

Prince Edward County: Revisited and Revitalized¹

By R.C. Smith

I am standing at the tip of a triangular patch of freshly mowed lawn, staring intently at a closed, locked school. Abandoned is the word that comes to my mind—a word with deep, hurtful implications where schools in this county are concerned. But Robert Russa Moton High School isn't abandoned, not yet. It sits there, a darker mass in a white haze of July sun, showing its age, waiting for its future. It is why I have come back to Prince Edward County after all these years.

As I stare at the red brick building with the institutional white trim, I feel oddly vulnerable. I have driven up from North Carolina and into the county on Route 15 coming first, directly to the school which, to my surprise, is now pinned between two well-traveled, citified streets. Close by on either hand, traffic moves slowly and I wonder what the passengers make of this graying figure perspiring in the late morning heat, staring so intently at the school. I block out that thought, concentrating hard, trying a little to my surprise now to imagine a spring day 46 years ago, seven years before my first visit to the county.

In my mind's eye, I see a vintage early 50's car moseying up to parking space and a man jumping out, half-running toward the school. It is the Moton principal, by now fairly certain that he has been tricked by a phone call telling him that students were at the bus station, getting in trouble. Not long after his return, the students—having taken over the auditorium in his absence to announce their plan—would begin to trickle out the front door, hand-made placards held proudly, shakily aloft. How slowly word got back downtown and with what disbelief received: the Negro high school students had walked out in protest to inferior conditions. Walked out, sworn not to return until they got a school as good as the white high school. How hard it all must have been to believe back then, so long before modern-day protest—much less full-blown civil disobedience—had come to race relations in the United States.

I walk over to the Virginia historical marker on my right: "On this site 4/23/51 the students staged a strike protesting inadequate school facilities. Led by the Rev. L. Francis Griffin these students' actions

became a part of the 1954 United States Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* decision which ruled racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. To avoid desegregation, the Prince Edward public schools were closed until 9/2/64."

Across the tip of the triangle is the modest, ground-set memorial honoring the Rev. Mr. Griffin, facing the street so as to be visible to passers-by in cars. On the plaque is a likeness of Griffin with his name and dates of birth and death (Sept. 15, 1917-Jan. 18, 1980) and the words: "Love. Freedom. Justice. A Mighty Champion." Below that are the following lines:

THE FIGHTING PREACHER
A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS
A MAN FOR ALL REASONS
A MAN FOR GREAT GALLANTRY
BEING FULL OF VALOR
COURAGE AND LIBERALITY

"YOU MAY HAVE TO BEAR IT,
BUT YOU DON'T HAVE TO GRIN".

Griffin's likeness on the plaque just misses him. I remember a big man, always a bit overweight, with a bearish shambling walk and a sleepy-eyed expression that belied a sharp, acquisitive mind and a sometimes mordant wit. I chuckled at the quote, which was a favorite line of his. For all of its meaning, he usually had a ready grin and a chesty, rumbling laugh. I note that this busy street close by has been renamed Griffin Boulevard. I wonder how he would have felt about that. I can see him shaking his head slowly, the grin spreading mini-wrinkle by mini-wrinkle. Shaking his head and letting that stand for words that would have reflected genuine incredulity.

Moton was not the focal point of conflict when I was researching the Book, *They Closed Their Schools in Prince Edward 1958-64*. When I first ventured into the county, I headed for the First Baptist Church, where the Rev. Mr. Griffin had his office. After talking with him I went directly to The Farmville Herald to see J. Barrye Wall, editor and publisher. What I had from these two over the years was a diametrically opposed assessment of the cause of the community crisis that had developed. To Wall, it was a case of the African-American community not being patient enough to wait for the new school they were getting, and then compounding the problem by involving themselves with outside agitators like the NAACP. To Griffin, it was a

question of long since lapsed trust and a burden of perceived inferiority that time had made no longer tolerable.

Looking back on it now, I am struck by a thought that may have significance in light of what has happened in the county since. It is how inevitable the school closings seemed to the leadership on both sides and how hard it was for many others, particularly well-educated, white members of the academic community (Longwood College and Hampden-Sydney College) to see what was coming.

While both told me how much they regretted the situation, neither Wall nor Griffin had serious doubts that the schools would close, certainly not as late as 1958. Yet for all the segregationist passion of those days, many whites believed—or comforted themselves with the Illusion—that the schools would stay open somehow. This gap between what the white leaders and the rest of the white community thought—might it have been cause or effect of the failure of other leadership to arise? It was the absence of this leadership particularly from clerical and educational quarters that was most sad. Only one white minister in Farmville spoke out against closing the schools and that one—Rev. James R. Kennedy of the Farmville Presbyterian Church—left his pastorate as a result. Only Dr. Gordon Moss, dean of women at Longwood, of all the academics at his school and at Hampden-Sydney, spoke out strongly and repeatedly against closing the schools.

The schools finally did close in 1959 in Prince Edward County—despite the collapse of "massive resistance" in Virginia earlier. For four years African-American children scrambled for what education they could get or simply did without. Prince Edward County became infamous in most of this country and elsewhere. In 1964 a hastily organized but efficiently run system of public education for the county's African-American children was put in place by forces outside the county. But it took the Supreme Court to reopen the public schools the next year.

Thirty years is a long time but nothing that had happened in this country quite prepared me for the stories friends began to send me in 1995 from newspapers in Richmond and Washington with Prince Edward County datelines. I read them, incredulously at first, and then put in a call to The Farmville Herald where the editor, Ken Woodley, obligingly sent me a more complete batch, including local stories and editorials he had written. Pieced together chronologically, here is the tale they told:

On Nov. 19, 1993, Vera Allen, president of the Martha E. Forrester

Council of Women, a group involved for many years in education of African-Americans in Virginia, and James Ghee, a local African-American attorney, appeared with a delegation before the board of supervisors asking them to agree to act as fiscal agent for a \$30,000 grant from the Kellogg Foundation. The grant was to support a study of the feasibility of converting the old Moton High School, later the Mary E. Branch Elementary School and more recently considered surplus, into a civil rights museum. The supervisors agreed but went to pains to indicate to the applicants that the action did not represent a commitment to the project.

The Farmville Herald—bulwark of segregationist sentiment in my Day—responded with an editorial carrying editor Woodley's initials under it calling for the supervisors to set aside any plans to sell Moton to the highest bidder and instead to support the plan to make it a museum. "Should blacks and whites join hands to create a museum out of the Moton-Branch school," he wrote, "it would be a healing act of affirmation in Prince Edward County.... The Moton-Branch school is a rare piece of American history.... We can't rewrite history. But we can make it."

To my eye, what made this bold editorial even more interesting was the list of individuals Woodley suggested be among those honored in the museum. Moton, himself, who had grown up in Prince Edward County to become the successor to Booker T. Washington as president of Tuskegee Institute, was one, as was Mary E. Branch, a native daughter who had become the first African-American woman college president. These were safe names of people long dead before the events surrounding the school closings. Another, Martin Luther King, drawing even broader biracial respect, remote from the local scene. Griffin, also named, honored even by many whites. Barbara Johns, the student strike leader, either revered for her courage or dismissed as too young to know what she was doing. It was the Rev. Vernon Johns' name on Woodley's list that caught my attention.

I remembered the reaction I had learned to expect among whites dedicated to the cause of segregation back in my time in the county when Vernon Johns' name up. Faces darkened, scowls appeared. To them, Barbara Johns' uncle was the serpent in Eden, the person responsible for the county's problem. He was a radical living outside the county who had programmed his niece and undoubtedly other children in the African-American community. I kept my mouth shut in the face of this raw anger. In a way, they were partly right. Nobody could have "programmed" the quiet, intense young person I talked

with in Philadelphia, where Barbara Johns Powell had gone to live as a preacher's wife. But Vernon Johns—who preceded King at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery—never disguised his hatred for segregation and certainly would have passed along to his niece his philosophy of equality. This was a man who once sat in a segregated diner drinking cup after cup of coffee as each finished cup was deliberately broken by the angry counterman. Johns won the contest of wills when the counterman began to take serious account of cost.

The subject of Moton lay relatively dormant in 1994, but something else happened that captured attention far outside the county's borders. Newsday sent reporter Timothy M. Phelps to the five communities that comprised the plaintiffs in *Brown v. Board* back in 1954. His stories were full of gloom. The Summerton High School in Clarendon County, S.C., formerly the "black" high school, presently had one white among 585 students. In Wilmington, Del., the state was in court to try to end the busing that had achieved success in desegregation. In Topeka, Kan., Linda Brown, daughter of Oliver Brown whose name attaches to the Supreme Court decision, was back in court fighting to desegregate schools for her own children. In Washington, D.C., the schools were African-American and poor.

Despite the events of the past, Phelps wrote: "Prince Edward County is the success story of the five cases. The same community that treated its black children like so much trash is now a model for the nation." He wrote of the county schools as having a 60 percent African-American and 40 percent white population, and "spawning National Merit Scholarships like minnows." Test scores, he noted, had reached the national average. Woodley saw that the story was circulated in the county in one of his editorials.

In 1995, the county sent a letter to the Department of Historic Resources in Richmond to defer consideration of historical landmark status for Moton. Such a status, the board feared, would hurt its plan to sell the school to the highest bidder in the summer to recoup money spent on a middle school addition. Herald Editor Woodley reacted with a scorching editorial headlined: "Shall We Tear Down America?" He wrote: "If we are going to tear down the former R.R. Moton High School, now Farmville Elementary School, let's go ahead and tear down Independence Hall, too, and dump the Liberty Bell in the river.... The Farmville school building is no less a monument to human courage in the belief that all human beings are created equal than Independence Hall.... (It) must not be destroyed."

He had gotten only silence as public reaction to his earlier editorial, but this time he got a response that astonished me when I first heard about it. He did not get a single letter against the idea of preserving Moton. The Herald devoted a full page to letters from white and African-Americans favoring preserving the school as a civil rights museum. The county's action also sparked an emotional meeting at Griffin's old First Baptist Church. One woman in the audience, who had four children at the time of the school closings, recounted her family's anguish at the splitting up necessitated by sending the children away to continue their education. A collection taken up by the Martha E. Forrester Council of Women came to \$1,000.

Board of Supervisors' Chairman Hugh Carwile, a retired dairy farmer, was quoted by The Washington Post on March 6 as being in favor of some modest commemoration at Moton, but nothing more. "The county may be better served if the building is removed," he said. "We don't want this to become a race problem. People tell me it's a constant reminder, like rubbing salt in a wound." However, with vociferous Moton supporters jamming the courthouse meeting room on March 14, the supervisors took a far more conciliatory position. After the meeting Herald reporter Mary Beth Joachim quoted County Administrator Mildred Hampton as saying that the county wanted to work with the preservationists to save the school.

From this point on, the issue of substantial public controversy over Moton's immediate fate seemed to melt away. By early 1996, the county had struck a deal with the Forrester Council. The Council would purchase the building for \$300,000, with two-thirds of the price due in two years and the remaining \$100,000 to be financed over an additional two years at six percent. The county would also negotiate separately with Longwood College, which desired to purchase Moton's athletic field, behind the school.

When I came back to Prince Edward County in the late spring of 1996, Moton preservationists were working with something less than perfect unity to organize themselves to attract substantial outside funding. The questions they were asking had to do with how much, how soon, and from where. The questions I had in mind went backward in time. Was Prince Edward County, I wondered, really a model of desegregation? How much advance in race relationships actually had occurred in the county? And what history might explain such advances as had been made?

II.

Vera J. Allen and Jim Ghee represent two generations of African-American leadership in Prince Edward, with common threads of life disruption from efforts to bring equality into the county's public school system. Ghee left the county to continue his education after the 1959 school closings. Eight years earlier, Allen had lost her administrative position in the public school system as a result of her family's support of the student strikers at Moton, a group which included her two daughters.

The younger daughter, Edwilda Allen Isaac, remembers conditions at Moton, the hated "tar paper shacks" to which the increasing student overflow was consigned. She talked with other students about how the white school had a modern gym, cafeteria, and lab, while Moton had nothing to match it. "Our biology lab had one frog," she says. When Barbara Johns brought up the subject of the strike, the other students were ready to follow. "We had to have representatives to go up to the courthouse after the strike started and I was one of them," Isaac says. "They tried to get us to go back to school. They wanted to know who we were, taking names and the names of parents. I was afraid they were going to do something bad."

When it came up for renewal, her mother's contract with the school board was not renewed. Vera Allen found herself out of work with the family unable to live on her husband's salary as an electrician. "It was fortunate that he worked for himself," she said, "because they (the county's leadership) couldn't get at him." After much casting about, Allen found herself a supervisory job in the Wayne County, N.C. school system and, just as important, a family with whom to live. There, for four of the years in which public schools were closed, she lived apart from her husband and children during the week, getting home on weekends. While she was away, the children's father looked after the girls, taking them on jobs with him. They sat outside in yards after school eating johnny-cake, and bologna and cheese while neighbors kept a watchful eye out for them.

Later, when the emergency Free School opened, Vera Allen came back to Prince Edward and eventually retired as director of instruction in the county school system--"a job that in the past had been reserved for a white male." She provides an instructive look back to the beginnings of Moton. As a young woman, she knew Martha E. Forrester, a Richmond educator who founded the women's council instrumental in developing public education for African-Americans in Virginia. She worked in the

group that had established Moton, the first, free-standing high school for African-Americans in the county, in 1939. "Before that, we had nothing beyond grade school," she recalls. "My husband had to go to Cumberland County to get a high school education." She remembers as well the battle for education for African-Americans in Southside Virginia and the demeaning compromises this entailed, such as accepting for their own children castoff, often obsolete books handed down from white children who had gotten new ones.

As a veteran member of the council and current president, Allen was vitally interested when a preservation movement for Moton was born in the early 1990's. Ghee had been nursing the idea of a civil rights museum, focusing on a house purchased eventually by Longwood College. The college's expansion goals concerned the African-American community as it was widely bruited that Longwood was interested in the Moton property. When Ghee and his group learned that the county planned to build an addition to the middle school and abandon old Moton, Ghee formed the Branch-Moton Historical Society, with Allen as a member of the board. With the grant-writing assistance of Gretchen Rogers, a white resident of the county instrumental in stimulating positive school change, he got the Kellogg feasibility grant. Eventually, however, the council was put in charge of the fund-raising drive. "I had personal legal difficulties," Ghee said, "and I didn't want them to interfere with the success of the project."

Ghee had been an eighth grader when the schools closed. After a year in one of the "training centers" run in Prince Edward to keep out-of-school African-American students in a posture of study, he was sent to live with his grandparents (a device used by African-American parents to maintain their children's education) in Cumberland County. After he had been in school for several weeks, the principal called a meeting with the 25-30 Prince Edward "refugee" children enrolled, announced that the school was over-enrolled, and told them not to show up the next Monday. Back in the training center, young Ghee—bright, quick, and full of curiosity—was discovered by Helen Baker, Quaker field representative in Prince Edward.

The Quakers—whose strong work with the African-American community during these difficult times would be hard to overpraise—arranged for Ghee to go to Iowa for the ninth grade. In Iowa City, the Quakers found him a home with the Anthony Costantinos. He was a white economics professor at the University of Iowa; his wife, Mori, was a Japanese-American who had spent time in American concentration camps for the sin of her parents' skin-color and nativity.

"Now she knew something about discrimination," Ghee recalls. He also remembers family nights out in which Mori would enter an Iowa City restaurant first, followed by young Ghee, followed by every eye in the house. Laughing, he says: "They couldn't wait to see what came next." In his junior year at the University of Iowa, Ghee wangled a year's study at the American University in Beirut, raising money by selling Great Books and the Encyclopedia Britannica door-to-door, with financial assists from his employer and from the African-American dean of the school of liberal arts. After a year abroad, he finished at the University of Iowa and got his law degree at the University of Virginia.

Allen and her daughter and Ghee took strength from the painful difficulties of strike and school closing days. Another such was Travis Harris, who started out late in public school and found himself eleven years old and out of school by the fourth grade. Big for his age, he started working on a farm. The first year was fun, but during the second year it came to Harris that he was missing something. Both the white farm family and Harris's own parents urged him to go back to school. He found himself, at 16, in the eighth grade, huge compared to his classmates and seriously behind in studies. It was a struggle but when he told himself it was hard, his internal voice always answered "not as hard as the tobacco fields." Harris made it through high school reminding himself of that. Later he got into police work. When I dropped in to see him last summer, he was the county's chief deputy sheriff. Some people think he would make a good sheriff if he got the chance. I asked if he was bitter about his lost educational experience. "Well, I was at first. But you've got to move ahead, you can't linger over things."

Only one serious study I know of attempted to assess the educational losses in the county from the school closings. That study was done by Dr. Robert L. Green of Michigan State. In a preliminary report he estimated that of the 1,700 African-American children of school age in the county, approximately 1,100 had received practically no formal and very little informal education during the years of the school closings. Green found that only 25 African-American children in the entire county had attended formal school all four years prior to the opening of the emergency Free School. In his completed study released in 1964, Dr. Green talked of early school closings as having possibly "irreversible effects" on the children affected.

Recalling my own interviews from 1964-65 in which I had found many African-American children floundering, I was not surprised at Dr.

Green's findings. In one striking story I discovered on my return, Virginia Washington Post reporter Donald P. Baker, writing for the Alicia Patterson Foundation Reporter, told of six-year-old Shirley Davidson's fantasy school. Her mother had prepared her for first grade in 1959 down to a couple of new dresses and a vaccination. When September came and the schools didn't open, her mother told Shirley it wasn't time yet. But Shirley, the only African-American child on her street, saw other children picked up every morning by the bus to the private Academy. After a while, she began to pretend she was going to school. She would go outside clutching her books every morning to wait for the bus to come by and would be there, again, in the afternoon when it returned with the schoolchildren. In between, during the day, she lived a surrealistic, child's daydream about what school might be like. It was many years before she could even speak about the experience.

What did surprise me was the number of closed-school children I found on my return who had turned their experience into something positive and emerged as adults tougher, more confident, and doing well. I was not prepared for that or for a degree of desegregation observable everywhere in this community which has reached the level of assistant managers in the banks and other establishments. Or for the schools--where massive desegregation apparently had been accomplished without notable negative incident. Or for the optimism surrounding the movement to save Moton High School. How to account for this I asked Vera Allen, whose public school experience spanned so long a time. She suggested that "subtle" inequalities still exist--a theme I heard from African-Americans more than once--but agreed that progress had been made. For the answer to my question, she sent me to School Superintendent Jim Anderson. "He's a good superintendent," she said, "easy to talk to and he listens ... he's done a lot."

III

James M. Anderson, Jr. attended a one-room school in Buckingham County with no electricity, no plumbing, and a wooden floor from which the dust was abated in old-fashioned country style, with a makeshift mop dampened with motor oil. Each child would bring a can of tomatoes, butter beans, or corn—some food—to school each day for common lunch. It was segregated, of course, but Anderson remembers clearly the advice a professor at the University of Richmond had later for prospective teachers—"if you plan careers in education, better plan it in integrated education. If you don't want to teach Negro students,

try another career." Anderson recalls that a lot of young white teaching prospects bailed out.

Anderson lived the professor's prophecy at the high school in Buckingham from 1960 to 1972 during years in which integration came to formerly white schools through freedom-of-choice--the formerly African-American schools remained segregated during this period. As principal of the high school by that time, it was his goal to integrate teachers to prepare for full integration of the students. At about this time, Prince Edward High School, officially integrated, but with a population almost entirely African-American, applied for admission to the high school association for sports. None of the other heavily white schools in the Southside area would agree to play Prince Edward. Anderson worked to get his district to compete and called Clarence Penn, the African-American principal of Prince Edward High School, to suggest a date for the game. "I think he was shocked," Anderson recalls.

If so, his shock was nothing to compare with that of the Buckingham County school superintendent of that day. The high school had always used highest grade point average to determine the valedictorian and in 1969 that honor fell for the first time to an African-American girl. Anderson announced the winner to the faculty and students, but a few hours later, he got a call from the superintendent. Wouldn't it be a good idea, his superior suggested, if they agreed to use a different method to select the high school valedictorian this year? Why, Anderson wondered aloud, when the current method has worked so well? Still, said the superintendent, the young girl with the highest grade average was a transfer student from another school who probably got her good grades there. Not so, Anderson replied, she had gotten her good grades at Buckingham, and furthermore a transfer student was valedictorian a few years ago and nobody had blinked an eye. Nevertheless, said the superintendent, it's time for a change.

Anderson spent a sleepless night over it and called the superintendent the next day. His decision would stand, he said; it was a matter left to the discretion of the principal and he was exercising his discretion. The superintendent responded that Anderson would not find a member of the school board or the board of supervisors at graduation and that he would not be principal of the high school the following year. These threats were carried out—the young woman's valedictory speech played to an empty first-two rows and a full, cheering rest-of-house and Anderson found himself "promoted" upstairs to an office job the next year. The story of the valedictorian had gotten around and the

board of supervisors came up with a more euphemistic explanation for Anderson's dismissal as principal—he and his wife had attended the inaugural ball of newly-elected Virginia Governor Linwood Holton, an acquaintance of Anderson's father who called for making his state "a model for race relations in America" in his 1970 inaugural address, and that was cited as politically incorrect and punishable.

Sometime later, as he stewed in his paper-shuffling job, Anderson got a phone call from Penn, over at Prince Edward High School, telling him that the county superintendency was open and asking him to apply. "I don't want to be a superintendent of schools," Anderson understandably replied. Penn insisted that he think about it. A few days later Anderson got a call from one of the most ardent supporters of the private Prince Edward Academy. Asking that his name not be used (Anderson has never revealed it), the caller confessed that his concern for public schools was negligible, but added—"I like to see my taxpayer's money spent well"—and urged Anderson to apply for the job. After much internal debate, Anderson accepted.

When he took over in 1972, the Prince Edward school population was 94.3 percent African-American. Reading vocabulary as reflected in the Iowa test scores was far below the state as well as national average. Morale was low. What Anderson found equally appalling was the reliance on machines to teach the youngest children reading. His first act was to insist that teachers read to the younger kids. Then he hired Vera Allen, whom he admired, as director of instruction.

He had a couple of things going for him. For one, under Holton's administration minimum standards of quality were passed putting a floor under what counties could spend for education. Prince Edward County had to increase its education budget by 48 percent. What, he was asked by one belligerent supervisor, if they refused to do it. "Well," Anderson told him, "I expect that the State would take over our county schools." To an outsider, it might sound risky to suggest that a county that had abandoned public schooling once could get out from under a second time. But Anderson had judged the political mood rightly. People were not going to leap to his aid, but nobody in the power structure wanted to re-don the mask of defiance. Nobody wanted another fight over public schools.

One of the most serious roadblocks to bringing white students in to integrate Prince Edward's schools was a "campus" school at Longwood, running from the first to the seventh grade and available to the

children of Longwood and Hampden-Sydney faculty. As long as this school was available to drain off these highly advantaged children, the public schools of Prince Edward were at a distinct disadvantage. Governor Holton had heard of Anderson's dismissal in Buckingham for attending his inaugural ball and appointed Prince Edward's new superintendent of schools to the board of Virginia State University, the predominantly African-American state-supported teaching school in Petersburg. From that position, Anderson campaigned successfully to close the "campus" school there, arguing that taxpayers should not be asked to fund competing public schools. With the campus school at Virginia State closed, Longwood's was a target for the same argument and soon it, too, closed. When Anderson succeeded in getting the presidents of the respective institutions of higher education in Prince Edward to send their children to the public schools rather than the private academy, he had turned the corner. Gradually, the percentages of white students in Prince Edward public schools increased.

With this, test scores indicate, performance of all students in Prince Edward's public schools began to improve significantly. Dropouts sharply decreased and the percentage of students continuing their education after high school graduation increased from 29.4 percent in 1984-85 to between 60 and 70 percent presently. The schools' brochure lists Harvard, Yale, Smith, and Vassar among the post-secondary schools attended by recent graduates. Four out of five white children from Prince Edward County now attend the public schools rather than the private school, which has been purchased by J.B. Fuqua and renamed for its benefactor.

IV

When Bob and Gretchen Rogers moved to Prince Edward County in early 1975, some of their friends in Newton, Mass. thought they had lost their minds. But in an important sense, it was a move they had been preparing for long before they ever heard the county's name. Both Ohioans, their migrations had taken them eventually to Massachusetts. First, Bob Rogers was at Boston University's Hillel House, the only gentile teaching religion in this Jewish school. ("They needed someone who would work through the high holidays"). After seven years there during which time the Rogers' two daughters cut their teeth on bagels, Bob went to the Newton College of the Sacred Heart to become the only Protestant teaching religion there. "You could say we were comfortable being minorities," he observes.

But Newton College was scheduled to close and the Rogerses cast about for other opportunities. One Bob Rogers found most intriguing was a chance to teach religion at Hampden-Sydney, a small liberal arts college offering strong relationships with students. There was something else. "There were Catholics, Protestants, Jews where we were," Gretchen Rogers says, "but the small African-American community was wiped out by the Massachusetts Turnpike. Newton, Mass., had very little integration. We wanted a fuller experience for ourselves and our kids."

They sat their fourth and ninth grade daughters down and put the matter to them. To their delight, both girls were enthusiastic. Bob would teach religion, Gretchen—whose graduate degree was in adult education—would join whoever was working to strengthen the public schools, and Jennifer and Margot would enroll in a school in which they would be among a tiny minority of white students. As a family, they all were prepared and willing to embrace this new situation. Gretchen had read up on the history of the Prince Edward school closings and took careful note that, despite the strife, there had been no violence.

Bob Rogers didn't want to live on campus at Hampden-Sydney. To both him and Gretchen it was important that the family be part of the community. They bought a fine, old house south of Farmville on Route 15, and lovingly and painstakingly restored it, turning it into a bed and breakfast. Even Prince Edward residents who did not care about public schools had to agree that the Rogerses had moved in to be part of the community. Their daughters, who had felt "poor" living in Newton with the children of people who vacationed in Europe suddenly felt "rich" (and a little uncomfortable) being left off at Linden by the school bus.

The timing of the couple's move turned out to be right for their ambitions both for the Prince Edward public school system and for an increasing role in government for African-Americans. They joined others working to appoint members of the board of education whose focus was on the public schools rather than the Academy. "We didn't necessarily get our people appointed," Gretchen Rogers says, "but it changed the kind of people who did get appointed." Gradually African-American members were appointed to the school board and elected to the board of supervisors. Then in 1982-83, Carl Eggleston, a local African-American funeral home director, successfully sued Farmville over its at-large electoral system for town council members. When wards were established, Eggleston won a place on the council from a majority African-American ward. By the mid eighties there were African-American members on the school board, board of supervisors,

and town council. When L. Douglas Wilder, an African-American, ran successfully for governor in 1989, Prince Edward County voted for him.

The Rogerses are both quick to say that they love Prince Edward County and consider making their home there to have been good for both them and their children. Gretchen Rogers told me that she found herself a little nervous with reporters around, now that Moton is back in the news. "Sometimes it feels like reporters are locking us in to what happened in the 1959-64 period and I hate that." Daughter Margot, now a staff attorney for the Center for Law and Education in Washington—working to level the playing field for the poor and minorities in education—considers Prince Edward County the formative experience of her life. She was one of the few white children in the fourth grade when her parents moved to the county. When she got to the sixth grade, she was sent to the school in the Worsham community. She talked about the experience: .

"It was a smaller and friendlier place to be, but the hard thing for me was the discipline. I had gone very free in Newton in a school where they gave more importance to 'ideas than to grammar. I had to spell and use good grammar at Worsham and write cursive. Also the discipline in the classroom. If it was deemed too rowdy, we would have a silent lunch. I got in trouble over that. I think the black community approved of firm-handed discipline in school. People got paddled in that school. But the parents were very responsive to the school community. I always wondered if it was having been denied education, you want to respond, take advantage of it."

She had a typical school experience in some ways, including two outstanding teachers, one white and one African-American. Still, she felt somewhat apart from her school community until the seventh grade, when she joined the band. She was the only white in the band but from that point on she felt accepted. "They (the band members) were my community, they were my friends." The band traveled frequently to other high schools and to African-American colleges. By the time she reached high school, there were more white students and she had at various times African-American and white best friends, went to her junior prom with an African-American boy and to her senior prom with a white boy.

The high school band marched and played downtown at Christmas time. One Christmas, as they turned on Main Street, Margot passed a group of white men, too old to be high school students. They jeered at her, called her "nigger-lover," and followed her along. By the time she

had reached the place on the street where her mother and father were standing, she was close to tears and her parents could see something was wrong. Her father met her at the end of the parade route. "It was such a shock," she says thinking back to the jeering. "It was something I didn't expect."

Word of the incident spread rapidly in the high school and the next day the band had a meeting from which she was excluded. Afterward several members came to her and told her that she was experiencing what they had experienced many times and that they understood. "The black guys who were my buddies and who were aware of the fact that I was in a position to draw attention made it clear that they were sympathetic and would look out for me. I felt very protected."

V

In search of a better understanding of what had happened in Prince Edward County, I dug back into time, beginning with Robert Russa Moton, himself. In his autobiography—*Finding a Way Out*—Moton, who succeeded Booker T. Washington as president of Tuskegee, described his post-Civil War boyhood in Prince Edward. Moton's father had hired himself out to Samuel Vaughan in January 1887, and was put in charge of field hands on the tobacco plantation. His mother, who had secretly learned to read despite severe penalties attached, was the cook, and the family was thus relatively privileged.

Nevertheless, Moton recalled the fear that struck the family group when a knock came on the door as they sat around the fire one night teaching young Robert to read. There was consternation, but Moton recalled his father's calmness. "He refused to let my mother hide the book. If the (Vaughan) family made any objection, my father said, they could find plenty of good work at good pay at any one of a dozen plantations in the district." Their nocturnal visitor proved to be Mrs. Vaughan, known affectionately as "Miss Lucy," who astonished the group by being very much pleased and by commending Moton's mother for being able to read and teaching her son. The next day the Vaughans' youngest daughter was commissioned to teach young Moton to read for one hour every afternoon. Moton noted that while there were no public schools "of any consequence either for white or colored children" at that time, one was opened later for African-American children a few miles from the Vaughan mansion.

Moton's description of the Vaughan family is instructive "They were the finest type of southern families—kind, thoughtful, and generous.

They were people of considerable wealth ... but at the same time they were of all white people the most popular among the Negroes. They visited Negro churches and prayer meetings and Negroes frequently visited the old Jamestown Presbyterian church to which the Vaughans belonged ... for many years the Vaughans conducted Sunday school in the afternoon at the church for colored people." Samuel V. Wilson, current president of Hampden-Sydney, is the great-grandson of Lucy Vaughn ("Miss Lucy") and is one who also points to the relative independence of the African-American population in Prince Edward County in early post-Civil War days. "The plantations were small, labor-intensive," he said. "Many of the African-Americans bought land or were in independent businesses."

These observations are confirmed by another famous African-American figure from the past, W.E.B. DuBois, who did a study of the African-American population of Farmville under direction of the United States Commissioner of Labor in August of 1897. DuBois noted that after the war 40 percent of Prince Edward's farms were of 50 acres of land or less. In Farmville, he found that the brick-maker for the entire county was a freedman who had purchased his master's estate, owned 1,000 acres of land, and employed 15 hands. He found among African-American businessmen seven grocers, five barbers, two blacksmiths, a wheelwright, four shoemakers, a furniture repairman, a silversmith, three contractors, a laundryman (running the county's only steam laundry), a jailor (who was also a wood merchant and whip maker) a bakeryman and a hotelier plus painters, cabinetmakers, coopers, and plasterers. Many of these were also tobacco. Jim Ghee, who called the study to my attention, describes it as "an amazing picture of Negro life only 35 years out of slavery." He called attention to DuBois' section on the strength of the former slaves' religious life at that time, commenting that it was strong then and remains so today.

To my mind, this helps explain the strength and solidity of the African-American community in the late 1950's at the time of the school strike and during the closings. It helps explain the presence of a Vernon Johns, a Leslie Griffin, and a Barbara Johns and other leaders. Those who would know why the suit against the schools occurred in Prince Edward must look to this leadership. Those who would know why the schools closed in response must look to the convictions of the white leadership at the time and to feelings among the white population in this county in an age of inflamed pro-segregation sentiment in the South.

The other question that has perplexed many observers is, with feelings so high, how did Prince Edward go through those tense, difficult four years of no schooling for African-American youth and the public demonstrations for civil rights afterward without violence? Otto Overton, the recently retired Farmville police chief, believes that it was a matter of generally good people keeping lines of communication open between them. "My brother Jack was the sheriff and he and I were dear friends with the Rev. Griffin and I give Mr. Griffin and Ben Marshall (a prominent local African-American contractor) a lot of credit for avoiding violence. The white leadership didn't want violence either. Bob Crawford, (president of the Defenders of State Sovereignty and Individual Liberties) I don't believe had an enemy in this world and Mr. Wall (J. Barry Wall, editor of The Farmville Herald) didn't want any violence either."

The Overtons grew up on a farm in the Rice community of Prince Edward where their parents and the African-American tenants shared hard times during the Depression. Other conventions of segregation may have been observed but everyone ate together in the kitchen. To this day one of Overton's friends is an African-American who worked his father's farm and later bought his own farm. "My father brought us up to treat everyone the way you would like to be treated," he said.

When Bobby Kennedy visited Prince Edward during the school closings in 1963, Otto Overton told the president's brother he didn't have to worry about violence. He remembers that he was concerned but that Kennedy didn't worry at all. Later on in Danville, the Overton brothers watched as peaceful civil rights demonstrators were herded into hot, crowded vans and carried to a central jail. They didn't think that was smart law-keeping. Overton remembers Stokely Carmichael's visit and the Rev. Mr. Griffin telling him that if he could control the whites, all would be well, that there would be no violence from the African-Americans. "This is a good place to live," Overton observed in the same words used by others I talked with of both races.

Overton's observation reminded me of the Rev. Mr. Griffin's great political skills and the respect in which he was held in the African-American community. It also reminded me that the Defenders, unlike the White Citizen Councils in the lower South, had placed strict injunction against violent action. And that Griffin, himself, in a moment of reflection had said to me that "to a degree"—and he emphasized the word degree—"this still comes down to an argument between gentlemen." That recollection set me to digging through the pages of V.O. Key's "Southern Politics," published in 1949 and still a classic of

observation about the South, for a half-remembered quote. "In a word," Key had written, "politics in Virginia is reserved for those who can qualify as gentlemen. Rabble-rousing and Negro baiting capacities, which in Georgia or Mississippi would be a great political asset, simply mark a person as one not to the manner born."

VI

Ken Woodley, the youthful editor of *The Farmville Herald*, agrees that Prince Edward County and Farmville are great places. He sometimes worries a little that his commitment to the community (he is president of the Chamber of Commerce) might represent a conflict of interest for a journalist. On the other hand—in a different, earlier journalistic tradition he may never have consciously studied—he thinks that commentary from one who stands personally aside from the civic fray could amount to a cop-out. However that may be, while he was not trained as a journalist, he is a talented, natural editorialist.

He was involved in busing as a youth in Richmond and went to a school that had a 90 percent African-American student body. In some ways, his experience paralleled that of Margot Rogers in Prince Edward. "I can honestly say that some of my best friends in that school were black. In my all-white, conservative environment, the songs of the 60's were affirmations of my own feelings. I had crushes on two teachers, one of them African-American and one white, went to the proms and danced with black and white girls."

Woodley went to Hampden-Sydney, graduated with a liberal arts degree, and came to work at the *Herald*. Eventually, he began to write editorials and is currently responsible to Steve Wall, the *Herald's* publisher and a grandson of the late J. Barrye Wall. Steve Wall describes his relationship with Woodley as very good and adds: "People in the street ask me why he said what he said today and I say it's his business to say what he thinks. If I tell him what to say, I might as well do the job myself. We get together and discuss elections." Wall, himself, sends his children to public schools rather than to the private Fuqua school.

Wall expressed an opinion I got from other whites I talked with in the county in my recent trips. He is tired of what he and others call "Prince Edward bashing," put-downs of the county by people who live at a distance and assume that the school-closing mentality must still rule there. Woodley, himself, has been critical of this practice. He believes that a vote in the county today would provide support for the

idea of turning Moton into a civil rights museum. At the same time, asked about the white community's true feelings about the project, Woodley told me: "A lot of people wish they could wake up and the whole thing would be gone. They could come forward instead and join hands and be an example of healing in the country."

There are divisions in the white community and some in the African-American community. Elsie Carrington, an African-American member of the board of supervisors and president of the local NAACP, has spoken out opposing the idea as not the best use of the property. Early on in the current Moton business, public officials were quoted as saying that the only real support for the civil rights museum was coming from the older, African-American women—the Martha E. Forrester Council, to be specific. Lacy B. Ward, Jr., field representative for U.S. Congressman Lewis F. Payne, Jr., disputed that publicly, arguing that there is a broad support for the Moton transformation across the African-American population.

Later, Ward, a young African-American gifted politically and a most influential, behind-the-scenes leader in the Moton project, talked about the council's effort to expand in such a way that it could not be seen as merely a group of older women. To be more inclusive, he said, the council has tended to insist that supporters of the project become members. "Many people who would help are not interested in being members of the council," Ward said. "It's a major area of contention." I found Vera Allen, the council president, aware of the problem. Both Allen and Ward see as the new leader in the thrust for inclusion inside and outside the county Henry Marsh, a lawyer who was a member of the firm of NAACP lawyers Spottswood Robinson and Oliver Hill in Richmond as far back as 1961. Marsh's firm has been retained to help the council pursue its goal.

To me, submerged divisions over the Moton project are far less remarkable than the considerable, public support the project has engendered. Such "silent" opposition as exists in the county can be read in different ways. Sam Wilson, president of Hampden-Sydney, believes a good deal of it is "guilt" over the community "crime" of school closings. "People who didn't speak up in opposition to the closings are sorry they didn't and there are children of parents who didn't speak up who are ashamed of their parents." Even among some professing support now Wilson detects hypocrisy. "Some people here (Hampden-Sydney) who sat silent and who watched this thing (the school closings) happen now boast that the one Rhodes Scholar we've had since the school closings is a black man."

Wilson believes that improvements in race relations that have occurred in Prince Edward County since school closing days are the result, first, of broader sea-changes in the country resulting from the Brown v. Board decision, second the "guilt" mentioned above, and, finally, the character of the African-American population in Prince Edward. "The extraordinary courage and patience they displayed with which to meet this terrible situation," is the way he puts it. "It's the Christian ethic being expressed by a community." Recently Wilson established the Jasper Dennis Wilson scholarship, named after his father and providing \$2,500 per year to an African-American student at Hampden-Sydney, with preference going to one from Prince Edward County.

Wilson came back home to Prince Edward County after a distinguished military career that occupied him elsewhere during the troubling school closing period. That instinct—to come "home" to Prince Edward—ran like a symphonic motif through the interviews I had in the county, as much or more with the African-Americans with whom I talked. Lacy Ward went to grades one through six in Philadelphia, then came home and lives within a half-mile of where his mother was born. Vera Allen and her two daughters, scattered by the school closings and the daughters' education, all came back. James Samuel Williams, one of the victims of the school strike and who worked with the Rev. Mr. Griffin during the closings, became a minister, worked in New York and New Jersey, but came back to take a ministry in the county and is now working actively for the Moton project. Time after time, the same story—a hejira and then a return to homeland.

I asked Edwilda Isaac to talk with me about this. "It's home," she responded with a warm smile and a shrug. But as she talked on, mixed with stories of mean treatment of African-Americans by some whites during the school closings, were stories of an opposing kind. "Many white people were behind our cause but couldn't say so," she told me. "At least once a week we would get an envelope from somebody in Farmville, no note, but \$5 or \$10." Then she told this story, eerily reflective of Moton's story of a century before.

"My father always talked to us about things. He decided his daughters were going to play music. He started us at six and we had a black teacher who left the area. The only other black teacher said 'you have outgrown me. My father went to Longwood College where they had a well-known music teacher. My father said 'I want you to teach my daughters. The professor told him to get us to wait outside his office on the street until it was time for lessons. He would come out and see

if anyone was coming and if not we would slip in through the big window to his office." Now Isaac teaches piano and has both white and African-American students. "I don't see races," she says, "I see behavior. I sound white when I sing because white people taught me how to sing."

The sense of "place"—Prince Edward as a "good place to live"—seems to me to be critical in any understanding of what has happened in these thirty-plus years since the school closing. Place and accountability seem to go securely together. If you are living in a small community where everyone knows something about everyone else, you may have bitter disputes—as families have bitter disputes—but in the end you cannot escape some feelings of accountability, no matter how ambivalent.

In this sense, there is another, more positive way to look at individual or collective sense of guilt, and that is as regret. The great silent mass of whites who did not respond to Woodley's blockbuster editorials supporting or opposing the Moton project, and who will not speak on the subject for the record to anyone, indeed is composed of many people who wish it would all go away. But among even these are many who stay silent because it is difficult to find words to express conflicting emotions, including a sense of accountability and inevitably regret.

I have visited schools and communities around the country as part of my work in recent years and have been struck by the power of this sense of place and accountability to make good schools and the converse power of alienation and anonymity to make bad schools-- recognizing of course that there is the conundrum of which comes first, the breakdown of schooling or the loss of community. I have not been to Summerton, S.C., or Topeka, Kan., or Wilmington, Del., but I have been to the schools in the nation's capital where there is a sense of anomie and hopelessness and a deep loss of accountability, as is the case in many urban centers around the country. In such circumstances brave teachers do what they can with what they have before them in the morning and try not to count the losses.

Meanwhile, in Prince Edward County, where the psychic wounds still burn deep, it is clear that healing has been going on for some time below the surface. But if the Moton project is to gain steam, truly involve massive public support, it will have to be seen not as a rebuke to the past but as a token of reconciliation for the present and a mark of hope for the future. This full community support, and a degree of

active participation, will be called for and so will conviction, and the willingness to work hard, if the Moton project is to reach fruition.

It's difficult to predict whether this will happen but there are hopeful signs and benign omens. Not long ago Sarah Terry, executive director of the Farmville Area Chamber of Commerce, conceived the idea of a church unity march in response to church burnings in the Southeast. More than 500 people showed up one Sunday evening for the hour and one-half walk that involved moments of prayer at six African-American and white churches, and that resulted in over \$1,000 collected for burned churches. More people participated actively in this function than did in a similar event in Charlottesville, which has a far larger population base. The Rev. David Ramsey, pastor of the Farmville Baptist Church, concluded his talk to the crowd by quoting from a lyric by Oscar Hammerstein, II, from "South Pacific"--"You've got to be taught to hate and to fear ... you've got to be carefully taught." And then he added his own observation. "Tonight we have learned that one can be taught that love can conquer hate."

The news article about the march was impressive and the pictures of the crowd accompanying it were instructive. I recognized a handful of people I knew, both white and African-American. Involved in the arch, I later learned, in addition to ministers of both races, were educators of both races from Longwood and Hampden-Sydney. Bob Rogers, on the Hampden-Sydney faculty, had told me that the turnover at that school had brought in many people who felt strongly about racial equality and my interviews convinced me that he is right. Clergy, then, and post-secondary educators—silent during the school closings—now are involved working for inter-racial amity. And now, as not in the past, a strong, successful and integrated public school system with its own cadre of leadership is committed to the cause of equality and positive about the Moton project. Finally, powerful leadership comes from the county's major organ of communication, The Farmville Herald.

The potential for positive leadership from both races, then, is much greater than anyone residing outside Prince Edward County could imagine, even from the peaceful and business-like integrated front exhibited in downtown Farmville and in its schools. When I ask myself whether this means that the Moton supporters will raise the millions of dollars they need to buy Moton and convert it successfully into a "living museum," I have to agree that it's not easy to believe. But in the end, I find it even harder to believe that the community will sit by and watch Moton High School—after all that has happened there and

after what has been happening in the community in recent years—torn down. When I try to imagine a commercial venture standing where this school, with all its symbolism, has stood since 1939, I cannot, even though I understand that it could happen.

After three visits back to Prince Edward over the past months, I have come to believe that this county can make out of its regrets for the past and out of its pride in what has happened since those dark days a ringing statement with meaning for the present and for the future. I think that the very fact of this darker history will make that important in the healing process within the county. If so, the county will end up teaching many who otherwise would have scorned its name. In the process it will write a story as fine and uplifting as any that is being written in this country today. One worth telling over and over again to the grandchildren and the children of the grandchildren.

¹ *The Virginia Quarterly Review: A National Journal of Literature and Discussion*.
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