

# From Segregation to Community in Pulaski

RADIO IQ | By [Robbie Harris](#)

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A segregated school in a small, southwestern Virginia town, burned down in 1938. No cause for the fire was ever established. But from its ashes came a little-known court case that would pre-sage *Brown vs. The Board of Education*: The decision declaring segregation unconstitutional.

Many people in Pulaski didn't know the story of how their town was instrumental in the fight for racial equality, until now.

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In the 1940s Dorothy Venable was a teacher at the Calfee Training School in the town of Pulaski. She says teachers from the African American school were never invited to meetings that white teachers attended, but this one-time, she wasn't having it.

“And so, I went in and Miss Eva Vawn was the supervisor and she looked at me as if to say—Pffff!— the room was full of teachers, so what can she say? She couldn't embarrass me and get away with it.”

It was one tiny salvo across the bow of segregation, and Venable got to bring back the *good* school supplies for her pupils in Pulaski. Gary Hash was a young student at Calfee in the early 1960s.

“I believe that the teachers understood the challenges that were in front of us and they brought that to the table. It was not just about the classroom. We're getting these kids ready for this life that they're facing. “

A life of closed doors and unequal opportunities. In Pulaski, formal education for African Americans ended at Junior High.

“It was deliberate back then that black students would only go to the ninth grade.” Mickey Hickman is a Calfee school alumnus. “This is the political science historian in me; when I read about our situation here in that, they didn't want black students going higher than the ninth grade, so that would track them to lower wage jobs.” With no high school for African Americans in Pulaski, Hickman attended high school in the town of Christiansburg, where he earned a graduate degree.

But years earlier, in 1929, when there were no options for him to continue his education in his hometown, a young man named Chauncey Harmon, was accepted to go straight to college at the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, where he studied with George Washington Carver. Two decades later, Harmon became principal of Calfee. He was disturbed by what he saw back home, and quickly started a petition for equal facilities and equal pay in Pulaski. Dr. Marylen Harmon is the late Chauncey Harmon's daughter.

“He had African American as well as whites (with him) and for many of them it was, as long as they’re not coming to us, let them have what they want.” And some whites, she says, supported the idea because it opened their eyes to racial inequality in their county.

“Mr. Harmon, was involved with one of the earliest efforts in civil rights.”

Wayne Tripp wrote his dissertation at Virginia Tech on Harmon’s little-known fight for educational opportunity and equality in Pulaski and a lawsuit filed on the issue in 1947. It was one of the earliest challenges to racial segregation in schools. But only recently, have these efforts been recognized as precursors to Brown vs. the Board of Education, the landmark case filed by Thurgood Marshall, who would later join the U.S. Supreme Court.

“And it was interesting to me, when I got started in this, I thought, eh? But the more I dug into it and the more I read, I mean, clearly it was there. Can you connect Thurgood Marshall to Mr. Harmon's work and Calfee school, yes, you definitely can.”

Again, Marylen Harmon.

“We found handwritten letters at the Library of Congress, written from my dad to Thurgood Marshall, about the lawsuit.”

In 1949 they won the case, filed by Pulaski Physician, Percy Corbin, 5 years before ‘Brown vs. the Board.’

“I've been here for soon to be 61 years and a year and a half ago I heard for the first time in my life the story of Chauncey Harmon and the lawsuit”.

Dave Clark is the Mayor of the town of Pulaski.

“I had no idea because I was told what I was supposed to hear. And the fact that that

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*Education, happened right here in my town.”*

After the first Calfee school burned, The Public Works Administration built a new Calfee school in 1940, where the old one had stood. Principle Harmon was not offered a contract to return. His daughter says he never talked about it. No one did. Now, Pulaski is fundraising to turn the former Calfee school into a community and childcare center with a museum commemorating the town’s role in the fight for racial equality.

Again, Calfee teacher, Dorothy Venable. “It makes me feel real good that they're going to use it for the community. That everybody, not certain people will be able to use it, but that even people who are low economic people, black people, white people, anybody who needs the services of, what's going to go on in this building will be able to use it.”

Pulaski county schools were not desegregated until the late 60s, and people say integration, well, that was another matter altogether. Calfee closed in 1966, more than a decade after the landmark Brown vs. the Board of Education case made segregation unconstitutional.

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