Hill."¹⁶

Whether the zoning of the schools at the senior high level might have retained the operation of Langston High seemed ephemeral. Such zoning plan was implemented on the junior high level which resulted in most parents choosing North Junior High as compared to Langston High School. However if the Board of Education had not adopted the policy of choosing between Langston High School and Science Hill High School then the Langston High might have been in continual operation. The Johnson City School Board should have adopted some policy where students in high school living west of Roan Street attend the Langston High School.

¹⁵ Minute Book, Board of Education, April 5, 1965; The Johnson City Press-Chronicle, April 6, 1965.

¹⁶ Interview with Mr. Ernest McKinney, Assistant Principle of Science Hill High School, February 14, 1980.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

The Johnson City School Board during the 1960-61 school term adopted a plan of abolishing the compulsory segregation school system in Johnson City, Tennessee. The Johnson City School Board adopted the so-called Nashville grade-a-year plan. This plan was met with bitter denunciation by members of the Progressive League and the Human Relations subcommittee. Both of these groups were dissatisfied with the rate of integration and urged the board to implement immediate and total integration of the Johnson City School system. The Board's grade-a-year plan had not resulted in any form of integration. The Board's adopted plan worked in theory but not in practice. However, the board was late as the 1964-65 school term had continued its grade-a-year plan with the exception of allowing seven students from the Langston High School to transfer to Science Hill High School. This change of policy in allowing seven students to transfer to an all white school was based on the Board statements of inequities in educational facilities and curriculum. The transfer of the seven students from the Langston High School to Science Hill High School did not result from the grade-a-year plan.

Disillusioned with the seemingly compulsory bi-racial school system in Johnson City, Tennessee, members of the Black community sought relief in the U.S. District Court at Greenville, Tennessee.

Judge Charles Neese disallowed the Board to continue the gradual grade-a-year plan and called for immediate desegregation of grades one through twelve by the beginning of the 1965 school year. The court further proposed to the Board to zone the city on a geographic basis without regards to race.

Despite the court order to the Board for a complete end to segregation, members of the Johnson City School Board gerrymandered the city to exclude blacks from attending white schools. The school Board zone did not result in any black school children transferring to all white school, despite the nearness of which blacks and whites lived in Johnson City, Tennessee. However, the Black community responded to the continued separate and unequal school system in court. The members of the Black community maintained that the Johnson City School Board was trying to get around the law and in fact maintaining segregation. The Board was court ordered to prepare zoning maps without any form of gerrymandering. By the school year 1965-66, the Johnson City Board of Education had finally put into practice an acceptable unitary, non-racial school system.

The integration issue in Johnson City, Tennessee, was a gradual process despite the ruling of the Supreme Court that integration of schools must occur with all deliberate speed. According to members of both its White and Black communities the Johnson City area is not a totally segregated community. There are pockets of Black families living throughout the Johnson City area. Despite the belief that a small number of Blacks could easily assimilate into the dominant

culture and achieve equality education the desegregation process in Johnson City, Tennessee, has not as yet completely run its course.

APPENDIX

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Report of the American Psychological Association, 1934-1943.

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VITA..

HAROLD G. HANDY

Personal Data: Date of Birth: November 7, 1956
 Place of Birth: New Orleans, Louisiana
 Marital Status: Single

Education: Catholic Schools, New Orleans, Louisiana
 Catholic Schools, Monroe, Virginia
 Xavier University, New Orleans, Louisiana;
 history, social studies, education B.A.,
 1977.
 East Tennessee State University, Johnson
 City, Tennessee; history, M.A., 1980.

Professional
Experience: Archivist, Archives of Apalachia; Johnson
 City, Tennessee

Publications: None

Honors and
Awards: None