

APPALACHIAN ACTIVISTS: THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN ASHEVILLE, NC

A Thesis  
by  
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NORTH CAROLINA

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## **Abstract**

### **APPALACHIAN ACTIVISTS: THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN ASHEVILLE, NC**

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While stories of the Civil Rights movement have been burned into the American consciousness through events that took place in large cities, such as, The March on Washington and the Montgomery Bus Boycotts, certain regions have been left out of the narrative. One region that has remained nearly invisible in the nation's memory of the Civil Rights Movement is Appalachia. For most Appalachian historians, the belief remains that this struggle for equality never permeated the mountains. However, this thesis works to prove that the Civil Rights Movement most definitely thrived in a portion of Appalachia

This thesis chronicles the untold story of Asheville, North Carolina's Civil Rights Movement. From 1917 to 1965, members of Asheville's black community led a peaceful movement to bring about racial equality in their town. Throughout this 48 year endeavor, these civil rights activists successfully furthered the social and political standing of Asheville's black community by employing a unique negotiation strategy that was influenced by their town's burgeoning tourism industry.

## **Acknowledgments**

First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. Bruce Stewart for his continued support and guidance throughout this entire project. Without his help, this thesis would have never come to fruition. A special thanks also goes to my committee members Dr. Amy Rutenberg and Dr. Andrea Burns for helping me connect Asheville's Civil Rights Movement to that of the greater U.S. Lastly, many thanks to Dean Williams of the ASU Library's Special Collections for his help during countless hours of sifting through Asheville's local newspapers.

## **Dedication**

To my mother and father for their unwavering support throughout the entirety of this project.

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## **Introduction**

During the summer of 1960, an inter-class coalition of black teenagers and adults staged a restaurant sit-in campaign in Asheville, a popular tourist town located in western North Carolina. The campaign drew inspiration from the Woolworth's sit-ins that had recently occurred in nearby Greensboro and came to fruition after months of ample planning, practice, and organization. When the day came to enact the plan, groups of black teenagers and adults visited every segregated restaurant in downtown Asheville and peacefully asked to dine inside each establishment. Most of the restaurant owners refused to comply with the activists' requests. Days later, however, negotiations between the demonstrators and the town's white leadership commenced and quickly ended with the desegregation of several of Asheville's white-only lunch counters. One of the activists later spoke of this expedient resolution, "We knew they would agree because Asheville was a tourist town...and they didn't want any trouble like what was going on with the Civil Rights Movement in other parts of North Carolina."<sup>1</sup>

These civil rights activists succeeded in quietly integrating Asheville's restaurants virtually overnight because of their town's status as a major tourist destination. Since the 1830s, tourism had formed the backbone of Asheville's economy. As such, to attract visitors, the town's white officials had long fought to portray their community as a place of peaceful

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<sup>1</sup> Marvin Chambers, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, Center for Diversity in Education, UNC at Asheville, North Carolina, Asheville, NC, March 4, 2005.



and harmonious race relations. This fabricated image is what historian Darin J. Waters recently referred to as Asheville's Veneer of Racial Harmony.<sup>2</sup> Knowing that tourists would likely not venture to a town in the midst of racial turmoil, white leaders continuously worked to marginalize and hide the city's black population between the 1830s and 1960s. Through this process, Asheville's white establishment covered up the local black community's gradual and successful civil rights campaign, one that began in the early twentieth century.

This thesis seeks to illuminate Asheville's hidden civil rights movement. During the twentieth century, black Ashevilleans effectively advanced the social and political standing of their community. The movement began in the 1910s as one exclusive to the black elite before gradually growing into a classless and ageless endeavor during the 1960s. Although the players in Asheville's civil rights movement may have changed, their strategy continued to follow a style endemic to Asheville. That chosen style came in the form of negotiations in which the black community leveraged the integrity of Asheville's Veneer of Racial Harmony to enact legislative change in the name of racial equality.

The thesis's first chapter will chronicle the creation of Asheville's Veneer of Racial Harmony during the town's rise as a tourist destination and examine this process's role in structuring Asheville's racial dynamics throughout the nineteenth century. The following chapter will explore Asheville's civil rights movement from its beginnings in 1917 up until 1959. This chapter will highlight the gradual transition of Asheville's movement from an upper-class crusade into an endeavor that encompassed the entire African American community. Chapter Three will narrate the movement from 1960 to 1965 as Asheville's

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<sup>2</sup> Darin J. Waters, "Life Beneath the Veneer: The Black Community in Asheville, North Carolina from 1793 to 1900" (Ph.D. diss., the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2011), 11.

black youth – having organized the Asheville Student Committee on Racial Equality (ASCORE) – took the helm, bringing with them influences from the Civil Rights Movement occurring elsewhere in the United States.

While most scholarship contends that the Civil Rights Movement bypassed Appalachia, this thesis reveals that the fight for racial equality not only permeated but also thrived in at least one part of the region: Asheville. Using the town’s Veneer of Racial Harmony as a negotiating tool, civil rights activists in Asheville successfully altered the social and political landscape of their city. Created to subordinate Asheville’s black population, the Veneer of Racial Harmony ironically became a tool that liberated local African Americans from white oppression.

### **Historiography**

Until the 1980s, most scholars turned a blind eye to the lives and legacies of black people living in the mountain South. This was largely due to the so-called Myth of Appalachian Exceptionalism. At the turn of the twentieth century, local color novelists, missionaries, and educators – hoping to stress the benefits of “modernity” and reaffirm their cultural superiority – depicted Appalachia as an unwanted remnant of the colonial era. According to them, the mountains of Appalachia served as a physical barrier that prevented civilization from entering the region, thereby making its inhabitants backwards and economically impoverished. These writers ultimately portrayed Appalachia as “exceptional.

Disconnected from the rest of the nation, it was a place where residents continued to adhere to primitive social, political, and economic customs.<sup>3</sup>

In an effort to paint Appalachia as a foreign realm, proponents of Appalachian Exceptionalism portrayed the entirety of the region's inhabitants as Anglo-Saxons. In turn, this led many scholars to ignore the role that African Americans played in mountain society. Consequently, the view of Appalachia's racial purity flourished and the notion of the region's "black invisibility" came to fruition. Throughout most of the twentieth century, this so-called Myth of Black Invisibility existed as a major obstacle to the study of African Americans in Appalachia. Effectively, historians negated a black population that had resided in the Appalachian region for over 400 years.<sup>4</sup>

The Myth of Black Invisibility held strong because blacks in Appalachia supposedly led lives that did not conform to the social and cultural stereotypes of African Americans elsewhere in the United States. Essentially, this contrast in lifestyle rendered blacks in Appalachia unfit for historical study. Other historians chose to ignore black Appalachians because they supposedly failed to fit the criteria as the subordinate farmhand synonymous with the African American actors in the dominant Southern history narrative.<sup>5</sup> Proponents of "Black Invisibility" also supported their beliefs by pointing to the low population density of blacks in Appalachia. Sociologist John C. Belcher wrote of this phenomena: "The number of

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<sup>3</sup> David S. Walls and Dwight B. Billings, "The Sociology of Southern Appalachia," *Appalachian Journal* 5 (1977): 132; Henry D. Shapiro, *Appalachia on our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 22.

<sup>4</sup> Theda Perdue, "Red and Black in the Southern Appalachians," *Southern Exposure* 12 (1984):56.

<sup>5</sup> William H. Turner and Edward J. Cabbell, *Blacks in Appalachia* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University of Press of Kentucky, 1985), 5; Joe William Trotter, *Coal, Class and Color: Blacks in Southern West Virginia, 1915-1932* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 7.

Negroes in the Appalachian region is such a small proportion of the total population that ... the social consequences of their presence and migration are not of any great significance.”<sup>6</sup>

It was not until the publication of William H. Turner and Edward J. Cabell’s *Blacks in Appalachia* in 1985 that scholars began to challenge the Myth of Black Invisibility in the mountain South. Focusing on the actions of Appalachia’s black population between the 1600s and 1900s, Turner and Cabell demonstrated that African Americans there were neither invisible nor insignificant. Instead, they argued, mountain blacks had long existed as a “unified, coherent and independent community that held agency in shaping the social, economic, and cultural dynamics in the region as a whole.”<sup>7</sup> Turner and Cabell also revealed that – contrary to popular misconception – race relations in Appalachia mirrored those that existed elsewhere in the South. In the end, *Blacks in Appalachia* shed light on a self-sufficient community rooted in a long tradition of collectivism in the face of racial injustices.

Published in 2000, John C. Inscoe’s edited volume *Appalachians and Race* further challenged the Myth of Black Invisibility. Expanding upon the themes raised in *Blacks in Appalachia*, Inscoe and the other contributors chronicled the history of black Appalachians throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In his essay, Inscoe demonstrated that mountain residents’ notion of race was static. According to him, race relations in nineteenth-century Appalachia underwent a metamorphosis that was mandated by the modernization of the region and its introduction into the national economy. Although anomalies existed, Inscoe continued, “Appalachia’s exploitation of black labor, slave and free, along with the racial violence and political manipulation of the post-Civil War era, all

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<sup>6</sup> John C. Belcher, “Population Growth and Characteristics,” in *The Southern Appalachian Region: A survey* (Ford: Lexington, 1967), 152.

<sup>7</sup> Turner and Cabbell, *Blacks in Appalachia*, 5.

seem to chronicle patterns and trends very much like those elsewhere in the South.”<sup>8</sup> In his previous work on slavery in western North Carolina, Inscoc also revealed that race relations between African Americans and whites in Appalachia resembled those that existed elsewhere in the antebellum South. According to him, slavery was a widespread institution in western North Carolina that infected the area with race-relations that mirrored those of the Plantation South.<sup>9</sup> Inscoc’s scholarship ultimately showed that Appalachia’s black population played a significant role in the shaping of the region’s economic and cultural landscape.

### **The Civil Rights Movement in Appalachia**

Though shedding light on the black experience in Appalachia, recent historians have focused almost exclusively on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As such, scholarship on contemporary black Appalachians, especially those who lived during the Civil Rights Movement, remains slim. Those few studies that have examined mountain blacks’ fight for racial equality fit into three different schools of thought that attempt to connect Appalachian activists to the master narrative of the Civil Rights Movement. Most of this research suggests that the few fruitful movements that occurred in Appalachia found success largely due to close ties with national civil rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). However, some researchers found that grassroots organizations also led effective civil rights campaigns. Nonetheless, the dominant school of thought contends that civil rights activism in Appalachia was weak and fragmented.

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<sup>8</sup> John C. Inscoc, edit., *Appalachians and Race: The Mountain South From Slavery to Segregation* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2000), 19.

<sup>9</sup> John C. Inscoc, *Mountain Masters, Slavery, and the Sectional Crisis in Western North Carolina* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 104-117.

Several historians have argued that civil rights efforts in Appalachia were virtually non-existent. One of the first works on the Civil Rights Movement in Appalachia was Fayette A. Allen's 1974 article "Blacks in Appalachia." In it, Allen argued that "canvassing the region for organized black groups was futile" because "the Civil Rights movement passed over black Appalachians and the people were left to fend for themselves."<sup>10</sup> Allen rejected the validity and influence of grassroots civil rights groups in southern Appalachia, claiming that they were powerless in the face of the white power structure. According to her, national black civil rights organizations did not appear in the region until 1969 with the introduction of the Atlanta-based Black Action Committee. However, Allen concluded, the Black Action Committee failed to further the civil rights cause in the region largely due to the rampant "geographic and social isolation among blacks in Appalachia."<sup>11</sup> Turner and Cabell upheld Allen's claims, insisting that "the civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s by-passed the mountains."<sup>12</sup> In essence, these authors agree that mountain black activism lay dormant during the Civil Rights Movement because African Americans in the region supposedly lacked communal ties and connections to national civil rights organizations.

Mary Waalkes and Donna Summerlin echoed the sentiments of Allen in their survey of school integration in eastern Tennessee. Waalkes and Summerlin maintained that the region's supposed benign race relations prevented civil rights activists from organizing. According to them, white resistance to school integration in eastern Tennessee was minimal

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<sup>10</sup> Fayette A. Allen, "The Black Family," *Black Scholar* 9 (1974): 51.

<sup>11</sup> Allen, "The Black Family," 45.

<sup>12</sup> Turner and Cabbell, *Blacks in Appalachia*, 5.

largely because the institution of slavery had been weak, thereby never allowing the southern racial hierarchy to perpetuate itself in Appalachia.<sup>13</sup>

Other scholars like Bobby Lovett have stressed the integral role that national organizations played in allowing black Appalachians to combat racism. Published in 2005, Lovett's *Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History* was the first work to narrate a successful civil rights campaign in Appalachia. In it, Lovett focused on African American activism in Nashville, Chattanooga, and Knoxville, where – according to him – there existed collective action committees comparable to those in the greater South. Ultimately, he argued, it was in Tennessee's largest cities that the revolutionary fervor of the Civil Rights Movement took hold. In most cases, these Tennessean civil rights' committees received the backing and support of the NAACP. Lovett persuasively demonstrated that "Tennessee's story belongs within the broader American and world history narrative about civil rights struggle and the ultimate peace of humankind."<sup>14</sup>

Katherine Fosl and Tracy K'meyer also underscored the importance of national black organizations in their examination of the Civil Rights Movement in eastern Kentucky. Lacking written records, Fosl and K'meyer used oral interviews with Kentucky mountain inhabitants to demonstrate that the national movement for equality found its way to the region. Their work ultimately gave voice to several black Kentuckians who had found a degree of political and social agency through their protests against racial discrimination during the 1960s. These interviewees explained that television scenes of civil unrest

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Waalkes and Donna Summerlin, "Flying Below the Radar: Activist, Paternalist, and Obstructionist Responses to the Civil Rights Movement in Three East Tennessee Communities," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 66 (2007): 270-293.

<sup>14</sup> Bobby L. Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 323.

elsewhere in the South encouraged mountain blacks in eastern Kentucky to advocate for racial equality. However, Fosl and K'meyer concluded, these activists also found a great deal of support from larger civil rights organizations located in Louisville.

Recently, some scholars have highlighted the existence of grassroots movements in Appalachia that held little to no connection with national civil rights organizations. This scholarship has revealed that white hostility towards African Americans in the region was rampant during the 1960s. In response, blacks there stood up for their rights and, in particular, demanded the integration of public schools. Betty Jamerson's *School Segregation in Western North Carolina: A History, 1860s-1970s*, for instance, shows that on three different occasions, small groups of African Americans in western North Carolina banded together to forge a better educational future for their children.<sup>15</sup>

Amanda Cole Brewer expanded upon Betty Jamerson's argument in her M.A. thesis entitled "Get On Board, Children: The Story of Integration in Yancey County, North Carolina." Brewer's extensive look at the 1959 public school integration campaign in Yancey County sheds light on a group of black families that sued their local school system in district court to desegregate their county's schools. Employing one of North Carolina's most prominent desegregation lawyers, Ruben J. Dailey, these Yancey County activists integrated the public education system and ended a bussing tradition that had forced many black students to take 80-mile-round trips to surrounding schools.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Betty R. Jamerson, *School Segregation in Western North Carolina: A History, 1860s-1970s* (New York: Mcfarland, 2011), 21.

<sup>16</sup> A.C. Brewer. "Get On Board, Children: The Story of Integration in Yancey County, North Carolina" (Unpublished master's thesis, Appalachian State University, 2011), 11-15.



In “Religion, Race, Gender and Education at the Allen School, Asheville, North Carolina, 1885-1974,” Jamie Butcher also found a thriving civil rights campaign with roots endemic to the Appalachian town of Asheville, North Carolina. Butcher discovered that the Allen School quite literally bred a revolutionary fervor within its all-black student population during the Civil Rights Movement. As a college preparatory school, teachers there challenged students to think critically and analyze the problems of the world around them. By the 1960s, the school held an “activist orientation that complemented the school’s role in the struggle for integration.”<sup>17</sup> Butcher’s arguments challenge the conventional wisdom regarding the Civil Rights Movement in Appalachia, showing that there were cases of protest in the region’s educational institutions.<sup>18</sup>

Although uncovering instances of black activism in Appalachia, this recent scholarship has focused exclusively on the so-called classical phase of the Civil Rights Movement that occurred between 1954 and 1964. The Civil Rights Movement in Asheville, however, emerged well before 1954. As early as 1917, black Ashevilleans had already begun to mobilize against racial inequality. Because of the Asheville administration’s efforts to whitewash this story, locals who lived during the town’s civil rights campaign – as well as scholars – remain largely unaware of its existence. This thesis, then, will unearth and chronicle the forgotten history of Asheville’s “long” civil rights movement from 1917 to 1965.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Jamie Butcher, “Religion, Race, Gender and Education at the Allen School, Asheville, North Carolina, 1885-1974,” *Appalachian Journal* 33 (2005): 473-501.

<sup>18</sup> Butcher, “Religion, Race, Gender and Education at the Allen School, Asheville, North Carolina, 1885-1974,” 478.

<sup>19</sup> Jacquelyn D. Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past.” *The Journal of American History* 14 (2005): 1241. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall introduced the notion of the long civil rights movement arguing that this national endeavor found its roots before the 1920s.

## Chapter 1- The Construction of Asheville's Veneer of Racial Harmony

Most scholarship on the African American experience in Appalachia suggests that the region's white population was more tolerant of blacks than whites elsewhere in the nineteenth-century South. Many historians attribute this supposed moderate racial climate to the fact that slavery was not widespread in the rural and disconnected mountains of Appalachia. Thus, they argue, the plantation dynamic present in the Deep South, which rendered African Americans as complete subordinates to white society, never entirely perpetuated itself into Appalachian culture.<sup>20</sup> Other historians point towards the low population density of African Americans in western North Carolina and other parts of the mountain South as an additional reason for the region's supposed benign racial climate.<sup>21</sup>

An examination of the African American experience in nineteenth-century Asheville, however, reveals a different story. Contrary to popular misconception, the institution of slavery thrived in Asheville and race relations there mirrored those elsewhere in the Deep South. However, in an attempt to promote tourism in the area, local whites – with the help of journalists – portrayed Asheville as town of racial peace, creating what historian Darin J. Waters has called the Veneer of Racial Harmony.<sup>22</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century, the Veneer of Racial Harmony dictated the nature of slavery, the development of post-Civil War

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<sup>20</sup> John C. Campbell, *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1921), 91.

<sup>21</sup> Belcher, *The Southern Appalachian Region: A Survey*, 152; Turner and Cabbell, *Blacks in Appalachia*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Waters, "Life Beneath the Veneer," 19.

race relations, and the formation of Asheville's black community. As such, Asheville's Veneer of Racial Harmony is integral to understanding the structure, strategy, and spirit of the town's civil rights movement that would emerge in the twentieth century.

### **Slavery and Tourism in Antebellum Asheville**

African Americans have long been present in Asheville and other parts of western North Carolina. In fact, blacks' arrival to the region predated that of Scots-Irish and English settlers. According to historian Theda Perdue, African Americans first came to western North Carolina with Spanish explorers as slaves in the early 1500s. Many of these blacks would eventually escape their Spanish captors and settle with the area's Native American tribes, taking on Indian wives and raising mixed race families.<sup>23</sup> It was not until after the American Revolutionary War, however, that African Americans would move into the region in large numbers. Most of them were the slaves of Scots-Irish and English migrants who sought to capitalize on western North Carolina's lush and fertile soils.<sup>24</sup> By 1800, in Buncombe County, where Asheville is located, blacks made up 6.5 percent of the population.<sup>25</sup>

During the antebellum period, slavery quickly emerged as a profitable institution in western North Carolina. As historian John C. Inscoe has discovered, because of the region's rugged terrain and short growing season, mountain slaveholders found it impossible to rely solely on large-scale agricultural production to earn a profit. Consequently, Inscoe argued, these slaveholders – unlike those in the Deep South – increasingly became dependent on nonagricultural enterprises to make a living. Indeed, most slaveholders in Asheville and other

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<sup>23</sup> Perdue, "Red and Black in the Southern Appalachians," 56.

<sup>24</sup> Lenwood Davis, *The Black Heritage of Western North Carolina* (Asheville: the University of North Carolina at Asheville, 1996) 12.

<sup>25</sup> Waters, "Life Beneath the Veneer," 11.

mountain communities were not planters but business owners. Many of them made their fortunes in the area's thriving livestock trade, using their slaves to run cattle stands. Other white residents, who held stakes in the mineral industry, utilized slaves in their ironwork and mining operations.<sup>26</sup> Eager to make money, mountain masters also frequently hired out their slaves to neighboring farmers and storeowners. By the 1850s, the number of slaveholders in western North Carolina had increased by 11.9 percent, no doubt a result of the peculiar institution's economic importance in the region.<sup>27</sup>

Another way in which mountain slaveholders – especially those in Asheville – profited from human bondage was through the tourist industry. In the 1790s, wealthy rice plantation owners from Georgia and South Carolina had begun to vacation in Asheville and other parts of western North Carolina. These men and women retreated to the mountains during the summer months in an attempt to escape the sweltering heat of their homes and the illnesses that they believed were associated with the coastal climate.<sup>28</sup> During the 1830s, these tourists would increasingly visit western North Carolina largely due the creation of the Buncombe Turnpike. Completed in 1828, this transportation artery quickly linked the region's cattle, mining, and agricultural industries to the larger market economy. In 1848, traveler Charles Lanman described the economic impact that the Buncombe Turnpike had on Asheville, pointing out that “quite a large amount of merchandise [was] constantly transported [over it to] merchants” in the town. In addition to stimulating trade, Lanman continued, the turnpike helped facilitate the rise of the livestock industry, as “an immense number of cattle, horses, and hogs” passed through the road in Asheville on their way to

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<sup>26</sup> Inscoc, *Mountain Masters*, 59.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 67.

<sup>28</sup> Richard D. Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky: Tourism and Society in Western North Carolina* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005), 56.

Charleston and other markets in South Carolina.<sup>29</sup> More importantly, the turnpike quickly transformed Asheville into a popular tourist destination, making it easier for coastal planters to visit the town.<sup>30</sup>

Tourism in Asheville also received a boost due to the publication of travel writings in *Harper's Weekly* and other popular national periodicals. During the 1840s and 1850s, travel writers such as David Hunter Strother depicted western North Carolina as a beautiful land untouched by modernity, an image that encouraged a growing number of urbanites to visit the area. These writers also perpetuated the view of harmonious race relations in Asheville. In 1857, for instance, Strother portrayed slaves in Asheville as happy servants who faithfully obeyed their benevolent masters by working as porters, cooks, and guides.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, most Americans would view these stories as truthful representations of Asheville. Upon visiting Asheville, they expected to discover a town where blacks “knew their place” and lived harmoniously with the white population. In the decades to come, local whites – hoping to capitalize on the tourist industry – would do their best to promote this veneer of racial harmony.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the number of inns, hotels, and restaurants in downtown Asheville increased as residents scrambled to accommodate tourists. Not surprisingly, whites relied heavily on slave labor to maintain these establishments. Female slaves worked as cooks and chambermaids in restaurants and hotel kitchens, while most male slaves operated as porters, servants, janitors, and waiters.<sup>32</sup> The position of a hotel worker granted slaves the highest degree of autonomy. These slaves frequently worked unsupervised

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<sup>29</sup> Charles Lanman, *Letters From the Alleghany Mountains* (New York, New York: G.P. Putnam, 1849), 123.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> David Hunter Strother, “A Winter in the South,” *Harper's Weekly*, May 1857, 26.

<sup>32</sup> Waters, “Life Beneath the Veneer, 19.

for extended periods of time and sometimes independently oversaw hotel operations. The experience of the hotel slave, however, was an exception to Asheville's broader slave narrative. Slaves picked to work in Asheville's hotels, for instance, were often of lighter complexion than those chosen to perform outdoor manual labor.<sup>33</sup> These conditions resembled those of the plantation South, where lighter skinned slaves held an advantage in the labor pool and worked as "House Negroes." Moreover, although treated as commodities, Asheville's hotel slaves were less affected by the violence and mistreatment that many of their fellow slaves who toiled outside of the service industry had to endure.<sup>34</sup>

Hoping to attract wealthy southern tourists, Asheville's elite aimed to paint slaves in the service industry as happy and subordinate. Unrest in the slave population, they feared, threatened to drive tourists out of Asheville who came to the area to enjoy the peace and tranquility of the mountains. The town's white leadership ultimately sought to harness the productive power of their slaves while keeping the African American population's presence invisible to their guests. By necessity, slaves working within the town's tourist sector learned to be unseen and unheard in the undertaking of their duties.<sup>35</sup> Content subordination came to be the behavioral standard for slaves working in the tourism industry. This behavioral blueprint remained an integral piece in the town's Veneer of Racial Harmony during the next 130 years.

While Asheville whites' portrayed slavery as a benevolent institution, their interpretation was far from reality. There was a clear divide between the treatment of slaves

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<sup>33</sup> Bruce E. Johnson, *Built For the Ages: A History of the Grove Park Inn* (Asheville, NC: Grove Park Inn and Country Club, 1991), 17.

<sup>34</sup> James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Slavery and the Making of America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 122-123.

<sup>35</sup> Waters, "Life Beneath the Veneer, 18.

working within the tourist sector and slaves working outside of it. As British traveler George Featherstounhaugh observed in the 1850s, slaves who labored in Asheville's hotels were supposedly "a merry race of people." "The Negroes," he claimed, "are all were well dressed and well fed, and more merry, and noisy, and impudent than any servants I had ever seen."<sup>36</sup> Slaves working as farm laborers, however, led much harder lives because they existed outside of the town's Veneer of Racial Harmony. Sarah Gudger, who worked as a slave on a plantation on the outskirts of Asheville, delivered this anecdote about her life in shackles: "We knowed t' git, else we git de lash. Dey did'n cah how old o' how young yo' wah, you' nebbah too old t' git de lash."<sup>37</sup> Gudger continued, "Wy, dey wa betta t' da animals then they wa t' us'ns."<sup>38</sup>

Gudger's recollection more accurately represents the collective experience of slaves existing outside of Asheville's Veneer of Racial Harmony. Purposely hidden from the view of Asheville's tourists, these blacks endured hardships similar to slaves elsewhere in the South. Unlike hotel slaves, they were often overworked and abused. This divide in the quality of life for Asheville's hotel and plantation slaves continued throughout the antebellum period. However, when they became free, Asheville's slaves would confront the same labor dynamics. They could either appear content and continue their service jobs under Asheville's Veneer of Racial Harmony or attempt a live off of the volatile landscape.

During the antebellum period, free blacks also lived in Asheville, much to the dismay of local whites. These freedmen posed a threat to the Veneer because their liberated status gave them an unclear position in the town's racial hierarchy. At the same time, their presence

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<sup>36</sup> George W. Featherstounhaugh, *A Canoe Voyage Up the Minny Sotar* (London, R. Bentley, 1847), 314.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

alarmed the many southern planters who summered in Asheville. A conversation between travel writer Frederick Olmstead and an Asheville resident, who offered his opinion on the sizable free black population in the North, captured local whites' distrust of freedmen: "I wouldn't like that....I wouldn't like to live where niggers was free, they are bad enough when they are slaves...if they was to think themselves equal to we, I don't think white folks could abide it...."<sup>39</sup> To uphold Asheville's Veneer, then, white authorities worked tirelessly to expel freedman from the town or keep them hidden from sight.<sup>40</sup>

The tourist industry ultimately shaped the structure of the town's racial hierarchy and set the behavioral standards for the black population. Working in direct contact with Asheville's visitors, domestic slaves were portrayed by local whites as being treated well and content with their servitude. Such an image was integral to the success of Asheville's tourist industry as it showed tourists that the town had racial harmony within its racial hierarchy. Slaves living outside of Asheville's tourist industry, however, endured harsh conditions comparable to their brethren elsewhere in the South. While slaves living within the tourist realm became a part Asheville's Veneer of Racial Harmony, freedmen would exist as threats to this fictional image, which prompted whites to advocate for their removal.<sup>41</sup> Although Asheville's tourist industry would decline during the Civil War, the town's Veneer of Racial Harmony continued to serve as the blueprint for its racial structure.

### **Post-Civil War Race Relations and the Rise of Asheville's Black Community**

Following the Civil War, black Ashevilleans united to navigate the uncharted waters of their newfound freedom. They quickly adopted a corporate strategy of survival that

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<sup>39</sup> Frederick Olmsted, *A Journey In The Back Country* (New York, New York: Mason Brothers, 1860), 259.

<sup>40</sup> Davis, *The Black Heritage of Western North Carolina*, 15.

<sup>41</sup> Waters, "Life Beneath the Veneer," 46



would epitomize the social, economic, and political structure of town's black community for the next 100 years. Historian Lenwood Davis has described the nature of Asheville's newly freed black population in its infancy as one of "self-help and quiet determination." Up until the twentieth century, that depiction was accurate. Most black Ashevilleans adopted this mantra due to the conditions imposed upon them by the town's Veneer of Racial Harmony. Throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, the Veneer would dictate the structure and location of Asheville's black community.

During the 1870s and 1880s, *Harper's Weekly* and other national periodicals continued to portray Asheville as a town of racial harmony. Writers in these magazines often depicted blacks working in the service industry as helpful, pleasant, and content. Constance Fenimore Woolson, for instance, described the role of a black servant named Zip who had accompanied her on a fishing expedition on the French Broad River in Buncombe County in 1874. Woolson frequently applauded Zip's talents and demeanor, calling him a "perfection of a cook who was constantly smiling." Woolson further explained that she felt safe with Zip when left alone with him.<sup>42</sup> Woolson's story ultimately perpetuated the myth that Asheville's black population remained a trustworthy group who lived in harmony with whites and gladly accepted their subordinate position.

Meanwhile, having declined during the Civil War, tourism began to reemerge as Asheville's leading industry. This was largely due to the publication of Horatio Gatchell's "Western North Carolina—Its Agricultural Resources, Mineral Wealth, Climate, Salubrity, and Scenery" in 1870, which espoused the healing benefits of the town's mountain air.<sup>43</sup> By

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<sup>42</sup> Constance Fenimore Woolson, "The French Broad," *Harper's*, April 1875.

<sup>43</sup> Edwin A. Gatchell, *Western North Carolina: Its Agricultural Resources, Mineral Wealth, Climate, Salubrity, and Scenery* (New York: A.L. Chatterton Pub. Company, 1835), 32.

the 1880s, thousands of wealthy people suffering from tuberculosis and other ailments increasingly journeyed to Asheville for physical rejuvenation. This influx of visitors to the town created a demand for more domestic service positions, which blacks, left with few other employment options, quickly monopolized. Most whites would not protest, believing that cooking, cleaning, and other service jobs were “Negro’s Work.”<sup>44</sup>

Due to the large number of African Americans in the service industry, Asheville whites once again hoped to not alarm tourists by showing them a town in which blacks held levels of autonomy inconsistent with those elsewhere in the South. As several local whites explained to travel writer Charles D. Warner in 1878, “Blacks should never have the social or political upper hand.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, in order to make race relations appear harmonious, whites demanded that blacks be subordinate in their employment and interracial interactions. The failure of African Americans to adhere to their position in society would upset the town’s Veneer of Racial Harmony.<sup>46</sup>

The reemergence of the tourism industry quickly offered black Ashevilleans with employment opportunities and helped to begin the settlement of African American into the city’s eastern district.<sup>47</sup> Beginning in the late 1870s, local blacks increasingly conglomerated into a small part of Asheville known now as the East End, which encompassed a portion of downtown Asheville on Eagle, Market, and College streets. Other parts of the community were situated in the nearby Valley, Dixon, Poplar, Pine, and Beaumont streets.<sup>48</sup> One of the

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<sup>44</sup>Booker T. Washington, *The New Negro* (New York: J. Pott and Company, 1903), 11.

<sup>45</sup> Charles D. Warner, *On Horseback: A tour in Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. With notes of travel in Mexico and California* (Boston And New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1889), 37.

<sup>46</sup> Waters, “Life Beneath the Veneer, 81.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Sarah M. Judson, “Twilight of a Neighborhood” *Crossroads* 14 (2010): 7, Accessed February 15, 2016. The North Carolina Humanities Council.

main reasons why African American settled the area was due to its proximity to a vast number of inns and hotels, where many black residents had become employed. In addition, the East End had been home to many of the town's hotel-working slaves. At the same time, the Eagle Hotel and other inns – all of which lay in the center of the East End – provided free housing for employees.<sup>49</sup>

The growing number of African Americans residing in the East End ultimately discouraged whites from moving into the neighborhood. By 1875, the East End had become the social, economic, and political hub of Asheville's black community.<sup>50</sup> More importantly, the East End offered a home and sense of community that had eluded black Ashevilleans since the end of slavery. Living in close proximity to one another, African Americans there forged a common bond based on their past and present experiences. Children played in the streets; families banded together; and black residents united to ensure the welfare of their small community.<sup>51</sup>

As a minority population, black Ashevilleans held very circumscribed political power, forcing them to rely on each other to improve their situation. Black residents ultimately aimed to fashion the East End into a microscopic version of Asheville. They wanted stores, social facilities, and access to the goods and services that the white community had long enjoyed.<sup>52</sup> These amenities would come thanks in large part to the rise of African American businessmen at the turn of the twentieth century.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Davis, *The Black Heritage of Western North Carolina*, 51.

<sup>51</sup> Judson, "Twilight of a Neighborhood," 7.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

The first signs of an emerging black entrepreneur class came in the 1880s when several African Americans in the area began to acquire economic ventures outside of manual labor. One of the city's first African Americans to establish his own business was Isaac Dickson. Born a slave, Dickson worked several menial jobs before founding a coal and wood business and later a taxi service. The former slave would even find himself appointed to Asheville's school board in 1887, a position that solidified his status as one of the black community's first members of the middle class.<sup>53</sup>

Dickson's success quickly inspired other black Ashevilleans to break free from domestic servitude. One such African American was Isaac's nephew, James Wilson, who became one of the first funeral directors in Asheville.<sup>54</sup> Wilson's position as funeral director ultimately allowed him to become one of the first blacks to hold a position of power in business dealings with the town's white community. Such influence stemmed from the fact that he held a monopoly over a service that Asheville's growing upper-class white community needed.

Other African American entrepreneurs soon established businesses that catered strictly to the East End's black inhabitants. During the 1890s, small grocery stores and restaurants began to appear around Eagle and Market streets. By 1892, Asheville's city directory listed 12 black-owned restaurants.<sup>55</sup> The prevalence of these retail establishments soon earned Market and Eagle Streets the title of "the black business district."<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, the East End community received funds from the Asheville City Council to hire an African

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<sup>53</sup> Kevan D. Frazier, *Legendary Locals of Asheville North Carolina* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2014) 12.

<sup>54</sup> *Asheville City Directory* (Asheville, NC: Southern Directory Co., 1887) 60.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> Judson, "Twilight of a Neighborhood," 7.

American police officer, Henry Saxton, to patrol the town's black sphere. Saxton, however, held no jurisdiction in any parts of Asheville's white community.<sup>57</sup>

Believing that all people deserved a proper Christian burial, Noah Murrough established a funeral home dedicated solely to black families. Since local ordinances forbade blacks from receiving health care in white facilities, Dr. William Green Torrence founded the first black hospital/clinic on 16 Eagle Street. Torrence's clinic later moved to Hill Street and then to an office in the Young Men's Institute. The Torrence Hospital – as it was soon called – fulfilled the medical needs of most black Ashevilleans.<sup>58</sup> Like Torrence, many African American businessmen would become part of the town's burgeoning black elite class, which would dictate the actions of their community in the upcoming decades.

The proliferation of black churches in the area also played an integral role in the growth of Asheville's East End at the turn of the twentieth century. The neighborhood's most notable African American churches were the Mt. Zion Missionary Baptist Church; the Calvary Presbyterian Church; the Hopkins Chapel African Episcopal Church; and the St. Matthias Episcopal Church, which was constructed in 1896 by a successful black contractor, James Vester Miller.<sup>59</sup> These churches offered African Americans a meeting place and helped local blacks create a sense of community. Black Ashevilleans visited these churches to hear the word of God as a way to ease and make sense of their collective disenfranchisement.<sup>60</sup> These churches ultimately gave black people hope and provided them

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<sup>57</sup> Waters, "Life Beneath the Veneer," 81.

<sup>58</sup> Davis, *The Black Heritage of Western North Carolina*, 43.

<sup>59</sup> Judson, "Twilight of a Neighborhood," 9.

<sup>60</sup> Davis, *The Black Heritage of Western North Carolina*, 51. Asheville's black community raised a portion of the construction funds for Mt. Zion Baptist Church while the majority came from George Vanderbilt. Vanderbilt likely made his contributions due to the fact that the many black servants, cooks, janitors and gardeners that worked on his estate were barred from worshipping at his All Soul's Church on the estate premises.

with a blueprint for living at a time when inequality stifled their community's spirit and potential.<sup>61</sup>

Perhaps the most influential church in the East End was Hopkins Chapel, which espoused a message that nearly all other black churches would soon embrace. The minister credited with creating the so-called "Hopkins Message" was William Jacob Walls, a fourteen-year-old African American who came to Hopkins Chapel after receiving his license to preach in 1899. Known as the "boy preacher," Walls appealed to black and white crowds alike. People came from near and far crammed into Hopkins Chapel to hear his enthusiastic and often fiery sermons. Largely because Walls was so well-received by both the black and white communities, many local ministers would adopt the boy's "Hopkins Message," which called on the black community to commit a life of "independence, cooperation, dignity, and self-respect."<sup>62</sup> Urging African Americans to continue on their path of "self-help and quiet determination," Wall's message quickly became the standard of religious teachings in every black church in Asheville.<sup>63</sup>

Inspired by the "Hopkins Message," Asheville's black churches increasingly began to use Sunday offerings to fund the creation of several religious and non-religious schools. Once such school was the Trinity Chapel Parochial Day School, whose 120 black pupils met 3 to 4 days a week in the Chapel's basement and received an education that heavily emphasized Christian values.<sup>64</sup> In 1885, Reverend L.M. Pease of the Methodist Episcopal Church established the Allen Home School. This school, which would endure for over a

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> *The Hopkins Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church Centennial Journal* (Asheville, NC: Hopkins Chapel AME Church, 1968) 10-11.

<sup>63</sup> Davis, *The Black Heritage of Western North Carolina*, 62.

<sup>64</sup> *St. Matthias Episcopal Church History* (Asheville, NC: St. Matthias Episcopal Church, n. d.), 2.

century, initially served as an industrial school for black women before becoming a female-only high school in the early twentieth century.<sup>65</sup>

Opportunities for African Americans to receive a public education began in 1888 after Asheville voters agreed to finance the construction of several black and white schools.<sup>66</sup> From the beginning, vast inequalities existed in the town's public school system. Asheville, for instance, allotted enough funds for the white schools to have a total of 7 teachers while the black schools only had 3. African American schools also had to turn away over 800 hopeful students because they had neither the room nor the teaching core to support the town's more than 1,100 black children.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, black teachers received close to \$25 per month while their white counterparts received a \$50 monthly salary.<sup>68</sup>

To make matters worse, the bond referendum that voters had passed to fund Asheville's public school system proved grossly insufficient in providing teaching materials and adequate learning space. The white schools, for instance, could efficiently educate the growing influx of white students through private donations from Asheville's wealthy citizens. Black schools, however, received a vastly lower amount of the private gifts, thereby forcing African Americans to rely on each other to procure building and material funds. Concerned for the educational welfare of black Ashevilleans, African American teachers put forth half of their meager salaries to cover the schools' operation funds.<sup>69</sup> But their valiant efforts failed to provide enough money to educate most black children. As such, African

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> *A Brief History of Asheville City Schools*, On File at the Asheville City Schools archive, n.d., 11. Black Ashevilleans' campaign for public schooling began in 1886. The issue was voted on in a county election on July 28<sup>th</sup>, 1887. The white and black community voted to fund these public schools by imposing a, 16 and 2/3 cents tax on \$100 and a 50 cent poll tax. The referendum passed by a majority of only two votes.

<sup>67</sup> Davis, *The Black Heritage of Western North Carolina*, 57. Asheville's black schools could only support 300 area pupils.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> *A Brief History of Asheville City Schools*, 15.

American parents had to scramble to save money to send their children to the smaller private schools chartered by black churches. In the end, many of these parents could not afford private schools, leaving their children without a necessary educational experience.<sup>70</sup>

In response, Isaac Dickson, who served as the only African American on Asheville's school board, petitioned for the construction of a new black school. Dickson owned several buildings in the East End, so board members asked him to donate one to become the new school. Dickson, however, insisted that the local government should provide the building. Asheville officials eventually acquiesced and agreed to hold an election on May 4, 1891 to provide a bond for the construction of another black school. The bond passed and town officials built Catholic Hill School to educate the black community's 1-12 grade students.<sup>71</sup> Though the school's opening helped to ameliorate some of the problems associated with educating black Ashevilleans, hundreds of students were unable to enroll in Catholic Hill School because it lacked the resources to accommodate them.<sup>72</sup>

In 1900, Dickson once again fought the school board to add another school for Asheville's growing population of black school-age children, convincing local authorities to create a committee to search for a lot on which to construct this school. On May 31, the school board authorized the purchase of a house on Hill Street at Maiden Lane to be utilized as the new black school.<sup>73</sup> The harmony between the races that resulted from this act of cooperation, however, would soon be stifled by Asheville's white power structure.

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<sup>70</sup> Davis, *The Black Heritage of Western North Carolina*, 57.

<sup>71</sup> *A Brief History of Asheville City Schools*, 15.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> "History of Education: Asheville's Black Community Part II," *Heritage of Black Highlanders Collection*, (Asheville, NC: University of North Carolina at Asheville, Ramsay Library), 6.



Following the purchase of the lot between Hill Street and Maiden Lane, residents of the nearby Montford Avenue, a large white subsection of downtown Asheville, immediately began to protest.<sup>74</sup> Essentially, Asheville's white community tolerated the actions of their black neighbors as long as their social, economic, and political institutions existed outside of their view. However, the potential location of this black school infringed upon Asheville's white sphere. The rise of Jim Crow segregation mandates, which Asheville adopted as early as 1900, added to Montford Avenue residents' animosity towards the proposed school location. This encroachment of the white sphere led large numbers of Asheville's white population to petition the Asheville Board of Aldermen to reject the school's building permit.<sup>75</sup>

Not surprisingly, the predominantly-white school board ultimately sided with Montford Avenue residents and refused to construct the school. Board members would continue to ignore African American's demands for a new school until 1914, when it purchased an adjoining lot on Hill Street to be an extension of the Hill Street School and approved an allotment of \$21,000 for construction fees.<sup>76</sup> Up to that point, black Ashevilleans had to find educational avenues for those students left out of the public school system. Meanwhile, black churches lent a helping hand, creating private education programs and recruiting African American teachers from Charlotte, Raleigh, Durham, and other cities. By 1942, Asheville was home to six black schools.<sup>77</sup> Although funded by tax dollars,

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> *A Brief History of Asheville City Schools*, 15.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. The 6 black schools were; Stephens-Lee High School, Asheland Avenue School, Hill Street School, Burton Street School, Livingston Street Elementary School, and Mountain.”

however, the schools' vast structural and operational problems forced local blacks to continue to pour their own funds into the upkeep of the six facilities.<sup>78</sup>

Perhaps the most important black facility at the turn of the twentieth century was the Young Men's Institute (YMI). Construction of the YMI, which historian Lenwood Davis has coined "The Epitome of a Black Self-Help Organization," began in 1892, when George Vanderbilt, a wealthy white industrialist who owned the famous Biltmore Estate, donated \$32,000 to erect the building on Eagle Street in the heart of East End.<sup>79</sup> But Vanderbilt's philanthropy was likely not an altruistic gesture but a strategic economic move.<sup>80</sup> Instead of being a recreational facility for the entire black community, the YMI initially served mostly as a sleeping quarters for Vanderbilt's black employees, all of whom were not allowed to sleep at his grand estate. In other words, Vanderbilt built the YMI as dormitories for his employees under the veil of using it to uplift Asheville's black residents.

The debate over the ownership of the YMI stems from the fact that the donated building remained technically owned by Vanderbilt, who continued to make money off of it by charging the black tenants an undisclosed monthly rent. The black community consistently paid this undisclosed rent for 18 years before their funds ran out in 1910. Unable to pay the rent, the black community foreclosed on the building in that same year. However, months later, Vanderbilt sold the building back to the black community for \$10,000.<sup>81</sup> In the end, Vanderbilt's \$32,000 donation was not a charitable gift, but a business investment.

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<sup>78</sup> Davis, *The Black Heritage of Western North Carolina*, 61.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 71.

<sup>80</sup> Nan K. Chase, *Asheville: A History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2007), 148.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid*, 149.

Nonetheless, Vanderbilt's donation financed the construction of the 18,000-square-foot building on Eagle Street that would ultimately serve the recreational needs of the black community. According to historian Lenwood Davis, the YMI quickly emerged as "the hub of social, cultural, civic, business and religious life of Black Mountaineers."<sup>82</sup> The building housed a large amount of black-owned businesses, including "a realty company, undertaker, cabinet shop, beauty shop, barber and shoe shop" that catered exclusively to African Americans.<sup>83</sup> It also housed a boxing ring, hosted indoor sports games, and offered bathing facilities, all of which were widely used by black residents. By 1900, the YMI had become the central meeting space for clubs, churches, schools, and civic organizations.<sup>84</sup> There, Asheville blacks would increasingly discuss the issue of racial inequality and formulate strategies to combat it. Within the walls of the YMI, the mantra of black survival in Asheville soon changed from one of self-help and quiet determination to one of community reform through peaceful protest. Ultimately, this shift in the spirit of Asheville's black community marked the beginnings of the town's Civil Rights Movement.

At the turn of the twentieth century, black Ashevilleans found themselves in a precarious situation. By then, town officials had passed measures that effectively legalized racism and guaranteed the continued strength of the white power structure. Nonetheless, African Americans in Asheville – like those elsewhere in the Jim Crow South – managed to survive through collective self-help and quiet determination. Rather than leave the mountains, they forged their own independent society and created a separate economic, social, and political sphere. In the midst of Asheville's worsening racial climate, a growing

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<sup>82</sup> Davis, *The Black Heritage of Western North Carolina*, 71.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

class of black religious, economic, and social leaders also emerged in the East End. These black elite would soon break from their community's tradition of self-reliance and begin to campaign for municipal funds to enrich the lives of Asheville's black population.

## **Chapter 2- Roots of the Movement: Black Leaders and Community Reform**

During the twentieth century, Asheville saw the rise of a black elite that would break from the East End's mantra of quiet self-determination. These elites would ultimately leap into the lion's den of Asheville's white power structure and skillfully and inconspicuously negotiate for social equality in the black community. The black elite's strategy challenged their community's tradition of self-help and created a rift between themselves and the town's lower-class African Americans. Asheville's lower-class black population believed that hard work could raise their community to a level equal with that of their white counterparts. However, upper-class members of Asheville's black community contended that action and outside intervention were necessary for the East End's survival. As had been the case since the 1830s, the integrity of Asheville's Veneer of Racial Harmony existed as the paramount concern of the town's white elite.<sup>85</sup> As leaders of their community, Asheville's black elite held dominion over residents of the East End.<sup>86</sup> Thus, they used their power over the continued harmony of the races as leverage in negotiations with Asheville's white elite.

### **Asheville and The Long Civil Rights Movement**

Historians of the Civil Rights Movement have focused primarily on what is known as the classical phase of the movement. This phase, which lasted from 1954 to 1968, existed as

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<sup>85</sup> Waters, "Life Beneath the Veneer," 46.

<sup>86</sup> Davis, *The Black Heritage of Western North Carolina*, 17.

the master narrative of the Civil Rights Movement. In recent decades, however, historians such as Jacqueline Dowd Hall have demonstrated that the seeds of the classical phase began well before the 1950s.<sup>87</sup> According to Hall, this so-called pre-classical period of the Civil Rights Movement was led by middle- and upper-class African Americans who sought to reform the social, economic, and political infrastructure of their segregated communities.<sup>88</sup> This reform phase also existed in Asheville and emerged in reaction to the passage of Jim Crow laws in the early 1900s.

In 1904, a group of black Ashevilleans attended a meeting entitled “Solve the Problem” at the Young Men’s Institute (YMI) assembly hall.<sup>89</sup> The problem the title referred to was the Jim Crow segregation laws that the town had enacted in 1900. Pushed into separate, but unequal facilities, the attendees had come seeking a remedy from Asheville’s black leadership.<sup>90</sup> The first person to address the crowd was the YMI secretary, who, incorporating a religious ethos, demanded “most manfully for racial integrity, purity, manliness and moral force, leaving the result with God.”<sup>91</sup> Next, L.T. Jackson, the principal of the Hill Street School, rose from his chair and declared that local blacks could only improve their situation by creating self-help organizations.<sup>92</sup> Subsequent speakers echoed the same message, calling for greater industriousness, continued passivity towards the white race, and “an implicit confidence in God.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Jacquelyn D. Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past.” *The Journal of American History* 14 (2005): 1241.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Angela Hornsby-Gutting, *Black Manhood and Community Building in North Carolina: 1900-1930* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2009), 130.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> “How to Solve the Problem Discussed at YMI,” *Asheville Citizen*, March 22, 1904, 4.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

The final person to address the crowd was Reverend Orner, who, breaking from the rhetoric of the previous speakers, called for Asheville's black community to bring their plight and disdain to the attention of the white race. "Let the white man put himself in the negro's place," he explained. "Liberated yet not free, privileged yet no right to exercise those privileges; rights that no man is bound to respect, a titled citizen without legal protection; then the white man can get an idea of the things that trouble the negro's inner soul and stir his manhood."<sup>94</sup> Though it brought great applause from the audience, Orner's speech was left out of the *Asheville Citizen's* write-up of the event. Perhaps the white newspaper strategically negated the speech to – as one participant put it – "keep the other race from knowing what kind of men we are producing and the progress we have made."<sup>95</sup> Much to the dismay of white Ashevilleans, however, Orner's oration lit a spark beneath the town's black leaders that would grow into the collective mission statement of Asheville's black leaders and inform their decision-making process as the century progressed. Instead of accepting the lowly state of the East End, Asheville's black leaders would begin demanding equality for their community.

### **Organization of Asheville's Black Leadership**

Inspired by this rally as well as Booker T. Washington's New Negro Ideology, and W.E.B. Dubois's Talented Tenth doctrine, an interconnected group of black leaders in the East End began a campaign to improve their community during the early 1900s.<sup>96</sup> Comprised mostly of black doctors, teachers, entrepreneurs, and religious leaders, these men epitomized

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<sup>94</sup> "How to Solve the Problem Discussed at YMI," *Asheville Citizen*, March 22, 1904, 4.

<sup>95</sup> "Grand Celebration of the Emancipation of the Negro," *Asheville Citizen*, January 4, 1904, 9.

<sup>96</sup> Washington, *The New Negro*, 11.

Washington believed it was the responsibility of the black race to reinvent themselves and break from the stereotype of the "Old Negro" through the attainment of education, wealth, and civil liberties.

Washington's "New Negro," as they had attained "levels of education, refinement, money, assertiveness, and racial consciousness." Unlike the archetypical black southerner of the time, these African American's financial success and educational levels allowed them connections and limited respect with Asheville's white power structure, a position that gave them a level of negotiating power that few other blacks in Asheville possessed. The group's validity with Asheville's black population lay in their strong ties with the YMI and their ample fundraising campaigns to ease the plight of their entire community. Meanwhile, the group's ability to be "peacekeepers" and supervisors of the black community granted them respectable relations with the white population<sup>97</sup> Knowing their position of strength, these black elites commenced a crusade to equalize the social, economic, and political state of the black and white communities.

Perhaps the most influential figure in the creation of Asheville's black leadership coalition was Charles B. Dusenbery. A pastor and founder of the Calvary Parochial School, Dusenbery enjoyed widespread support within the black community for his efforts to enrich the lives of disenfranchised youth. At the same time, white Ashevilleans held Dusenbery in high regard, viewing him as a mediator during periods of racial unrest. According to one resident, whites revered Dusenbery for his ability to be a "peacemaker and peacekeeper" in the black community.<sup>98</sup> As the archetype of a black leader, he proved to other members of Asheville's black elite that influence in the white society was contingent upon one's control over the African American community.

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<sup>97</sup> "History of Education: Asheville's Black Community Part II," 14.

<sup>98</sup> "A Devoted Life and its Results," *Heritage of Black Highlanders Collection*, (Asheville, NC: UNCA Ramsey Library) 1.



Another important figure within Asheville's burgeoning black elite was Dr. Otus Lee Miller. Born in Asheville in 1888, Miller came from one of the town's more affluent African American families. Otus's father was John Vester Miller, a black business owner and perhaps the first black resident to earn his place into the upper middle class.<sup>99</sup> John Miller was of mixed descent, having a black mother and a white father. His position as a businessman and his light complexion provided him with more opportunities than other local African Americans. Largely due to his family's affluence, Otus was able to attend medical school in Boston, where he earned a medical degree before coming back to his hometown.<sup>100</sup> Like most other black leaders in Asheville, Miller adhered to W.E.B. Du Bois's "Talented Tenth" doctrine, believing that the upper echelon of black society had the duty and ability to elevate their race's lower classes.<sup>101</sup>

Two other African American doctors, John Wakefield Walker and William J. Trent, also emerged as leaders within the black community during the early twentieth century. Both men received their Doctoral degrees from Livingstone College before returning to Asheville to serve as the town's first African American doctors. Like Dusenbery and Miller, they also had power in the black and white spheres of the community. In 1904, the men had pioneered an innovative treatment for tuberculosis that brought many visitors to Asheville from all over the nation. In addition, they opened a sanitarium that housed hordes of affluent white patients

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<sup>99</sup> "Dr. Lee Otus Miller," *Heritage of Black Highlanders Collection*, (Asheville, NC: UNCA Ramsey Library)

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Hornsby-Gutting, *Black Manhood and Community Building in North Carolina: 1900-1930*, 99; W.E.B. Dubois, "The Talented Tenth," September, 1903. TeachingAmericanHistory.org, Ashland University, accessed 3 June 2008.

and helped to bolster tourism in Asheville.<sup>102</sup> It was their role in supporting the town's tourist economy that gave them influence with local white elites.

The next person to join Asheville's black elite coalition was Walter Lee. Lee was a college professor who had moved to Asheville during the late nineteenth century. There, he served as the principal of the area's first black high school, Catholic Hill High School, which would later be renamed Stephens-Lee High School in his honor.<sup>103</sup> A proponent of Booker T. Washington, Lee was one of the first leaders to emphasize the importance of educating Asheville's black youth. In fact, he helped to create several of the area's first black public schools and succeeded in recruiting young black teachers from outside of Asheville. Meanwhile, Lee played an integral role in the creation of Asheville's Interracial Commission.<sup>104</sup> This commission existed to ameliorate interracial problems in Asheville and as the negotiating forum for the town's black leaders.

The entrepreneurial backbone of the black elite came with black business owners like Edward Walter Pearson. Born in Burke County, North Carolina, in 1872, Pearson served as a commander in the Buffalo Soldiers, earned several degrees from the University of Chicago, and worked in real estate with President Rutherford B. Hayes' son before moving to Asheville in the 1890s. There, he soon purchased several large plots of land in the western part of town and began selling them to black residents seeking to escape downtown Asheville's elevating rent prices. This area became known as Park View and would quickly grow into one of the largest black neighborhoods in Asheville.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Frazier, *Legendary Locals of Asheville North Carolina*, 15.

<sup>103</sup> *A Brief History of Asheville City Schools*, 15.

<sup>104</sup> Hornsby-Gutting, *Black Manhood and Community Building in North Carolina: 1900-1930*, 99.

<sup>105</sup> "E.W. Pearson Biography," *Heritage of Black Highlanders Collection*, (Asheville, NC: UNCA Ramsey Library)

More importantly, Pearson helped link black Ashevilleans to the burgeoning national civil rights movement. In the 1930s, he incorporated and then headed the first Asheville branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).<sup>106</sup> This association would soon organize and advise the actions of many of the black elite's social equality campaigns. The imprint of the NAACP was present in Pearson's efforts to give disenfranchised blacks the status of landowner in a time when Jim Crow property qualifications in Asheville and other parts of the South prevented most African Americans from doing so.<sup>107</sup>

Pearson's good friend H.L. Alston also emerged as a leader of the black community at the turn of the twentieth century. As the town's only black attorney, Alston held influence with many whites in the local judicial system. His popularity among the white community also increased with his efforts to enlist blacks for military service during the Spanish-American War and World War I.<sup>108</sup>

The most prominent religious leaders in Asheville's black elite were Reverend P.K. Fonville and Reverend R.P. Rumly. These men had worked and preached at Mount Zion Baptist Church, a highly respected religious institution that had been home to a large biracial congregation since the 1890s.<sup>109</sup> Fonville and Rumly also helped to establish several of the first black schools in Asheville's prominent black churches.<sup>110</sup> Their track record convinced many residents that they had the best interest of Asheville's black community in mind.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> "E.W. Pearson: A True Renaissance Man," *The Urban News*, February 13, 2014, Accessed February 15, 2016. <http://theurbannews.com/lifestyles/2014/renaissance-man-edward-w-pearson/>.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> *St. Matthias Episcopal Church History*, 17.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

The black elite coalition also enjoyed the support of several prominent African American women from Asheville. The two most active women in the group were Maggie Jones and Irene O. Hendrick. Maggie Jones had an illustrious career working to improve the lives of black men and women alike. In the 1920s, she chartered the North Carolina Federation of Negro Women's Clubs and organized its first chapter in Asheville. Jones would also later help mobilize local blacks during a fundraiser to buy back the Young Men's Institute headquarters in Asheville.<sup>111</sup> A fellow coalition member, Dr. William Trent spoke of her achievements, "The women of Asheville helped to make YMI and buy that building. Because the men alone couldn't have bought it."<sup>112</sup> Irene Hendrick also made great strides for the Asheville's black community. In 1926, she became head librarian and manager of the town's first black library, where she provided job training to women in her community.<sup>113</sup>

Other female activists like Friddie Abernathy and Anna George also worked with this coalition of black elites in Asheville as community organizers. While George and Abernathy lacked the class status of their elite counterparts, they made up for it with their strong ties to the black community. These women were often asked to start the conversation for fundraisers within the lower quarters of the East End.<sup>114</sup> In many ways, they served as the intermediaries between Asheville's upper- and lower-class black inhabitants.<sup>115</sup>

Gender historian Angela Hornsby-Guttering analyzed the importance of women in the building of Asheville's black community during the early twentieth century. She found that

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<sup>111</sup> Hornsby-Gutting, *Black Manhood and Community Building in North Carolina: 1900-1930*, 99.

<sup>112</sup> "Vanderbilt, YMI Link Powerful: Exhibit Explores Tie, Illustrates History of Local Cultural Center," *Asheville Citizen*, February 17, 2002, 9.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> Waters, "Life Beneath the Veneer," 52.

<sup>115</sup> Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Press, 1996), 12.

the role of women in the initial phases of Asheville's civil rights movement made the idea of combatting the town's white power structure more palatable for many skeptical African Americans. At the same time, Hornsby-Guttering argued, women activists found empowerment in their activities and successfully crossed gender boundaries by taking on masculine duties. Essentially, black women in Asheville's movement enjoyed more autonomy and power than they had traditionally held in their community.<sup>116</sup> This tradition would continue into the 1960s when a woman would become president of Asheville's teenage civil rights organization.

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Asheville's black elite would organize and fund several community aid organizations. One such organization was the Colored Betterment League, formed in 1916 by Reverend Dusenbery in an effort to "bring general uplift and promotion of the best interest of the colored people of Asheville and to foster the law and order of the colored community."<sup>117</sup> Nonetheless, the largest organization in size and scope would remain the YMI. A shift in Asheville's racial climate during the 1920s, however, would soon lead black elites to begin to privately pressure the town's white leadership for the creation of adequate social facilities in their community.

### **The Seeds of Activism**

Dusenbury helped to usher in the beginnings of the community reform phase of Asheville's civil rights movement when he won the first battle against Asheville's governmental administration. That victory came after the all-black Catholic Hill School

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<sup>116</sup> Hornsby-Gutting, *Black Manhood and Community Building in North Carolina: 1900-1930*, 99.

<sup>117</sup> "A Devoted Life and its Results," 2.

burned down in 1917.<sup>118</sup> Because it was the largest African American school in the area and served as the black community's key educational facility, the destruction of Catholic Hill High School meant the end of schooling for the majority of Asheville's black students. Understanding these implications, Dusenbury paired with a coalition of powerful blacks to help rebuild the school. Unfortunately, local African Americans lacked the funds to construct a facility comparable to the Catholic Hill School. As such, Dusenbury and his council petitioned that the Asheville's General Assembly rebuild the school. As the most respected leader of the black community, Dusenbury volunteered to meet with the committee alone.<sup>119</sup>

Prior to Dusenbury's decision to meet with Asheville's political power structure, interracial negotiation in the town did not exist. In fact, Dusenbury believed that private interracial meetings caused harm to the reputations of both races. He had even once refused a dinner proposal from a white reverend with the excuse, "My doing so would cause you to be severely criticized, and injure your opportunity for service and mine as well."<sup>120</sup> However, the gravity of the situation and the need for black education encouraged Dusenbury to break his longstanding protocol. Dusenbury brought his plea to Asheville's General Assembly in 1917 and emerged triumphant. Dusenbury pleaded for a new educational facility by highlighting the integral role that the Catholic Hill High School played in the black community. In an act of respect to Dusenbury's esteemed status among both white and black residents, the assembly allotted the necessary funds for the construction of a larger, more modern facility. Stephens-Lee High school – as it was called – came into existence soon after.<sup>121</sup> Dusenbury's victory convinced many African American leaders that interracial

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<sup>118</sup> Davis, *The Black Heritage of Western North Carolina*, 45.

<sup>119</sup> "History of Education: Asheville's Black Community Part II," 2.

<sup>120</sup> "A Devoted Life and its Results," 3.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

negotiation was the best way to improve the lives of their brothers and sisters. Though the onset of World War I would halt the progress made by black Ashevilleans, it would also serve to justify the validity of their movement.

### **1920s Activism**

While many African Americans in Asheville served in the military and fought bravely during World War I, they came home to find the same racial injustices that they had left behind. Even though local blacks had supported the war effort at home and abroad, they still confronted immense social, economic, and political disadvantages.<sup>122</sup> Between 1916 and 1920, Asheville's black population increased to over 7,000, as a growing number of African Americans had migrated to the town in search of employment and a better life.<sup>123</sup> This rise in population created a need for more social and economic institutions in the East End. Unfortunately, black Ashevilleans lacked sufficient funds to construct these projects. While members of the black community's upper and middle classes worked to pool resources, it increasingly became apparent that outside investment was desperately needed to further the African American sphere.

During the early twentieth century, Asheville's black elite felt that their socio-economic status could trump the color of their skin. Through the attainment of a level of wealth and education that surpassed many of their white counterparts, these men and women believed that they would ultimately find social and political equality. But the passage of Jim Crow mandates in 1900s segregating train and street cars dashed these hopes, convincing Asheville's black elite that – in the eyes of the law – they were no different than the lowest

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<sup>122</sup> Sondley, *A History of Buncombe County, North Carolina*, 492.

<sup>123</sup> Joseph H. Pratt and Frederic Q. Boyer, *Western North Carolina Facts, Figures and Photographs* (Asheville, NC: The Inland Press, 1925), 12.

castes of their community.<sup>124</sup> Nonetheless, the black elite continued to maintain congenial relations with Asheville's white leadership. These feelings of mutual respect between powerful blacks and whites, however, would implode during the early 1920s when the city's white political establishment launched a crusade to segregate all public facilities in Asheville.

The move for total segregation in Asheville came in congruence with two other major events in the town's history during the 1920s: the arrival of Ku Klux Klan and the unprecedented rise in local tourism. Between 1900 and 1925, Asheville became home to a large chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. Like those elsewhere in the South, Asheville Klansmen sought to disenfranchise African Americans through fear, extortion, and political intimidation. Several of Asheville's town leaders even became Klan members during those years. In a position of political power, Klan members wove their rhetoric into town legislation and increased the level of racial violence in Buncombe County throughout the early 1920s.<sup>125</sup> In response, the town government, hoping to uphold Asheville's Veneer of Racial Harmony, drew clearer racial boundaries in the town's segregated areas.

Although city leaders had strictly enforced racial segregation in schools, stores, and other public spaces, water fountains located in downtown Asheville remained inconspicuously integrated. In an area where traffic from both races bustled through, no one had apparently cared about segregating water fountains.<sup>126</sup> However, in 1924, the county commissioners began to strengthen Asheville's segregation policy to completely divide the races. That year, the *Asheville Citizen* broke the news with a headline story entitled, "Color

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<sup>124</sup> Hornsby-Gutting, *Black Manhood and Community Building in North Carolina: 1900-1930*, 17.

<sup>125</sup> Kevin W. Young, "The White-Hooded Mountains: The Rise of the Ku Klux Klan in 1920's Asheville," (Paper presented at the Appalachian Studies Association Annual Conference, 2015).

<sup>126</sup> Chase, *Asheville: A History*, 142.



Line On The Square.”<sup>127</sup> The article contended that “effective immediately blacks would only be allowed water from the bubblers on the east side of the square, while whites would find their race’s bubbler on the west side.”<sup>128</sup>

Nonetheless, many blacks continued to drink – perhaps purposefully – from the fountain of their nearest convenience. This resulted in the creation of an improvised and unincorporated water fountain patrol that consisted of older white men who spent their days sitting on the steps of the city hall ready to scold, berate, or physically drive away any African American attempting to sip from the whites-only bubblers.<sup>129</sup> Only once was a black man reported to have fought back against the patrol, delivering the statement, “I pay my taxes, I should have the right to drink here too.”<sup>130</sup> With this new policy, Asheville’s legislators had sent a clear message that their town was now one of total racial segregation.

While the Ku Klux Klan may have helped guide Asheville’s 1924 crusade for total segregation, the rapid growth of the city’s tourist economy equally informed the decision. Asheville officials wanted their town to be the epitome of a beautiful southern mountain hamlet. As such, Asheville had to adhere to all of the southern cultural, social, and legislative practices. A laissez-faire segregation policy that allowed the indiscriminate use of public facilities would have deterred visits from southern tourists, many of whom were powerful and influential business figures.<sup>131</sup> Alluding to the economic benefits of the town’s new fountain policy, one writer for the *Asheville Citizen* wrote, “A properly displayed sign on the fountains might do much more good than save the feelings of an unimportant citizen, a

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<sup>127</sup> “Color Line On the Square,” *Asheville Citizen*, July 20, 1924, 7.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Chase, *Asheville: A History*, 142

<sup>130</sup> “Color Line On the Square.”

<sup>131</sup> Waters, “Life Beneath the Veneer,” 47.

negro.”<sup>132</sup> With the support of most white Ashevilleans, town officials’ efforts to divide the races would continue throughout the year before coming to a head in the fall of 1925.

On October 30, 1925, a great schism between Asheville’s black and white communities occurred. This split began when a rowdy crowd of black men migrated to the town. Throughout a short period, this band of outsiders was charged with committing theft, rioting, and a litany of petty crimes.<sup>133</sup> Instead of blaming this small group of men, the *Asheville Citizen* lashed out at the entire African American community by delivering a libelous article entitled, “Negroes present Their Side of the Situation; Say They Can Not Control Their Race.”<sup>134</sup> This piece chastised the East End’s black leadership, claiming that they were harboring these supposed criminals and preventing justice from being served.

Using fear tactics common throughout the South, the *Asheville Citizen* article quickly alarmed the white community. An excerpt from this article read, “Affairs in this city have reached a critical stage because of the repeated attacks by negroes on white women.”<sup>135</sup> This claim played upon the belief of many southerners that black men had an incessant lust for white women. The words also acted as the justification for physical assaults on the black residents. While the article never explicitly urged white residents to take up arms against their black counterparts, that sentiment certainly ran throughout the piece.<sup>136</sup> Though only one white woman had reported being assaulted by a black man, the article conveyed that black-on-white rape had become an epidemic in Asheville. Days after the article’s release, the assaulted woman happened to pass by her assailant on the street. In an instant, a white

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<sup>132</sup> “Color Line On The Square.”

<sup>133</sup> Davis, *The Black Heritage of Western North Carolina*, 49.

<sup>134</sup> Theodore Harris, “Negroes Present Their Side of the Situation: Say They Can Not Control Their Race,” *Asheville Citizen*, October 31, 1925, 2.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> Chase, *Asheville: A History*, 142.

mob seized the man and prepared to lynch him before local authorities stopped them.<sup>137</sup> This piece would further drive a wedge between Asheville's racial communities and paint the entire black community as a band of lawbreakers.

Asheville's black leadership quickly attempted to ameliorate the situation by voicing their disdain towards the newspaper's claim of black-on-white crime. The day following the article's publication, leaders of Asheville's black elite coalition delivered a strongly worded resolution to the town commission. This group included J.W. Walker, Leotus Miller, Walter Lee, Rev. F.K. Fonville, E.W. Pearson, Maggie Jones, and H.L. Alston.<sup>138</sup> Before writing the resolution, Asheville's black residents had held three mass meetings in which they pledged to bring the criminals to justice and apologized for the actions of their race.<sup>139</sup> But Asheville's black leaders took a different stance in their resolution. Instead of apologizing for the criminals' activities, they scolded the *Asheville Citizen* for vilifying the entire African American community over the supposed actions of a few. Shortly thereafter, the authors of the resolution attended the Asheville's City Commissioners meeting and delivered their written statement, which read:

As law abiding citizens, we feel the injustice of the accusations. To our way of thinking the articles gives the encouragement to the possible shedding of blood should some irresponsible negro commit a crime in the future.

We hope that the article does not represent the sentiment of his honor and the members of the honorable body. In various ways, by members of our group, we have offered ourselves to assist in whatever way possible in the apprehension of the guilty parties. The ministers of our churches, superintendents of our Sunday schools, and our teachers, Y.M.C.A and Y.W.C.A. secretaries, and secret organizations have always stood for law and order.

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Davis, *The Black Heritage of Western North Carolina*, 49

<sup>139</sup> "Negro Citizens of Asheville Call Huge Mass Meeting for Sunday to Consider Situation," *Asheville Citizen*, October 30, 1925, 6.

We want it to say emphatically that no criminal is or would be harbored among us. Trusting and relying on the citizens of Asheville, the law-abiding and industrious negroes have gone to the limit of our authority, and if there is anything further we can do, please advise us.<sup>140</sup>

Although the City Commissioners included the resolution in the meeting's minutes, they failed to list the names of the black leaders who had delivered it. After the reading, the meeting adjourned and both parties left. The only acknowledgment of the resolution came from the town's interracial commission, which delivered a statement commending the black community for its stand against the article and its continuing support in apprehending the criminals.<sup>141</sup> Nonetheless, the statement received little attention from the white officials, who believed that black community leaders continued to harbor the criminals.

In such a tense atmosphere, all aspects of trust and mutual respect quickly deteriorated between the leadership of Asheville's black and white communities. To many white residents, black Ashevilleans were now, more than ever, enemies. With the town's Veneer of Racial Harmony compromised, however, Asheville's black elite began their push for social equality.

Given the city's worsening race relations, Asheville's black leaders wanted their community to keep quiet as they began their campaign against racial inequality. In particular, they urged African Americans to "stay off the streets at night, go to your homes and keep your mouths shut."<sup>142</sup> The leaders knew that in order to gain benefits for their community, they would have to keep the peace. Rioting and other forms of public protest, they feared, would only result in more animosity between the races. Instead, Asheville's black elites

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<sup>140</sup> Harris, "Negroes Present Their Side of the Situation: Say They Can Not Control Their Race," 1.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

sought to use what was left of their influence with the town's white establishment to negotiate the construction of separate but equal social facilities that would enrich their community. This style of negotiation would remain the prime protest technique used by civil rights activists in Asheville for the next 40 years.

Asheville's black elite first sought to construct a library for the African American community. For years, black residents had petitioned the city government to build a separate and equal library, but to no avail. In response, Asheville blacks – as they had done in the past – attempted to pool their own resources for the library's construction. However, the cost quickly proved too great.<sup>143</sup> As such, black leaders decided to use the volatile state of Asheville's interracial affairs as a leverage tool in negotiations for a new library. Having utilized a similar tactic to gain funds for the creation of the Blue Ridge Hospital, Dr. Leotus Miller initiated the negotiating process. In 1913, Miller organized a rally at the YMI, demanding the construction of a black hospital large enough to accommodate the city's growing black population. Accounts of the demonstration reveal that it was peaceful, but the threat of another public rally compromised Asheville's image as a peaceful tourist destination for white elites.<sup>144</sup>

Asheville's increasing dependence on tourism had influenced white officials' decision to enact absolute segregation, yet this economic shift also presented itself as leverage for the black elite's negotiations. In 1925, Asheville experienced a rapid growth in tourism, as more than 50,000 tourists summered in the area that year.<sup>145</sup> Meanwhile, a land boom raised the value of real estate in several parts of the city to over \$8,000 per square foot.

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<sup>143</sup> Davis, *The Black Heritage of Western North Carolina*, 49.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Sondley, *A History of Buncombe County, North Carolina*, 410; Starnes, *Creating the Land of the Sky: Tourism and Society in Western North Carolina*, 68-70.

The town's architecture also took on more elegant and grandiose attributes in order to attract an upscale tourist clientele.<sup>146</sup> Indeed, Asheville's elite wanted to portray their town as one of elegance, affluence, and, above all, peace.

With that goal in mind, white boosters sought to hide the growing black community from the view of Asheville's tourists. While the white leader's move was an insult to African American residents, the black elite used this to their advantage in negotiating for a black library. Prior to meeting with the City Commissioners for the library proposal, the black elite once again urged the black community to remain quiet. This reassured the commissioners that the library proposal would not be coupled with a public rally, as had happened during the hospital proposal in 1913. Though there is no documentation from the meeting, black leaders left victorious and the town broke ground on the construction of the library just months later. The volatility of Asheville's race relations likely played an influential role in the administration's decision to finance and construct the library.<sup>147</sup>

In 1926, the town employed Irene Hendrick, an African American library scientist from Florida, to organize the library, which was built as a part of the YMI institute.<sup>148</sup> This victory convinced Asheville's black leaders that their style of negotiation could yield positive results for their community. The black elite successfully employed a give and take style of negotiation in which they would keep the peace in the black community if the white officials' agreed to finance the creation of equal social facilities. These negotiations ultimately forged a symbiotic relationship between Asheville's black and white leaders. Nonetheless, white officials understood the volatility of this relationship. Although African American leaders

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Hornsby-Gutting, *Black Manhood and Community Building in North Carolina: 1900-1930*, 17.

<sup>148</sup> Frazier, *Legendary Locals of Asheville North Carolina*, 12.

had the power to suppress their community, they also had the ability to rouse them. This silent but imminent threat would inform negotiations between black and white leaders for years to come.

### **1930s Activism**

Just as Asheville's black elite had begun to gain momentum in their push for social equality, the Great Depression struck the nation. Consequently, Asheville's economy quickly declined, leaving the town's black and white residents in dire economic straits. Out of necessity, African Americans were once again forced into a life of "self-help and quiet determination."<sup>149</sup> Some black residents even resorted to eating "vermin [and] birds" to survive.<sup>150</sup> With the election of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the advent of New Deal in 1933, however, Asheville's black community found a bit of hope.

As historian Jacqueline Dowd pointed out, one of the New Deal's key components was unemployment protection. However, when implemented in 1933, the unemployment insurance designed to bring economic security excluded benefits for agricultural and domestic workers. These stipulations rendered 55 percent of the nation's African American population and 87 percent of black females unfit for unemployment pay in the midst of the Great Depression.<sup>151</sup> In Asheville, this unjust and unequal doling of benefits meant that most blacks would never receive federal aid.

Throughout the 1930s, job opportunities for African Americans in Asheville remained confined to the domestic and agricultural realms. Many black residents found employment only in hotels and inns. Others worked as subsistence farmers and farm hands.

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<sup>149</sup> Davis, *The Black Heritage of Western North Carolina*, 17.

<sup>150</sup> Sondley, *A History of Buncombe County, North Carolina*, 408.

<sup>151</sup> Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," 1256.

In the end, most black Ashevilleans – excluded from receiving federal aid – had to once again fend for themselves. To make matters worse, since unemployment insurance did not apply to Asheville’s black workforce, many mothers and fathers proved unable to provide for their families. In response, Asheville’s black elite, working with African Americans elsewhere in western North Carolina, established the Negro Welfare Council in 1937.<sup>152</sup> The council existed as a network of western North Carolina’s black elites that pooled together funds to improve the social and economic state of the region’s black community. As the federal government failed local African Americans, council members set up food drives and recreational events to ease the economic plight of their community.

### **1940s Activism**

During World War II, Asheville’s civil rights movement began to transform from an upper-class endeavor into a movement of the people. Over 80 black mountaineers served their country in the Pacific and European theaters. Many of these soldiers came from Asheville’s Stephens-Lee High School. Furthermore, the vast majority of Asheville’s black residents helped to fund the war effort back home in a number of ways.<sup>153</sup> The African American newspaper *West Asheville News*, for instance, encouraged black community investment with the slogan, “Not everybody with a dollar to spare can shoot a gun straight-but everybody can shoot straight to the bank and buy war bonds. Buy 10 percent every payday.”<sup>154</sup> African American women also organized the shipment of care packages to white and black troops from Asheville. Other young black Ashevilleans received First-Aid training to aid the sick and injured overseas. In these instances of assistance for the war effort, the

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<sup>152</sup> Milton Ready, “A History of Pride,” *Asheville Citizen Times*, February 13, 1983, 14.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> “State of the Black Community,” *West Asheville News*, September 11, 1942, 3.



town's black residents began to change the way in which they identified themselves. They increasingly saw themselves not only as black people in America, but also as Americans.<sup>155</sup>

World War II also caused a shift in the collective logic of Asheville's black community. The war forced many black citizens to re-examine their rights, liberties, and roles as Americans. Perhaps more importantly, the conflict led many middle- and lower-class blacks in Asheville – like those elsewhere in the nation – to join the Double V Campaign's battle for racial equality at home.<sup>156</sup> While fighting for their country in World War II, black Ashevilleans felt they deserved more than what whites in their city had allowed. Receiving much higher levels of equality in their time overseas, black veterans were disgusted to come back to a place that treated them as second class citizens.<sup>157</sup> These feelings quickly encouraged many lower-class black Ashevilleans to join forces with the town's black elite in the fight for racial justice.

The first actions of Asheville's inter-class civil rights coalition came in 1943. That year, the black community demanded a new hospital, pointing out that the five white hospitals in Asheville allowed a total of only 33 beds for black patients. While the black elite had successfully convinced the city government to charter an African American hospital in the 1920s, funding halted during the Great Depression and forced the hospital to close.<sup>158</sup> Working side by side, Asheville's inter-class civil rights coalition formulated a change in negotiation strategy. Instead of moving directly into negotiations between white and black

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<sup>155</sup> Ready, "A History of Pride," 14.

<sup>156</sup> Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," 1256; M. Newman, *The civil rights movement* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 17

<sup>157</sup> Chase, *Asheville: A History*, 149.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

leaders, Asheville's coalition chose to mobilize their ranks in an effort to showcase to the town's white officials the growth in the movement's size and scope.

First, black community members petitioned the city council in large numbers for the construction of the hospital. Meanwhile, the town's black leaders reached out to sympathetic whites, who, upon hearing about the plight of local African Americans, began to report heart-wrenching stories of Asheville's "lowly blacks" to local newspapers. An article from the *Asheville Times*, for instance, reveals a complete metamorphosis in the white community's pathos towards their black neighbors.<sup>159</sup> The article read, "Negro citizens should not be denied the privilege of contributing to their hospital but we of the white race should accept it as our job and our opportunity."<sup>160</sup> After local blacks had raised part of the funds through community pooling and donations from the white community, the *Asheville Citizen* reported, "The extraordinary repose of the Negro citizens of this city and county to the financial appeal of the Asheville Colored Hospital is decided by the most gratifying development....The Negroes have already raised \$2,500....This money has come out their own pitifully meager resources."<sup>161</sup> The article echoed the sentiments of a growing number of wealthy white Ashevilleans who believed that they had a charitable duty to help the African American community.

This paternalistic discourse, however, failed to convince Asheville's city government to build a new African American hospital. Conversations between white officials and the town's black elite soon came to a naught, forcing the inter-class black coalition to accept funds from white philanthropists in order to save "the many black people who die because

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<sup>159</sup> "Plea for Hospital," *Asheville Times*, January 6, 1943, 4.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> "Plea for Hospital," 3.

they can't get through the hospital doors."<sup>162</sup> Sympathetic whites like Mary Shuford and the editor of the *Asheville Citizen*, Charles Webb, worked with Asheville's Rotary Club to finally build the hospital in 1943.<sup>163</sup> Although the traditional strategy of negotiation had failed to inform the decisions of Asheville's city government, this defeat only strengthened the resolve of Asheville's inter-class civil rights group to continue their fight and convinced them that cooperation between the races could occur.

### **1950s Activism**

By the 1950s, the rhetoric of black civil rights activists in Asheville became more radical. While lower- and middle-class African Americans continued to support the black elite and their push for equality, a message from Reverend E.W. Dixon, one of the community's most influential religious figures, changed everything. Dixon called for an amendment to the platform of Asheville's civil rights movement. Essentially, he highlighted the need for African American suffrage, a right that the black elite had not fought to attain. Ultimately, the Reverend would alter the direction of Asheville's civil rights endeavor when he urged the black community "to rightly seek and contend for full American Citizenship and the rights provided for the same in the Constitution of the U.S.A."<sup>164</sup>

Using Dixon's message as their rallying cry, Asheville's black community created the Asheville and Buncombe County Citizens Organization and the Service Credit Union in 1959.<sup>165</sup> Both of these groups came to fruition in the wake of a campaign to suppress black voters in western North Carolina during the 1950s. Though African American

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Phoebe Ann Pollitt, *African American and Cherokee Nurses in Appalachia: A History, 1900-1965*, (Jefferson, NC: Macfarland and Co. Publishing, 2016), 59.

<sup>164</sup> *Minutes of the Mud Creek Baptist Association and Its Auxiliaries, 1951-1956*, (Asheville, NC: Asheville District Magazine of the Church of God, 1956), 16.

<sup>165</sup> "Negro Groups View Civic Problems," *Asheville Citizen*, September 22, 1959, 1.

disenfranchisement had long existed in the western part of the state, it was especially prevalent in Asheville and its surrounding communities. In 1958, for instance, over 15 blacks were forbidden to vote in nearby Brevard, North Carolina, after failing a rigged poll test. Among these hopeful voters was a high school teacher and principal whose lack of knowledge of the state constitution led registrar D.B. Pittillo to contend that “none of the blacks were able to satisfy him that they were qualified to register.”<sup>166</sup>

On September 19, 1959, the Asheville and Buncombe County Citizens Organization and the Service Credit Union met for the first time at Mt. Zion Baptist Church. Above all, both groups wanted to protect black voting rights. With that goal in mind, they set up a registration committee to monitor the activities in every voting station throughout Buncombe County. The organizations also wanted government funds to help guarantee that black children’s separate educational facilities were equal to that of white students.<sup>167</sup> One black member of the Asheville and Buncombe County Citizens Organization, Dr. R.T. Duncan, captured the spirit of the meeting and the sentiments of the black community as a whole with the fiery line, “All blacks are entitled to 3 powers: God, the ballot, and the dollar, and that we as negroes should use all 3.”<sup>168</sup>

Two of Asheville’s black leaders present that day were Jessie Ray and Will Roland. At that meeting, Ray was appointed as the president of the Service Credit Union, and Roland became his chief officer.<sup>169</sup> Both men would become instrumental in the next few years of Asheville’s civil rights movement, especially Roland, who soon helped to merge the civil

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<sup>166</sup> Davis, *The Black Heritage of Western North Carolina*, 39.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> “Negro Groups View Civic Problems.”

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

rights efforts of Asheville's black elite with a new movement gaining ground within the ranks of the African American community's youth.

### **Asheville's Youth Movement- 1959**

In 1959, a group of African American teenagers in Asheville began constructing an offshoot to the civil rights movement of the black elite. While these young activists still aimed to uphold separate but equal facilities, they focused primarily on the needs of Asheville's youth. The most important of these needs – and the base of their campaign – was to ensure equality in the town's segregated schools.

Asheville's youth movement began under the leadership of a charismatic and motivated student from Stephens-Lee High School named James Ferguson. As a talented student-athlete, Ferguson was popular among his peers and would become class president of the student body. In that powerful position, Ferguson would gain the title "Mayor of the School."<sup>170</sup> It also gave him an influential voice over Asheville's black teenagers, most of whom attended Stephens-Lee High School. Another influential figure in Asheville's burgeoning youth movement was Marvin Chambers. Chambers was good friends with Ferguson and also held a position in the Stephens-Lee High School Student Government.<sup>171</sup> Thus, the hierarchy of Asheville's youth movement lay in the power structure of the Stephens-Lee Student Government.

The process of preparing for school integration in Asheville began in 1959, nearly five years after the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled that "separate but equal" schools for white and black students was unconstitutional. These preparations were in part due to an ongoing

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<sup>170</sup> Frazier, *Legendary Locals of Asheville North Carolina*, 69.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

court case in which black students from neighboring Yancey County had petitioned for the integration of their public schools.<sup>172</sup> In Asheville, two wealthy white women, Mrs. Franz and Mrs. Schandler, undertook efforts to desegregate the city's schools. Marvin Chambers later recalled that "Ms. Franz. had called this group together to begin black and white youth ... across the racial lines, it's basically what it was about."<sup>173</sup> The group became known as the Greater Asheville Intergroup Youth Council. Student body leaders were picked from the area's black and white schools to go and talk about what James Ferguson called "the little things about racial things."

However, these discussions did little to bridge the gap between Asheville's white and black teenagers. Racism had become woven so deeply into many of the council participants that forging interracial bonds seemed impossible. For Marvin Chambers, the idea of school integration died during a discussion on the structural inequalities of Stephens-Lee and the all-white Lee Edwards High School. In the midst of the debate, the Lee Edwards' council submitted the statement: "The reasons we have ... a lot of things or get a lot of things is because our parents come to the PTA and fight for what we want." According to Chambers and Ferguson, this view summed up the sentiments of Asheville's white student body and proved that interracial animosity was too virulent to integrate schools.<sup>174</sup>

This unpleasant meeting inspired James Ferguson and Marvin Chambers to meet with the head of the PTA to discuss the possibilities of building a new school. Mr. Mapp, the chairman of the PTA, heard the boys' pleas for a new school before unveiling what Ferguson

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<sup>172</sup> "8 Yancey Students Petition School Integration," *Asheville Times*, August 6, 1959, 7.

<sup>173</sup> Marvin Chambers, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

referred to as the “Grand Plan to fix the school.”<sup>175</sup> To deal with the infrastructural frailties and cramped classrooms at Stephens-Lee, Mapp and the Buncombe County School Board had planned to construct several small additions onto the building. Logistically, Ferguson argued that the additions would make the school more crowded and “would have been nothing compared to what Lee Edwards had.”<sup>176</sup> Ferguson even offered possibilities for the location of a new black school, but the PTA leadership proceeded with a litany of excuses regarding problems with each proposed area. The fact of the matter being, Ferguson’s proposed areas encroached upon Asheville’s white sphere. Ferguson simply told the PTA that the new additions to Stephens-Lee were not enough and there had to be a new black school.<sup>177</sup>

News of the high school sophomore’s stance against the PTA quickly reached the Buncombe County School Superintendent as well as the local press. Ferguson’s actions made it into the *Asheville Citizen* and the *Asheville News*. As Marvin Chambers recounted, “He was on the front page of the paper with a headline that read, “Mayor of Stephens-Lee Rejects School Improvements.”<sup>178</sup> Soon after this publication’s release, School Superintendent E.C. Funderbunk summoned Ferguson to come to his office. In the midst of several school integration campaigns in nearby Yancey County, Funderbunk wanted to ameliorate the Stephens-Lee problem as quickly as possible. White officials in both Yancey and Buncombe counties aimed to maintain the integrity of the 1955 Pupil Assignment Act. The act existed to delay school desegregation in North Carolina and was constantly cited by school officials during the integration hearings in Yancey County. As court documents show, Buncombe and

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

Yancey counties wanted to “uphold the constitutionality of the North Carolina Pupil Assignment Law and plainly hold that federal courts should not be called upon to interfere in the administration of the local schools until plaintiffs have exhausted their administrative remedies under the law.”<sup>179</sup> Thus, Funderbunk hoped for an administrative remedy to fix the Stephens-Lee problem.

The Buncombe County School Board had become directly involved with the Yancey County debates, largely because the black students from Yancey were all bussed to Asheville schools.<sup>180</sup> This influx of migrant students created congestion problems at Stephens-Lee. Ferguson’s plea for a new school was based partly on the overcrowding of his school from out-of-county students, one of the consequences of the Yancey County bussing process. A proponent of segregation, Funderbunk wanted to silence Ferguson’s pleas and uphold the segregation of western North Carolina’s schools.<sup>181</sup>

Using his position of power, E.C. Funderbunk delivered a speech to the 15-year-old Ferguson on the wonders of the proposed additions to Stephens-Lee. The superintendent kindly and calmly gave Ferguson time for a rebuttal, during which the teenager again rejected the architectural revival plan for Stephens-Lee. Ferguson then voiced his disdain for the vast inequalities in Asheville’s segregated schools, explaining that “we have a group of participants and this is not something that we were willing to give up.”<sup>182</sup> This statement warned the superintendent that Asheville’s youth was prepared to organize in opposition to

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<sup>179</sup> “Griffith Vs. Board of Education of Yancey County,” *United States District Court, W.D. North Carolina, Asheville Division, 1960*, Web Accessed through Casetext.com.

<sup>180</sup> *A Brief History of Asheville City Schools*, 43.

<sup>181</sup> “With All Deliberate Speed,” The University of North Carolina at Asheville, 2005, web accessed November 17.

<sup>182</sup> James Ferguson, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, Center for Diversity in Education, UNC at Asheville, North Carolina, Asheville, NC, March 4, 2005.



racial inequality. In doing so, Ferguson started a fight that at that time was reminiscent of the civil rights campaign started years earlier by Asheville's black elite. The face of Asheville's civil rights movement was increasingly becoming more youthful and radical.

Knowing that Stephens-Lee lacked modern equipment and adequate infrastructure, Ferguson and several other students soon formed a committee to assess the structural status of the high school. After receiving PTA manuals that outlined what the Asheville County School system viewed as the necessary standards of schools, Ferguson and other members of the committee conducted a thorough investigation of Stephens-Lee High.<sup>183</sup> Marvin Chambers said of this investigation, "We had a lot of work to do and our teachers, who were on our side, would let us complete our investigations during class. We measured classrooms, checked the integrity of the walls, columns, pipes, etc. and looked at all of the books and other classroom equipment."<sup>184</sup> The impromptu study concluded that Stephens-Lee High School failed to meet state requirements. The textbooks were archaic; the equipment was unsafe; and the building was falling apart.<sup>185</sup>

The group compiled their findings in an extensive report that Marvin Chambers referred to as "The Unequal Part of Separate."<sup>186</sup> They then asked church leaders to circulate the report to black Ashevilleans and to encourage them to show their support at an upcoming meeting with the Buncombe County School Board, where Ferguson would present the report. However, when the day of the meeting arrived, the situation had changed drastically. Upon hearing that E.C. Funderbunk and several other prominent white officials would be there, the principal of Stephens-Lee threatened to expel Ferguson and any other black students who

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Marvin Chambers, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid

attended the meeting. The teenagers, however, ignored the principal's threat and proceeded to the meeting.<sup>187</sup>

There, Ferguson and the other students discovered that only a handful of black residents had come to show their support. A disheartened Chambers claimed that the meeting coincided with a horrible snowstorm that prevented most black Ashevilleans from leaving their homes. Fortunately, the president of the Asheville branch of the NAACP, E.H. McCoy, managed to attend the meeting.<sup>188</sup> During the meeting, McCoy stood up and said, "Mr. President, I know all of these people are here, but we are here to hear a report from these young people, this committee that we have selected, and we want to hear from them."<sup>189</sup> After voting on the matter, board members approved a motion to listen to the students' report. Ferguson then rose from his chair and began to present the report. Ferguson stuck to the approved script before inserting an unexpected addendum that warned that he would "lead a group of students from Stephens-Lee to Lee Edwards, Asheville's white high school, if a new school was not built."<sup>190</sup> The board did not submit a rebuttal that night and took the report for consideration. Months later, the board agreed to construct a larger black high school in one of the areas that Ferguson had suggested.<sup>191</sup>

Ferguson's threat to compromise Asheville's Veneer of Racial Harmony likely informed the board's decision to build a new black school. This victory inspired a growing number of Asheville's black teenagers to gather behind the youth movement started by James Ferguson and his friends. In 1959, these students still adhered to the spirit of the movement

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<sup>187</sup> James Ferguson, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005.

<sup>188</sup> Marvin Chambers, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

that Asheville's black leaders had developed decades earlier. However, in the coming years, these young men and women – inspired by the national civil rights movement – would adopt a different, more radical agenda.

Asheville's black elite found limited success in their community reform campaigns. They strategically petitioned Asheville's white leadership at times of interracial unrest and facilitated the construction of a few separate but equal black facilities. Their negotiation strategy succeeded in part due to the fact that black leaders held influence over the African American community and, thus, possessed the power to uphold or compromise Asheville's Veneer of Racial Harmony. This veneer existed as the glue that held Asheville's tourist industry together. Between 1917 and 1959, every civil rights campaign in Asheville had existed as a crusade for equality in Asheville's segregated facilities and communities. The sentiment of the movement focused on gaining social, economic, and political equality for the black community while not opposing legal segregation. In other words, the black elite sought to only equalize opportunity in Asheville's racially segregated spheres. During the early 1960s, however, Asheville's youth movement would cast off the yoke of the city's early black reformers and move away from the fight for separate but equal racial communities. This band of teenage activists would organize a grassroots civil rights organization called the Asheville Student Committee on Racial Equality (ASCORE) and launch a campaign to integrate their town's racial spheres.

### **Chapter 3 – ASCORE and Asheville’s Civil Rights Movement, 1960-1965**

In their landmark book *Blacks in Appalachia*, William H. Turner and Edward J. Cabbell made the definitive observation that “Appalachia can no longer afford to sit back and do nothing about the fact that the civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s by-passed the mountains. It is time that Appalachia confront the rampant forms of institutional racism brought on by industrialization in the mountains as well as covert racism rooted in the traditions and customs of the mountains.”<sup>192</sup> Though most scholars consider *Blacks in Appalachia* the gold standard in the study of black society and culture in Appalachia, Turner’s and Cabbell’s homogenous generalization of the region loses its validity after examining the actions of ASCORE in Asheville, North Carolina, between 1960 and 1965.

Like Asheville’s black elite, ASCORE wanted to achieve social equality between the races. However, while the black elite aimed to uphold separate but equal through their endeavors for social justice, ASCORE sought to, in most cases, fully integrate Asheville’s social sphere. This difference in strategy came from the historical context in which the two groups operated. Asheville’s black elite, for instance, fashioned their mission statements and rhetoric on the messages of W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and other early-twentieth-century African American intellectuals who believed that the black elite class

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<sup>192</sup> Turner and Cabbell, *Blacks in Appalachia*, 16.

could elevate the black community while still adhering to the notion of separate but equal.<sup>193</sup> On the other hand, ASCORE emerged in the midst of the classical phase of the Civil Rights Movement. By then, the movement's rhetoric had shifted radically and, most importantly, civil rights actions were globally visible to anyone who had a television set. The media had targeted charismatic leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. to be the face of the Civil Rights Movement. This news coverage ultimately allowed King's strategy of non-violent protest for racial equality to become what American society perceived as the general mission statement of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>194</sup>

However, public protests that occurred throughout the South in 1960 would not yield results in Asheville. In response, Asheville's black elite and ASCORE weaved their politics and strategies together to form an organization that was in many ways structurally consistent with other grassroots civil rights groups in the South, but also unique in its strategy.<sup>195</sup> This approach came from the groups' compromise of ideas and was specifically tailored to combat the white power structure in Asheville, North Carolina. Like their civil rights predecessors, ASCORE found interracial negotiating power through their ability to threaten the integrity of Asheville's Veneer of Racial Harmony.

### **ASCORE'S Genesis**

ASCORE was founded in 1960 by James Ferguson, whose position as student body president of Stephens-Lee High had allowed him to develop strong relationships with the school's administration. His 1959 victory over the Buncombe County School Board convinced many black teenagers that they had agency in the fight for racial equality in

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<sup>193</sup> Hornsby-Gutting, *Black Manhood and Community Building in North Carolina: 1900-1930*, 87.

<sup>194</sup> Newman, *The Civil Rights Movement*, 17.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

Asheville.<sup>196</sup> Ultimately, Ferguson demonstrated that the movement for civil rights in Asheville was not exclusively reserved for the wealthy and powerful members of the black community.

Unlike previous leaders of Asheville's civil rights movement, Ferguson was not a member of the black elite. He was born in Asheville in 1942 to James and Nina Freeman Ferguson, both of whom had migrated to the mountains from rural South Carolina. James Sr. and Nina were by no means middle- or upper-class citizens. James Sr. worked for the *Biltmore Press* and sold coal and firewood out of a wagon, while Nina labored as a maid for several white middle-class families. James' mother and father instilled a hard-working ethic in their children and taught them to be content with what they had.<sup>197</sup> James reminisced of his parents, "I never knew how tight things were, never knew we were poor, never had a mentality of poverty always felt that we had a good life. Because they never complained to us."<sup>198</sup> James' youth and class status initially set him apart from Asheville's black elite.

During the late 1950s, several internal and external factors fundamentally changed the rhetoric of Asheville's youth movement. Internally, Asheville's youth crusade stood at odds with the movement of the black elite. This strained relationship came from the radical nature of the youth movement in which Ferguson had demonstrated when threatening the school board to stage a mass protest in 1959.<sup>199</sup> Although aware of the previous actions of Asheville's black elites, James's decision to combat racial equality began with exposure to influential civil rights activists working outside of Appalachia. Ferguson, for instance, cited Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi as the two civil rights leaders that helped him

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<sup>196</sup> Frazier, *Legendary Locals of Asheville North Carolina*, 14.

<sup>197</sup> James Ferguson, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid.

hone his initial activist agenda. Ferguson studied “the non-violent method of Martin Luther King, and Gandhi and others. They also read materials and learned the method of what was then called direct action.”<sup>200</sup> Direct action resembled the non-violent methods that Asheville’s protesting black elite had employed since the early twentieth century. Ferguson knew that the first two steps of direct action protocol – problem identification and negotiation – had succeeded in the past. However, swept away with the revolutionary fervor of the Civil Rights Movement in 1960, he was not afraid of incorporating direct action’s third phase, civil disobedience.<sup>201</sup>

The threat of civil disobedience was always a silent piece of the previous negotiations between Asheville’s black and white elite, but widespread public protest had never come to fruition in the black leaders’ campaign. By 1960, however, widespread media coverage of the Civil Rights Movement had convinced Asheville’s white leadership that there now was an exponentially growing number of black Americans hoping to break the chains of subordination.<sup>202</sup> Media scenes of civil unrest had become so frequent that the once unknown process of civil disobedience had become normalized.<sup>203</sup> At the same time, Ferguson’s threat of a protest at Asheville’s white high school showed the actions in which the now-organized youth movement might take to gain racial equality. By 1960, the destruction of Asheville’s Veneer of Racial Harmony stood as a real and imminent threat. Therefore, Ferguson deduced that incorporating vocal threats of civil disobedience in his negotiations could be an effective political strategy. While mutual respect had played a small role in the previous civil rights

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Lisa Watters, “Peaceful Warriors,” *Mountain Xpress*, October 26, 2010, accessed November 7, 2014.

<sup>202</sup> “A History of Pride: Black Asheville a Blend of Traditions: School, Church, Community Involvement,” 11.

<sup>203</sup> Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” 1249.

negotiations of Asheville's black and white elite, ASCORE would replace this negotiating tool with fear.

Ferguson initially wanted to create a mixed coalition that consisted of students from Stephens-Lee High School and Warren Wilson College. Due to the low number of black students enrolled at Warren Wilson, however, Ferguson decided to build ASCORE's core out of teenage boys and girls from Asheville's black community. When Ferguson began recruiting in early 1960, he received criticism from many Stephens-Lee administrators, faculty, and students.<sup>204</sup> Fortunately, two events occurred in 1960 that would make recruitment more palatable to the student body. The first event was the February 1<sup>st</sup> sit-in at the Woolworth's department store in Greensboro, North Carolina. The initial actions of the Woolworth's activists sparked a revolutionary enthusiasm within Asheville's teenage community as they saw that protest could be silent, yet effective. Ferguson spoke of the sit-ins, "We saw what was going on, and we wanted to be a part of it too."<sup>205</sup> The integration of the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro six months later convinced many skeptical Stephens-Lee students that young people could use peaceful protest to invoke change in their state. Essentially, processes occurring outside of Appalachia provided Asheville's black teenagers with the self-efficacy needed to organize their movement.

Drawing from those students who had helped him take on the school board in 1959, Ferguson recruited ASCORE's original roster of activists. Original members from Stephens-Lee High School included Al Whitesides, Marvin Chambers, and Annette Coleman, among others. The group soon linked up with other African American high school students at the all-girl Allen Home School, including Viola Jones Spells, Annette Coleman, and Oralene

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<sup>204</sup> Marvin Chambers, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005.

<sup>205</sup> James Ferguson, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005.



Simmons, who would serve as ASCORE's second president.<sup>206</sup> Although the Allen School students were not directly affected by the inequalities of Asheville's public school system, teachers at their school had been outspoken critics of segregation and may have inspired a revolutionary fervor within their students.<sup>207</sup> For these reasons, the Allen School existed as an incubator for civil rights activism.

Inspired by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Ferguson and his friends named their new organization the Asheville Student Committee on Racial Equality. This name was chosen specifically to highlight the committee's mission of correcting the racial inequalities that remained endemic to their town. Having identified racial bias in their school system, the group wanted to strengthen their movement with help from other members of the African American community. ASCORE ultimately found this aid from those black leaders who had participated in the first phases of Asheville's fight against racial inequality.<sup>208</sup>

While many members of the black elite remained critical of the integration movement, a few supported the youth activists' mission. In the summer of 1960, Ferguson had reached out to Asheville's black leaders, a decision that would inform the style, structure, and spirit of ASCORE altogether. The first place where Ferguson found help was at the jewelry store of Will Roland. Roland was part of the Asheville's black leadership and had become an active voice in Asheville's civil rights movement when he helped found the Service Credit Union in 1959, which sought to ensure economic stability for the black

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<sup>206</sup> "With All Deliberate Speed," 7.

<sup>207</sup> Butcher, "Religion, Race, Gender and Education at the Allen School, Asheville, North Carolina, 1885-1974," 478.

<sup>208</sup> James Ferguson, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005.

community in Asheville.<sup>209</sup> Though Roland supported Ferguson's belief in racial integration, he wanted to make sure that ASCORE went about doing so in a safe manner. Roland hoped that that ASCORE's campaign would be calculated using logic instead of passion. As such, he offered the back of his jewelry store as a safe meeting place for ASCORE to carefully map out their plans. The use of the jewelry store was contingent upon ASCORE's following a strict code. A proponent of Asheville's civil rights movement in its earlier phases, Roland knew what strategies worked in negotiations with the town's white leadership. For Roland, public protests like picketing were a last resort, only to be exhausted when all else had failed. In the end, Roland wanted to ensure ASCORE's movement remained a safe and legally sound endeavor.<sup>210</sup>

With that goal in mind, Roland organized a meeting between the committee and Asheville's only black lawyers, Harold Epps and Ruben J. Dailey. Epps and Dailey agreed to serve as legal advisors for ASCORE and show the activists how to protest within the boundaries of the law.<sup>211</sup> Dailey, in particular, played an integral role in the growth of ASCORE. By 1960, Dailey was well known throughout Asheville and western North Carolina as a staunch proponent of school integration. His concerns about the busing system, which forced some students to ride over 80 miles to Highland black schools, brought many others to speak out against school segregation. For these reasons, Dailey had been in court

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<sup>209</sup> Georgia Roland, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, Center for Diversity in Education, UNC at Asheville, North Carolina, Asheville, NC, May 11, 2005.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Marvin Chambers, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005.

throughout 1960 in the hopes of integrating eight students from Yancey County into a nearby white high school.<sup>212</sup>

More so than other black leaders in Asheville, Dailey believed that the school board had a legally mandated duty to give black students “an equal playing field” in the realm of education. Using the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision as his legal rationale, Dailey worked in Yancey, Transylvania, and Buncombe counties to hasten the “with all deliberate speed” of school integration in western North Carolina. His courtroom prowess and knowledge of the law made him a formidable opponent in the battle against Appalachian municipal courts. His persistence would culminate in the forced integration of Transylvania and Buncombe County Schools in 1963.<sup>213</sup>

While Dailey’s reputation and legal knowledge offered a level of validity to ASCORE, his connections with the NAACP’s Charlotte chapter also provided the committee status as a legitimate civil rights organization.<sup>214</sup> Dailey had been associated with the NAACP for several years and was on retainer as the association’s lead attorney in its western North Carolina school integration campaign.<sup>215</sup> Working in congruence with Will Roland, he began circulating literature on non-violent protest to ASCORE as well as reaching out to NAACP headquarters to set-up training sessions for the teenage activists. Marvin Chambers commented that at the commencement of training, Dailey exclaimed, “You all go and do what you feel like you can do and we’ll be ----- back here.”<sup>216</sup> Ultimately, ASCORE received the legal protection of Harold Epps, Ruben Dailey, and the NAACP. This support from

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<sup>212</sup> “Negro Group (The Asheville and Buncombe County Citizens Organization) Backs Voter Organizing,” *Asheville Citizen*, September 27, 1959 11.

<sup>213</sup> “With All Deliberate Speed,” 6.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>215</sup> “Griffith Vs. Board of Education of Yancey County,” 6.

<sup>216</sup> Marvin Chambers, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005.

members of the World War II generation was integral to ASCORE's future success and a common occurrence throughout the South at this time.<sup>217</sup>

Shortly after meeting with Dailey and Epps, Will Roland began working with other black leaders to pool the funds needed for ASCORE's travel expenses and training costs. According to Chambers and Ferguson, ASCORE members soon traveled to Raleigh, Charlotte, and an undisclosed location in South Carolina to attend training seminars in civil disobedience and non-violent protest. This training awarded ASCORE a level of legitimacy within the community, which caught the attention of Asheville's black leadership.<sup>218</sup> At the same time, the training widened ASCORE's original campaign agenda from desegregating the school system to integrating Asheville's entire social sphere.

With a newfound level of validity, ASCORE began receiving economic aid from Asheville's black religious leaders and civic groups. Reverend Nilous M. Avery of Hill Street Church and Reverend Walker Percy of Mount Zion Baptist Church, for instance, provided their facilities for ASCORE to act out scenarios that they might encounter in their push for integration. These religious figures' support of ASCORE made the idea of public activism more palatable to Asheville's black community. However, many local African Americans remained hesitant to endorse ASCORE's campaign. As Ferguson later remarked, "Some of them agreed to help; there were others who were fearful for our safety and preferred that we not do it."<sup>219</sup> In the end, ASCORE's connections to the town's black leadership helped transform their endeavor into a community-supported, grassroots movement. While ASCORE likely received training from the NAACP, the committee held

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<sup>217</sup> Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 67.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

<sup>219</sup> Watters, "Peaceful Warriors."

no other ties with the national organization. The training may have helped ASCORE sharpen their non-violent protesting skills, but it did not alter the committee's original plan to protest through the teachings of the direct action doctrine.

### **ASCORE'S Style and Successes: 1960-1961**

ASCORE's partnership with Asheville's black leaders ultimately helped them find a protest process that would be the most useful in their town. This protest style would be based on negotiations where ASCORE would leverage the integrity of Asheville's Veneer of Racial Harmony to integrate the town's social spheres. Roland and Dailey educated the committee members on the importance of Asheville's tourism industry. Integral to the success of this industry, they informed ASCORE leaders, was the maintenance of Asheville's Veneer of Racial Harmony. Essentially, a threat to Asheville's veneer was a threat to the white community's livelihood and the town's economy.<sup>220</sup>

ASCORE's first attempt to alter Asheville's social fabric came with a restaurant sit-in campaign in 1960 that took its influence directly from the recently completed Woolworth sit-ins in Greensboro. The sit-ins were staged after ample planning between ASCORE's teenage members and supporting members of Asheville's black leadership.<sup>221</sup> According to Will Rowland's wife, Georgia Rowland, "The first meeting ASCORE had, well it probably wasn't the first meeting, but they decided that they would get some students from Warren Wilson and Stephens-Lee High school and they got together and decided the date that they were going out in the city to see about integrating some of these facilities, stores, restaurants, etc.

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<sup>220</sup> Marvin Chambers, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

and they did so.”<sup>222</sup> There is no exact tally for the number of people recruited for the undertaking of these sit-ins. However, ASCORE had nearly twenty members, all of whom participated in this integration campaign.<sup>223</sup>

Meanwhile, several ASCORE members began to contemplate utilizing more radical forms of public protest. The scenes of civil unrest and picketing that the national media used to embody the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement had certainly made an impression on the committee’s young teenagers. As James Ferguson recalled, “We saw [on TV] what was going on in the rest of United States and we wanted to do our part.”<sup>224</sup> However, Will Roland quickly corrected these aspirations, believing that ASCORE could only persuade Asheville’s white administration to end racial segregation through contained and calculated measures. Voicing the sentiments of Asheville’s black leadership, Roland set the standard for ASCORE’s protesting style at their first meeting when he said, “Don’t start any kind of confusion. And if the owners say they won’t serve you, thank them and then ask, are you sure this is what you want to do? Then walk out.”<sup>225</sup>

With their protest protocol in place, ASCORE staged several sit-ins in downtown Asheville. In August of 1960, ASCORE members and several of their adult advisors were to go to each restaurant in Asheville’s white sphere and see if they could get served. Will Rowland’s wife, Georgia, just happened to stop by the jewelry store on that fateful day and was unexpectedly swept into the campaign. She recalled the process in an interview: “My husband said, Georgia why don’t you go? And Rhonda, my daughter, was only 6 or 7 at the time, but he said, Why don’t you all go out to Burger King and see if they will serve you?”

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<sup>222</sup>Georgia Roland, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, May 11, 2005

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup>James Ferguson, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

And then his secretary said I'm going with you."<sup>226</sup> Georgia accepted her husband's offer and, after being briefed on the proper discourse for the demonstrations, she went to Burger King with her daughter and Will's secretary in tow.

Not expecting to be served, Georgia and the secretary had decided not to bring any money with them. Still, the group walked into the Burger King and made an expensive order. Unbelievably, the manager of the Burger King asked the three ladies, "Would you like to eat this inside or do you want to it as a take-out order?"<sup>227</sup> Baffled by the proposition, Georgia fumbled through her purse to find some money to pay for the order. Confronted by stares of confusion and disgust from the restaurant's white patrons, the three women sat down and began eating their lunch. Inadvertently, Georgia Rowland, her daughter, and Will's secretary became the first black people to be publicly served in a segregated Asheville restaurant.<sup>228</sup> On the surface, this story raises several questions. Before Georgia's trip to Burger King, ASCORE members had spent the day going to every restaurant in Asheville's white community. Each store owner had refused to serve the protestors. One might infer the likeliest conclusion that the Burger King employees had received word about the attempted sit-ins occurring throughout the city.<sup>229</sup> Perhaps, then, the Burger King managerial staff decided to give in to Georgia's request instead of causing a scene and upsetting the town's Veneer of Racial Harmony.

Marvin Chambers' experience on the day of the Asheville sit-ins is likely a more accurate representation of the general narrative of ASCORE's first desegregation campaign. Chambers led several ASCORE members to Kenilworth's Drug Store in downtown

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<sup>226</sup> Georgia Roland, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, May 11, 2005

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

Asheville. As Chambers and his fellow demonstrators approached the lunch counter, the store's owner and his patrons gave them stares of disgust. Mimicking the actions of Woolworth's activists in Greensboro, the boys sat down in a white-only seat to order their lunch. The owner approached them, saying, "I can serve you, but I cannot serve you if you're seated. We do not serve colored here."<sup>230</sup> Following the protocol of direct action, Chambers delivered the pre-determined quasi-threat, "Are you sure this is what you want to do?"<sup>231</sup> The store owner nodded in agreement. Peacefully, the boys rose and exited the building, only stopping to deliver the promise that they would return for a seat the following day. "You won't find one," the disgruntled owner muttered.<sup>232</sup> When Marvin Chambers and his friends returned to the drug store the next day, the owner had kept true to his word. All of the seats in the restaurant had been pulled up from the floor and removed.<sup>233</sup>

During the sit-in campaign, Will and Georgia Roland teamed with three white friends from the Y.M.C.A. to seek service at the more upscale Asheville Holiday Inn. Georgia explained that their friends were white women who worked with a small faction of Asheville's white community that supported integration. These women were Ms. Lord, Ms. Bridgman and Ms. Brigenstein (first names were not given). They accompanied Will and Georgia as they attempted to be served dinner at the Holiday Inn. As expected, Georgia and Will were refused service, forcing the entire group to depart the restaurant.<sup>234</sup>

ASCORE's sit-in campaign quickly gained the attention of Asheville's white city leaders. Such a campaign had ever happened in Asheville. The public scene of young black

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<sup>230</sup> Marvin Chambers, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Paul Clark, "Civil Rights Movement in Asheville was Not So Quiet," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, April 3, 2010, 9.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.



people challenging the status quo certainly tested the nerves of Asheville's leadership as their Veneer of Racial Harmony had come under attack. The nervousness of local white officials became apparent when one of ASCORE's adult advisors, Leah Butler, received word that several city managers had become willing to speak to the committee. According to James Ferguson and Marvin Chambers, some of the restaurant owners they encountered answered ASCORE's proposals by saying that they were "not in the position to make the decision and that they would have to go to the city."<sup>235</sup> Judging by the swift response of Asheville's white leadership, many business owners had quickly informed the city leaders about their encounters with ASCORE.

Meanwhile, ASCORE continued with its first campaign by reaching out to sympathetic leaders of Asheville's white community. Leaders like Maggie Ray helped bring the integration problem to the attention of Asheville's city leaders by highlighting the detrimental economic repercussions that might come if ASCORE's demands went unheard.<sup>236</sup> Being that this was – as Will Roland put it – "ASCORE's movement," the committee's advisors wanted the teenage members to be the chief negotiators in their meeting with Asheville's white power structure.<sup>237</sup> In the wake of this session, Marvin Chambers said, "We prepared ourselves to negotiate with the store owners, the store managers and the powers that be downtown."<sup>238</sup> Several days later, ASCORE met with a coalition of Asheville's white city managers, store owners, and community leaders.

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<sup>235</sup> Marvin Chambers, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005

<sup>236</sup> Viola Jones Spells, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, Center for Diversity in Education, UNC at Asheville, North Carolina, Asheville, NC, March 4, 2005.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Marvin Chambers, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005

During that meeting, James Ferguson recalled that “there was a good deal of back and forth and it was heavy, heavy negotiations that went on.”<sup>239</sup> However, ASCORE representatives knew that they had the upper hand in the negotiations as they held the very state of Asheville’s tourist industry in their hands. Throughout the negotiations, Marvin Chambers remembered, “You could tell the powers that be did not want anything that would deter ... tourism.”<sup>240</sup> Asheville’s white leadership ultimately opted to acquiesce to ASCORE’s demands instead of jeopardizing the lifeblood of their town’s economy. In phases, the desegregation of many Asheville restaurants immediately commenced. Though ASCORE’s first campaign had defeated segregation, white officials soon launched a counter-campaign to refute, downplay, and mask any traces of a civil rights movement in their town.

### **Hiding ASCORE**

Today, most long-time Asheville residents as well as Civil Rights Movement scholars remain largely unaware of ASCORE’s crusade. In fact, any mention of the event invokes confusion and surprise to most white people who lived in Asheville during the early 1960s. For instance, Dean Williams, an Asheville native who as a teenager lived in the epicenter of ASCORE’s activity, remarked in a 2016 interview, “I’ve never heard of ASCORE and we never knew anything about a civil rights movement in our town.”<sup>241</sup> Asheville historian Bradford Griggs also expressed a similar statement in a recent interview, “I didn’t think the movement took place there because there weren’t black colleges near Asheville.”<sup>242</sup> An

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<sup>239</sup> James Ferguson, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005

<sup>240</sup> Clark, “Civil Rights Movement in Asheville was Not So Quiet,” 2.

<sup>241</sup> Dean Williams, interviewed by Shane Parker, March 1, 2016, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC.

<sup>242</sup> Dr. Bradford Griggs, interviewed by Shane Parker, February 3, 2016, University of North Carolina at Wilmington, Wilmington, NC.

almost complete absence of scholarship on ASCORE further demonstrates that the organization's story remains virtually unknown within and outside of Asheville.

Just as their predecessors had done since the 1830s, Asheville's white leadership in 1960 sought to maintain the Veneer of Racial Harmony. To do so, they quickly attempted to hide the city's civil rights movement.<sup>243</sup> As historian Darin Waters recently explained, during the continued rise of Asheville's tourist industry, town promoters reasoned that "few people would want to spend their leisure time in a place that was fraught with racial problems. Thus, presenting an image that was progressive and peaceful was paramount."<sup>244</sup> Hoping to distance themselves from the current state of racial unrest in the South, white officials aimed to portray Asheville as a delightful hamlet. The key to fashioning this image was the portrayal of Asheville's black community as docile, subordinate, and unobtrusive.

In an attempt to keep ASCORE invisible to the public, Asheville's media turned a blind eye to the group's actions. For example, the town's most popular newspaper, the *Asheville Citizen*, covered the Civil Rights Movement in places like Durham and Charlotte, but paid little attention to the movement in its own backyard. On those rare occasions when local newspapers reported on ASCORE, the articles were no more than a couple of lines long and were hidden amongst a litany of trivial community write-ups. ASCORE's first sit-in campaign brought about the largest article ever published by the *Asheville Citizen* regarding the committee's push for integration in the public sphere. The three sentence long article, entitled "4 Chain Store Lunch Counters Are Integrated," read as follows:

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<sup>243</sup> "With All Deliberate Speed," 3.

<sup>244</sup> Waters, "Life Beneath the Veneer," 47.

A number of Negro patrons were served without incident at the lunch counters of four chain variety stores here Monday. A spokesperson for the Asheville Area Council on Human Relations said the limited service of Negro customers followed several weeks of negotiations between the council, store managers and Negro community leaders. He said the stores involved were F.W. Woolworth, S.H. Kress and Co., Fain's Thrift Store and J.J. Newberry Co.<sup>245</sup>

This article not only downplayed the fact that a 100-year tradition of public segregation had just crumbled, but also neglected ASCORE's involvement in the desegregation debate. Interviews conducted with former ASCORE members, supporters, and advisors show that while "Negro community leaders" helped to set up the negotiations, it was ASCORE's teenage members who conducted and participated in the entirety of the debate.<sup>246</sup> It appears that the local media's failure to mention ASCORE's role in the lunch counter integration was strategic. The mention of young activists challenging and altering Asheville's status quo would suggest that the Civil Rights Movement had infiltrated the mountains. Such a development would have certainly alarmed Asheville's white community and signaled a direct threat to Asheville's Veneer of Racial Harmony.

Several weeks after ASCORE's sit-in campaign, on August 15, town officials ruled that black Ashevilleans would now receive "limited service" in select local lunch counters.<sup>247</sup> Eager to uphold the Veneer of Racial Harmony, Asheville city leaders hoped this measure would ameliorate any problems with the integration of Asheville's lunch counters. James Ferguson recalled that on first day of the integration process, "the mayor came...and there were people, they says okay, you guys go down and sit at the lunch counter, and there we'll be, when you sit, you leave a seat between you and somebody white will come and sit

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<sup>245</sup> "4 Chain Store Lunch Counters Are Integrated," *Asheville Citizen*, August 18, 1960, 10.

<sup>246</sup> "With All Deliberate Speed," 3; *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>247</sup> "4 Chain Store Lunch Counters Are Integrated," 10.

there.”<sup>248</sup> Ferguson did not know the white people who were beside him as he sat for his first meal in a white-owned restaurant.<sup>249</sup> Asheville’s white leaders had likely set up this interracial meal to ensure the white community that even in the midst of change, the town’s racial climate remained tranquil.

Unfortunately, the illusion of racial tranquility portrayed during Ferguson’s staged interracial lunch melted away at the meal’s commencement. Free from the policing of Asheville’s white leadership, many owners of the newly integrated restaurants ignored the desegregation mandates. ASCORE member Viola Spells, for instance, recalled that employees at S.H. Kress simply disregarded the forced integration of their restaurant. She went on to say that Kress employees gave her bad looks, cursed at her, and, on one occasion, spat on her.<sup>250</sup> Even if an African American was not deterred from entering S.H. Kress, Spells explained, employees simply refused to serve that black patron. As Spells put it, “I remember just sitting and sitting for hours waiting to be served, before we finally just had to leave.”<sup>251</sup>

Other white Asheville businesses also attempted to make interracial dining an uncomfortable and unpleasant experience for African Americans. Will and Georgia Roland’s return to the newly desegregated Holiday Inn summed up the dreadful atmosphere in the wake of Asheville’s restaurant integration process. Even though the Rolands once again brought their white friends from the Y.M.C.A., the group was met with hostility. Georgia spoke of their first evening at the Holiday Inn: “The white people would just get up when you came in to eat. They would jump up just like we were going to eat them instead of the

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<sup>248</sup> James Ferguson, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> Viola Jones Spells, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

food.”<sup>252</sup> Even with their white friends by their side, the Rolands were treated as if they did not belong in the formerly segregated Holiday Inn.

The owner of Kenilworth’s Lunch Counter also kept the promise he had made to Marvin Chambers and permanently removed all of the stools from his lunch counter. Moreover, in opposition to the city leader’s desegregation ruling, the owner changed the structure of his business and eliminated in-house dining altogether. For many Asheville residents, the black community’s sudden entrance into the white social sphere was unnatural and unacceptable. Although the city government had mandated the limited integration of the city’s restaurants, most white Ashevilleans remained steadfast in their support of racial segregation.<sup>253</sup>

But the white community’s collective disdain only compelled the committee to continue to advocate for civil rights. Indeed, ASCORE’s initial campaign led to a slow process of the complete desegregation of Asheville’s restaurants. The four restaurants that had initially desegregated were soon joined by Eckerd’s, the Asheville Holiday Inn, and several other retail establishments.<sup>254</sup> The sustained desegregation was due in part to an impromptu continuation of ASCORE’s sit-in campaign. Employing a strategy of persistence, Will Roland and several other black leaders began to regularly revisit the restaurants that had refused service to ASCORE members. Georgia Rowland recalled that this tactic ultimately worked. “Finally,” she remembered, “they just opened up, they had to, we were just kind of there. But it took a long time, however, for them to get used to us being there.”<sup>255</sup>

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<sup>252</sup> Georgia Roland, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, May 11, 2005

<sup>253</sup> Anita White Carter, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, Center for Diversity in Education, UNC at Asheville, North Carolina, Asheville, NC, March 4, 2005.

<sup>254</sup> “A History of Pride: Black Asheville a Blend of Traditions: School, Church, Community Involvement,” 3.

<sup>255</sup> Georgia Roland, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, May 11, 2005

## **ASCORE: 1961-1963**

During the second phase of ASCORE's sit-in campaign, members hoped to involve the entire African American community in the integration process. By 1961, ASCORE and its advisors had begun urging black Ashevilleans to dine at select restaurants in the white community. This second phase was an attempt to normalize integration and demonstrate to skeptical members of Asheville's black community that the institution of segregation was indeed breaking down. While many of the town's black residents heeded ASCORE's call, many older African Americans remained fearful of crossing a color barrier that had dictated their entire lives.<sup>256</sup>

Ecstatic over their victory against racial segregation, ASCORE once again gathered at Will Roland's jewelry store to formulate their next civil rights campaign. The key topic of these meetings centered around Asheville's tax-funded institutions. After much deliberation, ASCORE decided to take on the task of desegregating Asheville's City Library. At the suggestion of Will Rowland and Leah Butler, committee members crafted a statement that outlined their grievances towards the segregation of the library. Viola Jones Spells summed up the committee's collective argument in an interview: "We pay taxes and yet we were not allowed to use the library, the fact that the library received private funds from Mr. Pack, Pack and that in it, it stipulated that it could not serve black people."<sup>257</sup> The Mr. Pack that Viola spoke of was either George Willis Pack, who donated the land for Asheville's Pack Square, or his son, both of whom opposed integration.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Al Whitesides, interviewed at The Center for Diversity Education, Asheville, NC, September 17, 2015.

<sup>257</sup> Viola Jones Spells, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005

<sup>258</sup> Chase, *Asheville: A History*, 142.

In 1926, Asheville's black elite had successfully negotiated the creation of a library on Eagle Street, which ran through the heart of the town's black community. But the library closed in the late 1950s. The Eagle Street library stood vastly disproportionate to the white library regarding building and book collection size.<sup>259</sup> Aside from the tax issue, ASCORE found it more unjust that Asheville's white community held a monopoly on the transfer of written knowledge.<sup>260</sup>

Having formulated an argument for the integration of Pack Square Library, committee members made their way to meet with the library's staff. It appears that the library staff was already aware of ASCORE's plan to desegregate their facility and that several local black leaders had already facilitated a meeting between the committee and the director of the library.<sup>261</sup> According to Viola Spells, "We visited the man who was the Director of the library at the time. And he listened to our concerns and he said that as far as he was concerned that it shouldn't be a problem, but he would have to take it before the board."<sup>262</sup> Within a few days, ASCORE met with the director of the library, who told them that the board had agreed to let black residents use the facility.

The library board of directors' decision to integrate most likely came as a way to further uphold Asheville's Veneer of Racial Harmony. With the sit-in campaign fresh on the minds of Asheville's white leadership, the threat of civil disobedience certainly guided their decision to desegregate the library. Marvin Chambers offered his thoughts on the decision: "It happened because they didn't want the publicity. This is what works. And this was the

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid.

<sup>260</sup> Viola Jones Spells, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid.



way it got done and that's how, that's how Asheville avoided public protests."<sup>263</sup> The fear of public protest also likely prompted the library board to bring out the royal treatment for ASCORE on the day of the library's desegregation. The committee, for instance, received an extensive tour of the library facility and was shown all of its special services and amenities.<sup>264</sup>

Shortly thereafter, ASCORE embarked on a campaign to advertise the newly desegregated facility to black residents. Committee members first reached out to Asheville's black religious and business leaders for their support. Many preachers responded by urging their congregations to utilize the new integrated library. For many skeptical blacks, such endorsements gave ASCORE's movement a considerable degree of validity.<sup>265</sup> It was this connection with Asheville's black religious leaders that provided ASCORE with the community support that would prove integral to the longevity of their movement.

Meanwhile, ASCORE began to conduct educational meetings with black Ashevilleans on the committee's mission and strategies. As Ferguson recalled, "At Mount Zion, along with Mr. Rowland, we explained to the adults, and ... black leadership of this city at that time, what our position was and what we were doing so that there would not be any confusion about where we are as this happened."<sup>266</sup> Such meetings further gained the support of adults in Asheville's black community. Ferguson said of these African Americans, "They were very empowering, and didn't try to take the reigns of our movement."<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Marvin Chambers, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005

<sup>264</sup> Viola Jones Spells, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> James Ferguson, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005

<sup>267</sup> Ibid.

Ultimately, these adults believed in ASCORE's movement and allowed the committee continued autonomy in the creation and execution of their endeavors.

Following these endorsements, a growing number of middle-age and younger black Ashevilleans began to publically support desegregation. Unfortunately, many whites remained reluctant to share the newly integrated Pack Square Library with the black community. When ASCORE members accompanied black residents on their first visits to the library, Annette Coleman remembered that "it was ... [an] uncomfortable feeling." "The people on staff there," she recalled, "didn't really make you feel welcome and then the patrons who visited the library, they would look at you like, you don't belong here. But it was necessary to go."<sup>268</sup> While many younger African Americans endorsed ASCORE's movement, most of the older population remained skeptical of these sudden changes to Asheville's racial dynamics. As such, Coleman concluded, "We didn't get very many people in to the library. I think they were in such a habit of not going, so we really had to encourage them."<sup>269</sup>

The lack of ASCORE's support from older African Americans was based primarily on a fear for the safety of the entire black community. Coleman, for instance, recalled that her elderly father "had a very different attitude towards integration, and he was very much afraid for his children."<sup>270</sup> However, Coleman's mother, who was considerably younger than her husband, supported her daughter's involvement with ASCORE. Viola Spells's middle-aged parents also endorsed ASCORE's movement. "Well they encouraged me," Spells

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<sup>268</sup> Annette Coleman, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, Center for Diversity in Education, UNC at Asheville, North Carolina, Asheville, NC, March 4, 2005.

<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

remembered. “My parents supported me in going to the meetings and my activities things.”<sup>271</sup> These anecdotes are indicative of the general sentiment of Asheville’s black community in the midst of ASCORE’s movement. Asheville’s turbulent racial climate during the early twentieth century had apparently instilled in the older black community a distrust of the white race.<sup>272</sup> In their desire to uphold separate but equal communities, they continued to adhere to the rhetoric used by black elites during the first phase of Asheville’s civil rights movement. However, swept away by the teachings of the World War II generation, and the revolutionary fervor of the classical phase of the Civil Rights Movement in Asheville and other parts of the South, younger African Americans had adopted the rhetoric of racial integration.<sup>273</sup>

Community support was an integral part of ASCORE’s next campaign. In November 1961, ASCORE members began to look at securing economic equality for Asheville’s black community. The campaign centered on the need for equal hiring practices in the town’s grocery stores and would last for nearly a year. ASCORE’s focus on the economic effects of systemic racism sprang from the current national debate on the need for affirmative action in hiring processes. The committee’s endeavor grew in validity and size when, on March 6, 1961, President John F. Kennedy enacted Executive Order 10925, which mandated that businesses “take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color, or national origin.”<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Viola Jones Spells, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005

<sup>272</sup> Davis, *The Black Heritage of Western North Carolina*, 49.

<sup>273</sup> Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 91.

<sup>274</sup> Newman, *The civil rights movement*, 79.

The catalyst for this campaign came in early November when Asheville's Winn-Dixie had refused to hire a black man as a bag-boy. The campaign widened as ASCORE learned that other grocery stores, such as Eckerd's, A&P, and Ingles, also continued to deny employment to African Americans. To add insult to injury, these unjust hiring practices occurred when the stores were in desperate need of employees.<sup>275</sup> Committee members began preparations for their meetings with the grocery store owners. As James Ferguson's wife, Barbara, said, "We would also do role plays before these actions. One person would play the CEO and an ASCORE member would practice what they were going to say."<sup>276</sup> Well-versed in the statutes of the Affirmative Action mandate, ASCORE members formed a committee to meet with the managerial staff of the four above grocery stores.

Shortly thereafter, in mid-November 1961, several ASCORE members arrived at the Eckerd's and informed an employee that they wished to speak to the manager. The employee ginned and replied, "He's on the roof shoveling snow."<sup>277</sup> The committee knew this was a direct insult to their campaign because, as James Ferguson recalled, "there was a black guy back there, a Mr. Porter, sitting down in a chair, but the manager is on the roof shoveling snow. (laughter) Now think about that."<sup>278</sup> This lie convinced ASCORE that negotiation was futile. Having failed to even provide an Eckerd's representative for the negotiations, the Eckerd's staff had undermined ASCORE's campaign and forced the committee's hand in staging their first public protests. Negotiations also soon failed at Winn-Dixie, Ingles, and

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<sup>275</sup> Ibid.

<sup>276</sup> Barbara Ferguson, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> James Ferguson, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005

A&P, prompting ASCORE to again launch demonstrations against Asheville's downtown grocery stores.<sup>279</sup>

Instead of discouraging ASCORE's newly planned protest, most black leaders sided with the committee. First, the Asheville and Buncombe County Citizens Organization publicly endorsed ASCORE's decision to protest in an article in the *Asheville Citizen*.<sup>280</sup> The publicized support of the Asheville and Buncombe County Citizens Organization bolstered ASCORE's campaign, as it was staffed and run by several of Asheville's most influential black leaders. Meanwhile, widespread public support for ASCORE's protest encouraged Asheville's black leaders to lay down their old roles as the "peace keepers and peace makers" in interracial community affairs. By retiring their posts as the caretakers of the black community, Asheville's black leaders now actively challenged their town's Veneer of Racial Harmony and, thus, broke their long tradition of mutual respect with white community leaders.

With the support of Asheville's black leadership, ASCORE members began implementing measures to take on their first vocal public protest campaign in November of 1961. As civil rights activists had done in Montgomery and New Orleans, ASCORE picketed and boycotted several grocery stores.<sup>281</sup> Word of the movement swept through Stephens-Lee High School as once hesitant students and staff quickly got behind ASCORE's campaign.<sup>282</sup> As ASCORE member Al Whitesides recalled, "The art classes, taught by Walter Lewis at Stephens-Lee, created the posters we used in the Boycott. They were very professionally

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<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> "Negroes Picket Supermarket," *Asheville Citizen*, November 18, 1961, 10.

<sup>281</sup> M. Newman, *The civil rights movement*, 17

<sup>282</sup> James Ferguson, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005

done.”<sup>283</sup> ASCORE then set up the strategy for the first wave of picketing. Not knowing the exact length of this campaign, James Ferguson said, “It was an ongoing thing, we would, you know, we determined what numbers . . . we wanted to worked in shifts, to keep somebody there at all times.”<sup>284</sup>

On November 17, 1961, a small, but enthusiastic group of ASCORE members stood outside Asheville’s Winn-Dixie holding signs and chanting against the store’s unjust hiring practices. Sources vary on the exact number of protesters present. The *Asheville News* reported three demonstrators, while ASCORE members claimed there were five.<sup>285</sup> The first few days proved disheartening for ASCORE members as many black community members crossed the picket line and continued to support the Winn-Dixie. James Ferguson recalled that one black couple offered the apology, “We’re with you, but we gotta go eat.”<sup>286</sup> These blacks would continue to disregard the boycotts until ASCORE’s campaign got an endorsement that highlighted the spiritual importance of the public protest.

In this moment of desperation, Asheville’s most powerful religious leader, Reverend N.M. Avery, publicly embraced ASCORE’s protest against Winn-Dixie. The *Asheville Citizen* wrote of Avery’s endorsement: “The Negro leader said the pickets would continue until a Winn-Dixie Spokesperson met with the group.”<sup>287</sup> Soon thereafter, leaders of the influential Hopkins Chapel Community gave their support for ASCORE. Most other black churches soon followed suit. As Al Whitesides remarked, “All of the ministers supported the

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<sup>283</sup> Al Whitesides, interviewed on September 17, 2015, The Center for Diversity Education, Asheville, NC.

<sup>284</sup> James Ferguson, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005.

<sup>285</sup> “Negroes Picket Supermarket,” *Asheville Citizen*, November 18, 1961, 10; James Ferguson, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid.

<sup>287</sup> “Negroes Picket Supermarket,” *Asheville Citizen*, December 18, 1961, 9.

boycott from the pulpit.”<sup>288</sup> Perhaps most integral in this church involvement was Reverend Percy Smith who urged church members to shop at other establishments and even organized travel to the outside stores.<sup>289</sup> Ultimately, Smith and other black preachers commended ASCORE’s campaign and insisted to their congregations that full community support of the boycott was their Christian duty.

Indeed, the support of Asheville’s black religious leaders transformed ASCORE’s movement from a social endeavor to a Christian mission. The addition of this Christian element in late 1961 swayed many black Ashevilleans who had not fully backed ASCORE’S campaign. Soon after, as Barbara Ferguson remembered, “the picket line wasn’t crossed.”<sup>290</sup> As the numbers of protestors increased, picketers began to gather at the three other grocery stores that ASCORE had initially targeted for their unjust hiring practices. ASCORE member Virginia Dawkins, for instance, picketed on her days off from Walton City Park, until her boss, a white man named Raymond Washington, threatened to fire her if she went to “The Line.”<sup>291</sup> Undeterred, she proceeded to make picket signs and distribute leaflets at protest locations. Such widespread community support for the protests strengthened ASCORE’s resolve and led many committee members to elongate their picketing shifts. Al Whitesides remembers “that they would head straight to their posts every day after school and picket in shifts on weekends” as a way to maintain a constant presence at the grocery stores.<sup>292</sup>

Despite the public protests, the managerial staff of the accused grocery stores refused to meet with ASCORE. The only half-hearted attempt at reconciliation came with a public

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<sup>288</sup> Al Whitesides, interviewed on September 17, 2015.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Barbara Ferguson, Interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005.

<sup>291</sup> “With All Deliberate Speed,” 6.

<sup>292</sup> Al Whitesides, interviewed on September 17, 2015.

statement from Winn-Dixie area supervisor, C.J. Benfield, which said, “We deny that any Negroes have been refused employment due to their race. One Negro is employed in the Winn-Dixie Store at 487 Biltmore Avenue.”<sup>293</sup> According to ASCORE members, this man was a night janitor. Therefore, not a single black person held a grocery store position in which they were visible to the public.<sup>294</sup> This attempt failed to silence the protesters. ASCORE members Anita Carter and Viola Spells remembered being spit at and berated by patrons of the A&P grocery store.<sup>295</sup> However, committee members remained calm and followed Will Roland’s advice that “under no circumstances do you hit back-even if they call you a nigger.”<sup>296</sup>

The picketing continued for nearly a year before negotiations began. Looking back at the effects of the picketing campaign, James Ferguson said, “It’s hard to know, we don’t know the numbers, we don’t know the economic impact it had.”<sup>297</sup> Hoping to retain the livelihood of the grocery stores and uphold Asheville’s Veneer of Racial Harmony, the owners of the accused grocery stores opened up negotiations in early 1962. However, the grocery store owners refused to negotiate with ASCORE’s teenage members. Instead, the well-known Reverend C. Percy was chosen to represent what had turned into a movement that encompassed the entire black community. Percy negotiated the end of the protest and, in return, the grocery stores began hiring black men as bag-boys, including ASCORE member Al Whitesides, who became the first African American employed at A&P.<sup>298</sup> Surprisingly, Whitesides recalled a smooth transition into the job at A&P, as he quickly forged friendships

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<sup>293</sup> “With All Deliberate Speed,” 6

<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> Viola Jones Spells, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005

<sup>296</sup> Barbara Ferguson, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005.

<sup>297</sup> Ferguson, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005.

<sup>298</sup> “With All Deliberate Speed,” 6



with white employees and even befriended a white co-worker's father who was a recruiter for the Naval Reserves. As Whitesides contended, "This friendship kept me out of the foxholes in Vietnam when the draft came around soon after."<sup>299</sup>

Although initially skeptical of ASCORE'S motives, most black Ashevilleans stood in complete solidarity with the youth civil rights activists during their first picketing campaign. Without such full support, the grocery store protest would have crumbled in its earliest stages. Asheville's black elite also played an integral role in garnering the black residents' support by organizing and rallying the black citizenry behind ASCORE'S movement.

Between 1962 and 1964, ASCORE continued to advance the racial integration of Asheville's social sphere. However, the committee would never capture the same spirit that it had enjoyed the previous two years. Many of ASCORE's founding members like James Ferguson and Marvin Chambers soon left the group when they went off to college.<sup>300</sup> Knowing this would likely happen, the original ASCORE members had put in place measures to ensure the longevity of their organization. Even before Chambers and other members' departure to college, they had begun to recruit students from Asheville's Junior High School, one of whom became James' future wife, Barbara Ferguson. Another of these recruits was Oralene Simmons, who became ASCORE'S second president in 1963.<sup>301</sup>

ASCORE's new leadership retained ties with Asheville's black leaders and other members of the African American community. Throughout 1963 and 1964, the group fought for the integration of several other social facilities and targeted businesses that maintained unjust hiring practices. New member Kenzill Summney even met with white church leaders

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<sup>299</sup> Al Whitesides, interviewed on September 17, 2015, The Center for Diversity Education, Asheville, NC

<sup>300</sup> Ibid.

<sup>301</sup> Barbara Ferguson, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005.

in 1964 to end the tradition of black exclusion in employee hiring at Asheville's Sears Department Store. Many church leaders supported Kennell's mission and offered him suggestions for negotiations with Sears' representatives. Even with a changing of the guard, ASCORE stayed true to the doctrine of non-violent protest and direct action.<sup>302</sup>

### **ASCORE's Demise**

ASCORE's role in the Civil Rights Movement gradually diminished before ceasing altogether in 1965. There was no paramount catalyst for ASCORE's demise. Perhaps the organization's tenure as Asheville's premiere youth activist group came to a close with the end of the classical phase of the Civil Rights Movement. After the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed racial segregation, new actors emerged at the forefront of the movement's national stage. By the late 1960s, the Black Panthers appeared and altered the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement into an endeavor based more on economic equality.<sup>303</sup> This appears to have happened in Asheville, although on a lesser scale than it did in other southern cities. However, as elsewhere in the South, interracial violence increased in Asheville amidst the integration process of the city schools in the mid-1960s.<sup>304</sup> The violence of Asheville's integration process ultimately excluded ASCORE and its non-violent doctrine from the protests altogether.

Like those in other parts of the South, Asheville City Schools resisted throughout the integration process. It was not until 1963 that Asheville's school board concocted a sustained plan of school desegregation that only included the gradual integration of Asheville's Elementary School students in grades 1-3. The plan was also based on the "Freedom of

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<sup>302</sup> Clark, "Civil Rights Movement in Asheville was Not So Quiet," 2.

<sup>303</sup> Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 91.

<sup>304</sup> "With All Deliberate Speed," 9.

Choice” application system, which allowed families to decide whether or not to send their children to integrated schools. In 1964, Asheville City Schools allowed grades 4-6 to join in the application process as well.<sup>305</sup> By ASCORE’s demise in 1965, all Asheville high schools remained segregated.

The integration process in Asheville was helmed not by the youth, but by the black elite. ASCORE’s legal advisor, Ruben Bailey, led the fight for school integration in Asheville and other parts of western North Carolina. His efforts in the courts and at the Asheville City Schools’ headquarters brought about the “Freedom of Choice” campaign in 1963.<sup>306</sup> However, the issue of school integration created a divide between Asheville’s black elite and the rest of the African American community. Many black parents apparently believed that school desegregation was a dangerous idea. Fearing for their children’s safety, several black parents refused to send their children to new schools until the forced integration of Asheville High School in the late 1960s.<sup>307</sup> The desegregation of Asheville High School sparked interracial violence, much of which was headed by a more radical and angry black youth movement present in Asheville. This violence culminated into a riot on September 30, 1969, when a group a black youth staged a walk out before hurling stones and construction debris at the school. Chaos quickly erupted between black and white students and, by day’s end, several students had sustained injuries and were taken to the hospital.<sup>308</sup>

From the beginning, ASCORE members wanted no part in the integration of their school system. While their goal became the integration of Asheville’s social sphere, the committee desired to keep public schools segregated. Therefore, when the Civil Rights

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<sup>305</sup> “With All Deliberate Speed,” 9.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

Movement shifted its focus to school integration, ASCORE stood at odds with the activists elsewhere in the United States.

A collapse of committee infrastructure also contributed to the end of ASCORE. This break down was due in large part to the loss of the committee's headquarters at Will Roland's jewelry store. According to James Ferguson, Roland lost the store "because he was too busy working with us all of the time."<sup>309</sup> It seems that Roland's undying support of ASCORE took him away from his duties as a jeweler. In turn, his business failed and ASCORE lost its meeting place along with its chief advisor. At the same time, the committee's plan for longevity meant a constant turnover in leadership and membership. In a different context and with different characters, ASCORE never found the same spirit it had during its first two years. Perhaps, then, the committee just ran its course.

Nonetheless, it is incorrect to judge ASCORE's worth by the length of its tenure. In a span of only two years, the committee had destroyed the institution of segregation in a portion of Asheville's social arena. They forged a mission statement based on the statutes of Martin Luther King Jr., Ghandi, and the black leaders of their town. What followed was a strategy that used modern protest techniques to strike at Asheville's 130-year-old Veneer of Racial Harmony. By 1962, ASCORE had solidified itself as a community movement that transcended class and generational lines. What started solely as a crusade of the youth became a campaign that encompassed Asheville's entire black community.

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<sup>309</sup> James Ferguson, interviewed by Dolly Mullen, March 4, 2005

## Conclusion

Although influenced by national events, Asheville's civil rights movement employed a protest style endemic to its location. This movement began in the midst of Asheville's transformation into a tourist economy during the 1820s. The creation of the Buncombe Turnpike in 1828 linked Asheville to the national economy. This connection allowed Asheville's tourist economy to grow and altered the town's racial dynamics. The rise of Asheville's tourism industry further perpetuated the racial norms and mores present elsewhere in the South and modernized the town's architectural, economic, social, and political infrastructure.<sup>310</sup> This metamorphic process created Asheville's Veneer of Racial Harmony, which at first subordinated the town's black population before becoming a tool of liberation for local African Americans in the twentieth century.

The Veneer of Racial Harmony presented race relations in Asheville as congenial and portrayed the town's black population as hardworking, docile, and happy. Asheville's fabricated image of racial harmony helped the tourist industry to thrive and allowed blacks to gain employment within the town's tourist sector following the Civil War. This enabled many black Ashevilleans to hold more autonomy than most other blacks in the South. These

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<sup>310</sup> Sondley, *A History of Buncombe County, North Carolina*, 410.

service industry jobs, however, proved low paying, thereby forcing some local blacks to explore new careers as entrepreneurs.<sup>311</sup>

Many of these African American entrepreneurs succeeded in their endeavors and emerged as members of the town's small black elite class at the turn of the twentieth century. Finding a degree of power with their elevated socio-economic status and influenced by national black leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, Asheville's black elite began organizing a crusade for equality in their segregated community.<sup>312</sup> Essentially, Asheville's connection with the greater U.S. enabled the town's black leaders to create their own civil rights coalition by the early twentieth century. These outside influences ultimately encouraged Asheville's black elite to break from their subordinate race roles that had been dictated by the Veneer of Racial Harmony. In the end, these activists challenged Asheville's white leadership by using the integrity of the town's harmonious image as a bargaining tool in their negotiations to create equal black institutions.

Like W.E.B. Du Bois, these leaders sought to strengthen the black community by providing it with an adequate social, economic, and political infrastructure. Through these processes, they hoped to secure the emergence of a proud black community that could equally compete with the white race. Following Du Bois's doctrines, Asheville's black leaders used their wealth and status to equalize their community.<sup>313</sup> Thus, Asheville's civil rights movement took root in the early twentieth century as a separatist endeavor.

During the 1920s, the growth of Asheville's tourist industry and rise of the town's Ku Klux Klan chapter increased black activism in the area. The boom in Asheville's tourist

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<sup>311</sup> Davis, *The Black Heritage of Western North Carolina*, 49.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> Hornsby-Gutting, *Black Manhood and Community Building in North Carolina: 1900-1930*, 17.

industry came from the increase of wealth in the nation and the rise in the Ku Klux Klan in the city emerged from the organization's national growth brought on by the release of the film *The Birth of a Nation*.<sup>314</sup> Consequently, white officials in Asheville succeeded in segregating the entire town and, in the process, strained race relations. Hoping to threaten Asheville's Veneer of Racial Harmony, the black elite began to strategically use their position as peacekeepers in their community to petition the town's white administration for necessary black facilities during the 1920s. In the end, this strategy worked and became the dominant style of protest in Asheville's civil rights movement.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, two additional national phenomena helped to further stimulate Asheville's Civil Rights Movement: the racial inequalities systematized in the New Deal and America's entry into World War II.<sup>315</sup> These events gradually motivated black communities throughout the U.S. to rise against both visible and veiled forms of systematic racism. Asheville's civil rights movement followed these same trends. The New Deal's unemployment insurance, for instance, did not cover farmers and domestic workers. As such, black Ashevilleans, most of whom worked as maids, servants, porters and hotel workers, were ineligible for unemployment benefits.<sup>316</sup> Like those elsewhere in the nation, western North Carolina's black communities responded by pooling resources together for

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<sup>314</sup> Young, "The White-Hooded Mountains: The Rise of the Ku Klux Klan in 1920's Asheville"; David Cunningham, *Klansville, USA: The Rise and Fall of the Civil Rights-Era Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 23-26; Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York, New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2008), 39-42.

<sup>315</sup> Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," 1241.

Newman, *The civil rights movement* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 17.

<sup>316</sup> Michael L. Ezra ed., *Civil Rights Movement: People and Perspectives* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 48; Aimin Zang, *The Origins of the African American Civil Rights Movement, 1865-1956*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 41-46; Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950*, 17.

survival and seeking help from national black organizations like the NAACP, which founded a branch in Asheville in 1936.<sup>317</sup>

World War II also reinvigorated Asheville's civil rights activism and transformed it from an upper-class endeavor into a community movement.<sup>318</sup> During the 1940s and 1950s, Asheville's civil rights activists moved from the shadows of elite negotiations and gradually became more public. Asheville's NAACP chapter, for instance, increased in membership and two other civil rights groups, the Service Credit Union and the Buncombe County and Asheville Citizens Organization, arose to combat institutionalized racism. The rise of these organizations demonstrates that a growing number of black Ashevilleans had begun to participate in the civil rights movement.<sup>319</sup> By the late 1950s, Asheville's black community rallied behind the claim, "All blacks are entitled to 3 powers: God, the ballot, and the dollar and that we as negroes should use all 3."<sup>320</sup> This metamorphosis in the movement's rhetoric laid the groundwork for the beginning of Asheville's youth movement.

The black youth movement emerged in 1959 with a revolutionary fervor indicative of the Civil Rights Movement in the greater U.S.<sup>321</sup> The young activists' message initially frightened members of Asheville's black community who stood firmly against public protest and civil disobedience. The disdain for such practices came from local activists' original strategy of keeping the peace in the black community as a form of leverage in negotiations with Asheville's white leadership. Furthermore, Asheville's youth campaign adopted the idea

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<sup>317</sup> Davis, *The Black Heritage of Western North Carolina*, 49

<sup>318</sup> Neil A. Wynn, *The African American Experience During World War II*, (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2010), 29; Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950*, 17.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid.

<sup>320</sup> "Negro Groups View Civic Problems," 1.

<sup>321</sup> Ezra ed., *Civil Rights Movement: People and Perspectives*, 45; Andrew B. Lewis, *The Shadows of the Youth: The Remarkable Journey of the Civil Rights Generation*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009), 13-17; Jack M. Bloom, *Class, Race, and the Civil Rights Movement*, (Indianapolis: Indianapolis University Press, 2001), 15-17.



of racial integration in 1960. This idea stood at direct odds with the separatist agenda that Asheville's civil rights movement had held since the 1910s. However, the youth ameliorated this divide by seeking out the help of Asheville's black elite.

Under the tutelage the black elite, young civil rights activists organized, trained, and gained legitimacy within Asheville's black community. In the end, the town's black elite and youth merged their rhetoric to create ASCORE. In turn, the committee forged a mission statement based on the statutes of Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, and Asheville's black leaders. What followed was a strategy that used modern protest techniques to strike at Asheville's 130-year-old Veneer of Racial Harmony. Using the same negotiation tactics that had been laid out by Asheville's black elite, ASCORE quickly succeeded in desegregating portions of Asheville's social sphere. In response, Asheville's white administration worked to hide ASCORE's victory in the hopes of retaining the integrity of the town's Veneer of Racial Harmony.

By 1962, ASCORE solidified itself as a grassroots organization that transcended class and generational lines. What started solely as a crusade of the youth became a movement that encompassed Asheville's entire black community. With the backing of most local African Americans, ASCORE members gained much more agency in their fight for civil rights. Although the committee disbanded in 1965, it truly changed the social and racial fabric of Asheville.

Although the leadership in Asheville's civil rights movement changed throughout the twentieth century, the movement's key protest strategy held steadfast. Asheville's Veneer of Racial Harmony created the structure of the town's racial hierarchy and later informed the structure of its civil rights organizations. The Veneer set the rules for black behavior in

nineteenth-century Asheville before being used to combat racial inequality during the twentieth century. Furthermore, the Veneer exists as the main reason why Asheville's civil rights movement has remained hidden until now.

### **Comparison to the Civil Rights Movement**

Strategy was one aspect that set Asheville's movement apart from civil rights activism elsewhere in the nation. As demonstrated, race-relations in Asheville were forged by the town's tourism industry. While racial dynamics elsewhere in the South drew from the conditions of the plantation economy, Asheville residents followed the rules set forth by their city's Veneer of Racial Harmony.<sup>322</sup> As such, Asheville's black activists leveraged the integrity of the Veneer in negotiations for racial equality with their town's white leadership. Although these African Americans followed the non-violent protest protocol of direct action, their negotiation style was endemic to Asheville.

In most of the non-violent campaigns led by Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders, widespread civil disobedience forced negotiations. Such was the case during the 1963 Birmingham Campaign when black activists planned to "consistently protest and fill the jails with protesters to force the city government to negotiate as demonstrations continued."<sup>323</sup> However, Asheville's activists used sustained civil disobedience only once to mandate negotiations. Towns like Birmingham were not tourist economies, so they had no reason to uphold an image of racial harmony. Consequently, white officials there had no reservations in resorting to violence to break the will of the protesters. This use of violence

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<sup>322</sup> Waters, "Life Beneath the Veneer,"46.

<sup>323</sup> Charles D. Lowery, John F. Marszalek, Thomas Adams Upchurch, ed., "Birmingham Confrontation," *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of African American Civil Rights: From Emancipation to the Twenty-1<sup>st</sup> Century* 1 (2003): 47.

garnered unprecedented media attention for the Civil Rights Movement and painted Birmingham as a war zone.<sup>324</sup>

Asheville's white leadership aimed to erase the influence of the town's civil rights movement by hiding the protesters altogether. This strategy was a tool to retain Asheville's image as a tranquil tourist destination. As a result, the media portrayed the city's civil rights crusade as a peaceful and inconspicuous one. However, these conditions also allowed black activists to quickly and quietly integrate portions of Asheville, as public protests would have gained media attention and rendered Asheville an unfit vacation destination. Most of ASCORE's campaigns moved swiftly into negotiations before the eruption of racial unrest. The only time in which ASCORE held a widespread public rally was during their grocery store campaign between 1961 and 1962. This campaign lasted for nearly a year and included daily public picketing and the boycotting of 4 grocery stores. The boycott marked the first and only time that Asheville's leadership compromised the Veneer of Racial Harmony. It was also the sole instance in which the town's African American activists employed sustained and widespread civil disobedience to force negotiations.

### **Breaking Down Theoretical Barriers**

The story of Asheville's Civil Rights Movement ultimately challenges many of the dominant theories that have influenced Appalachian scholarship. In particular, it debunks the claims of Appalachian historians who contend that the civil rights activism bypassed the mountains.<sup>325</sup> Enduring for nearly 50 years, Asheville's civil rights movement left behind a spirit of equality that still exists in the city. The crusade transformed Asheville's racial

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<sup>324</sup> Ibid; Ezra ed., *Civil Rights Movement: People and Perspectives*, 45 61-63; David J. Garrow, *Birmingham Alabama, 1956-1963: The Black Struggle for Civil Rights* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1989), 49-51.

<sup>325</sup> Turner and Cabbell, *Blacks in Appalachia*, 21; Fayette A. Allen, "The Black Family," 51.

dynamics and altered the black community's mission for equality from one of quiet determination to vocal contestation.

At the same, this story challenges the Myth of Appalachian Exceptionalism, which portrays the region and its people as economically, geographically, and culturally at odds with modern America.<sup>326</sup> As demonstrated, the metamorphosis of Asheville's movement was based on national catalysts such as the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, the Great Depression, and World War II. In these regards, Asheville's movement for racial equality was dictated by the same national stimuli that informed the Civil Rights Movement in the greater U.S. These comparisons demonstrate that Asheville was undoubtedly connected to and influenced by the national events that galvanized the Civil Rights Movement.

Given that Asheville exists as an exception to many of the widely held doctrines of Appalachian history, perhaps it is time to reexamine the way in which historians view the mountain region as a whole. Spanning 13 different states, Appalachia is home to a diverse number of traditions, customs, and cultures. Why, then, do many scholars continue to portray Appalachia as a socially and culturally homogenous region? This homogenous treatment of the region has ultimately created a history of Appalachia based upon a range of overarching and inconsistent claims.

The story of Asheville's civil rights movement demonstrates that many parts of Appalachia do not adhere to the homogenous claims that previous historians have imposed upon the region. In many ways, Asheville's civil rights movement mirrored that of the greater U.S., suggesting that certain parts of Appalachia were not isolated socially, politically, and economically. Only until historians begin to treat Appalachia as a

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<sup>326</sup> Walls and Billings, "The Sociology of Southern Appalachia," 132.

heterogeneous region can they find that the mountains are much more similar to the greater U.S. In particular, Asheville's civil rights movement deserves a place within the grand narrative of the national movement. It is time for historians to uncover the actions of these long forgotten mountain activists and give them the recognition that they deserve.

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## **Vita**

Patrick Shane Parker grew up in the coastal town of Emerald Isle, North Carolina. He graduated from Appalachian State University in 2013 with his B.A. in Secondary History Education. He then stayed on at his alma mater to earn his M.A. in General History in 2016. Shane has worked as a high school and preschool level teacher for the past three years. His favorite hobbies include hiking, fishing, playing music, and debating politics and history with anyone who is willing.







