

WHITE JUSTIFICATIONS FOR SCHOOL CLOSINGS IN PRINCE EDWARD COUNTY, VIRGINIA, 1959–1964

Christopher Bonastia

Department of Sociology, City University of New York, Lehman College

Abstract

From 1959 to 1964, Prince Edward County, Virginia, dodged a court desegregation order by refusing to operate public schools. Though the county played an integral role in the national battle over civil rights, scholars and journalists have largely neglected Prince Edward's role in the national drama of race. In 1951, Black high school students went on strike to protest unequal school facilities. This strike led to an NAACP lawsuit that became one of five decided in *Brown v. Board of Education*. When faced with a final desegregation deadline in 1959, the county put itself in a unique position by becoming the only school district in the U.S. to close its public schools for an extended period of time rather than accept any desegregation. Most White students attended a private, segregated academy; over three-quarters of Black Prince Edward students lost some or all of those years of education. White county leaders believed they were creating a blueprint for defying desegregation in the rural South and perhaps, they hoped, throughout much of the United States. Using archival materials, interviews and secondary accounts, I explain how White county leaders made a public case for the school closings. These leaders' rhetorical strategy was a crucial early draft in the depiction of segregation as a natural state free of racial rancor. The segregationist rhetoric emanating from Prince Edward County was grounded primarily in arguments for privatization, local self-determination, and taxpayers' rights. Such arguments would come to dominate conservative rhetoric nationwide.

Keywords: Segregation, *Brown v. Board of Education*, Civil Rights, White Backlash, Prince Edward County, Virginia

INTRODUCTION

Recent scholarship on White responses to civil rights movement pressures has added important insight to our understandings of the changes that were forged as well as the changes that were stalled or reversed in attempts to transform the racial land-

scape of the United States.¹ Taken as a whole, this body of scholarship has begun to sketch the ways in which national, state, and local contexts shaped the individual and collective responses of Whites to impending changes in racial relations (Crespiño 2007; Kruse 2005; Lassiter 2006; McGirr 2001). Earlier scholarship focused largely on the rural and small-town South, where many of the most dramatic civil rights battles played out, while more recent scholarship has turned its attention to metropolitan areas, both within and beyond the South. One important strand of this work documents the ways in which frank White supremacist rhetoric was replaced by “a new conservatism predicated on a language of rights, freedoms, and individualism” (Kruse 2005, p. 6; see also Bonilla-Silva 2006; Carter 1995).

To grasp the full significance of this rhetorical and cultural shift, we must attend to the rural South—more specifically, to Prince Edward County (PEC), Virginia. Though PEC played an integral role in the national confrontation over civil rights, scholars and journalists have largely neglected its significance in the national drama of race. It was in this rural county located sixty miles west of Richmond that Black high school students went on strike to protest unequal school facilities in 1951, several years before civil rights activities elsewhere in the South began to reach public consciousness. This strike led to an NAACP lawsuit that became one of five decided in *Brown v. Board of Education*.² When faced with a final desegregation order in 1959, the county put itself in a unique position by becoming the only school district in the U.S. to close its public schools for an extended period of time—until Fall 1964—rather than accept any desegregation. White county leaders believed they were creating a blueprint for defying desegregation in the Black Belt South and perhaps, they hoped, throughout much of the United States. Had the Supreme Court decided not to strike down this strategy in 1964, these Virginia segregationists may have been correct. While this *practical* strategy for resisting desegregation ultimately failed, Prince Edward’s *rhetorical* strategy was a crucial early draft in the depiction of segregation as a reasoned, natural choice, not one of racial rancor. The rhetoric of White Prince Edwardians, while not devoid of traditional references to White biological superiority, Black immorality, and other racial tropes, grounded itself primarily in arguments for privatization, local self-determination, and taxpayers’ rights. Such arguments would come to dominate conservative rhetoric nationwide. PEC adopted such rhetoric early by necessity: the county meant to convince the federal government that only its Board of Supervisors could decide whether to reopen public schools. This paper does not parse the legal arguments that county attorneys made in court. Instead, it examines the ways in which White county leaders presented a public case for closed public schools. (Of course, public rhetoric and legal arguments overlapped with some frequency.) As Klarman (2004), among others, has demonstrated convincingly, federal judges, including members of the Supreme Court, took the motivations of segregationist resisters and the climate of public opinion seriously in their decisions about segregation and timetables for local action.

As in many communities of the South, Whites in Prince Edward spoke frequently about their warm relationships with Blacks, and about their determination to oversee the continued progress of local Blacks.³ When the county closed its schools in 1959, nearly all White students, who comprised just under half of school-aged individuals in the county, attended private schools created to replace abandoned public schools. During each school year between 1959 and 1963—when the Kennedy Administration launched a one-year, privately funded school system (the Free Schools) in the county—at least three-quarters of Black school-age children were not receiving formal schooling (Green et al., 1964). What stories did Whites tell themselves and others to justify the denial of education to Black school children? How were

these narratives ratified by action and inaction, and the apparent unanimity of opinion among county Whites? To understand the Prince Edward County case is to understand what factors caused the county to adopt a practical strategy of White resistance taken by no other locality in the U.S. But it is also to understand why many of the rhetorical justifications used by the county later became so widespread among Whites throughout the nation.

ORIGINS OF THE SCHOOL CLOSINGS

Prince Edward lies in the “Black Belt,” a stretch of land that extends from the Chesapeake Bay through the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and east Texas. Historically, Black Belt counties “are predominantly rural, have a Negro population of at least one-third (and in some instances a majority), and possess stringent mores and laws requiring racial segregation” (Morland 1964, p. 1). It is not difficult to understand why Black Belt communities would be especially determined in their resistance to change, since the development of Black social and economic equality in areas of high Black population would present a substantially greater threat to Whites than in areas where Blacks are a distinct numerical minority (Andrews 2002; Bartley 1969; Muse 1961).

The county covers 357 square miles of low, rolling hills. Its social and economic center was and remains Farmville, which had a population of 4293 in 1960 (Smith 1965).⁴ During the 1950s, the overall county population declined 8.3%, with most of the decrease coming from the Black population, who represented 44.6% of residents at the beginning of the decade. The 1960 census recorded a county population of 14,121, of whom 39.9% were labeled “non-White,” essentially synonymous with “Black.”⁵ Though agriculture played a key role in the local economy, with tobacco and lumber the two most significant cash crops, less than one-fifth of the work force listed agricultural occupations in 1960. A shoe factory with 350 employees was the largest industrial plant. In 1959, the median white family income was \$4070; for Negro families, it was \$1848 (Morland 1964). The Negro population included “a substantial element . . . [that] has acquired comfortable homes and prosperous farmland,” as well as some sharecroppers “who from year to year might have no cash income at all.” The Black professional strata of Prince Edward County included two doctors, one dentist, one mortician and about a dozen ministers.⁶ One year after schools closed, the *Richmond Afro-American* reported that all but three of the county’s seventy-two Black school teachers had left the county (Wells 1960).

Black residents had been fighting for better educational opportunities for decades prior to the 1951 student strike. By 1934, it was possible for Black students to graduate from an eleventh-grade high school. But because no bus service was yet available, Negroes “out in the county . . . who wanted a high-school education had to board in Farmville or go untutored past sixth grade” (Kluger 1975, p. 459). The first freestanding Negro high school opened in 1939, aided by funding from the federal Public Works Administration and the state. R. R. Moton High School, unlike the White Farmville High, lacked a gymnasium, cafeteria, locker rooms, infirmary, and an auditorium with fixed seats. Even more seriously, the school became overcrowded almost immediately after opening. County authorities ignored repeated pleas by Blacks for a new high school. By 1947, 377 students were packed into a school built to house a maximum of 180. Rather than constructing new facilities for Negro students, the county built temporary structures to house the overflow of students. These tarpaper shacks—prone to leaks, inadequately heated by single wood stoves—

vividly illustrated the racial inequalities in Prince Edward's educational facilities and became a rallying point for the Black community (Kluger 1975; Robert Russa Moton Museum n.d.; Rorty 1956; Smith 1965; Turner 2001).⁷

After years of refusal by the school board to address these concerns, 456 students walked out of the all-Black R. R. Moton High School on April 23, 1951, to protest conditions in the county's schools for Blacks.⁸ At the time, the per capita property value of schools was \$817 for Whites and \$194 for Blacks (Morland 1964). After the strike, student leader Barbara Johns phoned NAACP attorneys in Richmond to solicit their help. Though initially resistant, the NAACP was swayed by the students' commitment and agreed to file a school desegregation suit. In 1950, the National Board of the NAACP had decided that it would no longer pursue cases seeking equalization of facilities, instead turning its focus to suits seeking the abolition of public school segregation (Tushnet 1987; Wilkerson 1960). Consequently, if the Prince Edward students wanted the NAACP's help, they would have to insist on a desegregation suit. The students found an early adult supporter in Reverend L. Francis Griffin, the local head of the NAACP who became the undisputed leader of the Black community throughout the school closing fight.

Though it did not face a court-imposed deadline to begin desegregation until 1959, the county began to plan for such an occurrence soon after the Supreme Court decided *Brown v. Board of Education*. In July 1954, two months after the decision, the county Board of Supervisors passed a resolution stating that "it is not only impractical but it will be impossible to operate a nonsegregated school system . . . [and] that the said board intends to use its power, authority and efforts to insure the continuation of a segregated school system" (*Farmville Herald* 1962a, p. 4A). Planning for segregated private schools for Whites began in 1955. The Board passed another resolution in May 1956 confirming its intention to close schools after receiving an "Affirmation" signed by 4500 White citizens maintaining that a court "order to mix the races in our schools can only result in the destruction of the opportunity for a public education for all the children of this county." This statement insisted, "We do not act in oppression of the negro people of this County."⁹

Federal District Judge Sterling Hutcheson declined to set a timetable for desegregation of Prince Edward schools in a January 1957 decision. An appellate court overturned the decision that November. In August 1958, Hutcheson set a deadline of 1965, which an appellate court also overturned, ordering the district court to set a September 1959 date to begin desegregation. The U.S. Supreme Court denied the county's request to stay the Appeals Court ruling (Muse 1961).

As in the rest of the resistant South, the state legislature of Virginia had worked furiously to pass legislation that would prevent enforcement of the *Brown* decision. Virginia was in the forefront of Southern states meeting *Brown* with "massive resistance," trying in effect to outmaneuver the Supreme Court and the NAACP legislatively and judicially. The state acted most emphatically in September 1958, when Governor Lindsay Almond, Jr. closed nine schools in three locales—Charlottesville, Norfolk, and Warren County—that were under court orders to desegregate. Over 12,000 students were locked out. (These closings were overshadowed in the national media by the closings of four schools in Little Rock, Arkansas by Governor Orval Faubus.) By late fall, White Virginians outside the Black Belt revealed growing skepticism about the school-closing strategy. "As the recklessness and futility of massive resistance policies became clear," Lassiter and Lewis write, "white moderates—especially middle-class parents concentrated in urban areas and in counties where Blacks constituted a small percentage of the population—became increasingly vocal

in their opposition to policies designed to protect absolute segregation at the expense of public education” (1998, p. 3; see also Hershman 1998).

The legal basis for massive resistance collapsed in January 1959 when state and federal courts struck down key state statutes intended to prevent desegregation. Within two weeks, the General Assembly passed a new legislative package proposed by Governor Almond that sought to limit desegregation rather than block it entirely. Two days after that, on February 2, six schools in Norfolk and one in Arlington County began operating on an integrated basis (Gates 1962; Muse 1961; *Southern School News* 1956, 1958a). Locales in many parts of the state slowly began to accept the inevitability of desegregation, at least on a token basis.

Segregationists were not ready to concede the fight. The Defenders of State Sovereignty and Individual Liberties, the state’s most influential pro-segregation group, issued a statement asserting: “We deplore the abandonment of massive resistance . . . as our state’s policy in opposition to federal tyranny. We believe some of our political leaders have misjudged the resolute will of our people” (*Southern School News* 1959b, p. 7). The Defenders certainly were not ready to accept desegregation in Prince Edward County, their point of greatest strength. Their state president was Farmville dry cleaner and former county school-board member Robert Crawford; J. Barrye Wall, the publisher and editor of the *Farmville Herald*, was a founding member.¹⁰ The *Herald’s* editorial was predictably vitriolic. With the move to integrated schools, it asserted, “Virginia, the mother of constitutional government, will have permitted the rape of ideals and principles for which great men have given their minds and blood, suffering almost unbearable hardships.” This will constitute “the abandonment of the high plane” in defending segregation as a state and local prerogative in which the federal government had no right to intervene (*Farmville Herald* 1959a, p. 1B).

Faced with the specter of operating public schools with some degree of desegregation, the PEC Board of Supervisors refused to appropriate money to fund the public schools for the 1959–1960 academic year. Thus the era of the school closings began. Barrye Wall led the public battle to justify keeping the schools closed rather than operating integrated ones. As the person running the *Farmville Herald*, then the county’s sole newspaper, he was ideally positioned to do so. The round, cigar-chomping Wall was well regarded in the newspaper industry, a past president of the Virginia Press Association known for heading “one of the best and most profitable county papers in the East.” Wall’s “editorials offering temperate support of school segregation [were] widely reprinted in the South” (Hanson 1955, p. 12). But the newspaperman was no one-man army. Throughout the county’s long, ultimately failed quest to keep county schools segregated, Wall was joined by virtually all influential Prince Edward Whites and by powerful Virginia politicians and journalists in making the case that the county’s position was not only defensible, but righteous. The few Whites who were willing to consider reopening schools with some level of desegregation were effectively silenced, as were most Blacks fearful of economic repercussions. To be sure, some members of the Black community were remarkably outspoken, and many showed great determination in their pursuit of a desegregated school system. Nevertheless, it was not until a second Supreme Court ruling in 1964 banned the closure of public schools to avoid desegregation, that the county relented. Not until the 1970s did the schools become meaningfully integrated.

Prince Edward Academy opened in Fall 1959, enrolling 93% of White students who had been eligible for public schools the previous spring (*Farmville Herald* 1959b, c). In 1961, upper-school students moved from makeshift classrooms to a new \$450,000 building in Farmville. For a time, funding for the Academy drew from state and local coffers. After the collapse of massive resistance, the state enacted a program

of tuition grants, under which parents not wishing to send their child to the local public school could receive a stipend to send her to a private, non-sectarian school or public school in another district. Thus, no child would be compelled to attend an integrated school. Prince Edward enacted its own tuition grant program to supplement state funding. During the 1960–1961 school year, over 1300 county students received state and local tuition grants, with all but five going to Whites attending the segregated Prince Edward Academy. Students receiving county and state tuition grants could attend the Academy at virtually no cost. The county disbursed over \$163,000 in local tuition and transportation grants to families sending their children to the Academy. In August 1961, Federal District Court Judge Oren R. Lewis ruled that neither the state nor the county could provide tuition grants to Prince Edward students for attendance at private schools while public schools remained closed. Lewis also banned a county ordinance that allowed local taxpayers to donate up to one-quarter of real estate and personal property taxes owed to the Prince Edward School Foundation. Through this device, the Foundation had received \$56,000 in local tax money.¹¹

Why, after the segregated private academy was a well-established entity, did the county refuse to re-open public schools, which would be desegregated in name but populated almost entirely by Black students? William vanden Heuvel, a Department of Justice aide assigned to address the Prince Edward crisis, posed this very challenge in a speech delivered in the county: “It is your right to send your child to such private schools, but cannot this right be exercised without destroying the fundamental institution of public education which safeguards against innocent children being the prisoners of poverty and social status?”¹²

“PRINCE EDWARD’S POSITION IS AS CLEAN AS A HOUND’S TOOTH”

Prince Edward’s answer to vanden Heuvel’s question was, in a word, “no.” In justifying this negative response, Wall and other county leaders used numerous rhetorical strategies. Among the most prominent were the following: (1) we are fighting on a high plane for an important constitutional principle, namely, the rights of states and localities to make their own decisions without federal interference; (2) the responsibility for the lack of educational options lies with Negroes themselves; (3) private schools are perfectly acceptable replacements for public schools, and may even be superior; and (4) we Whites pay the lion’s share of local taxes, so we may spend tax revenues as we see fit. These claims were legitimated by the portrayal of White resistance as unanimous, non-violent and well-mannered. Moreover, White businessmen, who did not depend on outside investment or on an educated workforce, found it in their economic self-interest to support the school closings.

Wall suggested that individuals continuing to fight for separate schools should be referred to as “patriotic constitutionalists” rather than “diehard segregationists” (*Farmville Herald* 1959d, p. 4A). In several exchanges of personal correspondence with state legislator John Hannah Daniel, Wall asserted the broader implications of the county’s fight. In early 1961, he urged Daniel to “please press the point that this suit affects the entire south and it is the last time we will have the opportunity to fight this decision on a high constitutional plane. Prince Edward’s position is as clean as a hounds tooth and legally defensible.” Later that year, Wall told Daniel: “The cold turkey is: Prince Edward is the only buffer between the NAACP and federal courts and school integration in rural Virginia. We believe we can win something better than integration, even if it must be done through the ‘judicial legislative’ process. Schools in rural Virginia are operating normally this year, because Prince Edward is still fighting.”¹³

Segregationists in Prince Edward often took turns privately to offer encouragement to their compatriots. In 1956, Louis Dahl—a storeowner in Farmville who was closely involved in the fight to preserve segregation—wrote to Rep. Watkins Abbitt, who represented Prince Edward in Congress from 1948 to 1973:

It is indeed a lonely battle—this fighting for principals [*sic*]. So few people know even how to spell the word or pronounce it, much less feel it and love it and be willing to die for it.

As I've said before, how are you going to rouse a man from his lethargy when he has a car, a home, a fifth of whiskey in the pantry, a vacation with pay, and a will-o-the-wisp pension at the end of the road.

It won't come in my lifetime, or yours Watt, and perhaps neither your name nor mine will be scratched in marble, but some future generation will remember that a little handful of Virginians once again kept burning the fires of liberty, and held the fort while free men everywhere were being awakened.¹⁴

Despite Dahl unwittingly exposing himself as one of those individuals who could not spell “principles,” his belief in the cause was unshakeable. Wall, one of the founders of the Defenders, wrote glowingly about the organization’s annual convention in a 1958 editorial:

Tuesday night over 500 delegates from every section of the State braved the cold weather and icy roads to attend the annual banquet. What they heard was pure Americanism. There were no race-baiting speeches nor propaganda. . . . Thurmond Sensing, a nationally known speaker and columnist, addressed the gathering, not on race, not on schools, not on hate, but on the underlying principles of constitutional government, the Republic of the United States, as conceived and established by the founding fathers. (*Farmville Herald* 1958a, p. 7)

With evident pride, Wall quoted the Defenders’ founding principles espoused in 1954. These included the assertions:

That, the powers and authority of the Federal Government should be strictly separated, and that domestic legislation by decree, judicial decision, treaty, executive fiat, or administrative order is foreign to the Constitution and an encroachment on the inalienable powers and authority of the several states and the Congress of the United States of America;

That, attempts to change the lawful manners, mores, and traditions of any state . . . by any branch of the Federal Government is an infringement of the sovereignty of the states composing the Union;

That, the right to determine segregation of the races is a power reserved to the states . . . (*Farmville Herald* 1958a, p. 7).

Wall repeatedly told readers that Prince Edward was fighting a battle that reached far beyond the question of whether to operate desegregated public schools: “We know one thing—we can devise another system of education, but, once lost, we can not retrieve a Constitution. The Constitution may be changed by means of amendments as provided by the document itself, but change in the basic Constitution by judicial legislation is an attack upon the liberties guaranteed by the instrument. This

we feel it is our duty and privilege to defend" (*Farmville Herald* 1958b, 1B). Two weeks later, he insisted that the "question of private vs public schools has no place in the present controversy" facing the state (*Farmville Herald* 1958c, 1B). When the state abandoned massive resistance, Prince Edward was left alone to save the Constitution, from the standpoint of Wall and his allies. Five years later, as much of Virginia had accepted token integration and the PEC case continued to bounce around the courts, Wall editorialized that the people of Prince Edward "have never compromised the principles for which they have stood. They must win this legal fight. Too much sacrifice has been made, the questions involved are too grave, the answers too important to the liberty and freedom of all Americans and to the future of education for their cause to be lost" (*Farmville Herald* 1963a, p. 1C).

Segregationists outside the county reinforced the convictions of local Whites. From 1959 to 1970, over 600 delegations traveled to the county to observe Prince Edward Academy (Murrell 1998). The county received praise in print from, among others, the *Birmingham Post-Herald's* John Temple Graves, whose pro-segregation columns were syndicated in numerous papers, the *Farmville Herald* included. "For peaceful, provident and effective resisting," Graves wrote in August 1958, "the South's prize belongs to" Prince Edward (Graves 1958, p. 1C). *Richmond News Leader* editor James Jackson Kilpatrick was the most outspoken and articulate journalistic voice in Virginia on the fight to turn back desegregation. After his lengthy editorials urging Virginia to ignore the *Brown* decision via the obscure doctrine of interposition proved to have little practical value, Kilpatrick counseled Virginians to be flexible in their responses to federal desegregation edicts. Replacing public schools with private schools was one option. Kilpatrick gave the graduation address to the White Farmville High School in June 1959, the last commencement before the school closings. He assured the crowd that "the resolute and courageous action of Prince Edward taken quietly and unflinchingly after years of patient endurance, and when no other tolerable alternative could be discovered, is in the finest tradition of American political independence" (*Farmville Herald* 1959e, p. 1).¹⁵ Powerful U.S. Senator Harry F. Byrd (D-VA) praised "the gallant little county [that] is fighting against great odds to protect a principle it believes to be right" (*Time* 1961).

PEC Whites took pride not only in the high principles for which they saw themselves fighting, but also in the gentlemanly way in which they fought. "At no time," Wall claimed in a 1960 editorial, "have we in any manner spoken ill of the Negro citizens. Many of them we have known for one and two generations. . . . We hold them in high respect and many with affection" (*Farmville Herald* 1960a, p. 1C). An editorial in June 1963 noted with some pride, "No law has been broken in Prince Edward, no court order defied, no bigotry or demagoguery used" (*Farmville Herald* 1963b, p. 1C). This "civilized" stance was characteristically Virginian. Cabell Phillips, a native Virginian, explained to readers of the *New York Times* in 1957 that:

You can only understand Virginia in terms of its mythology, for what Virginians think they are has a great deal to do with what they are. . . This mystique is best expressed, perhaps, in the phrase, "our way of life," an all-embracing concept which few Virginians feel called upon to analyze or to explain. What it does connote is a firm belief that the Virginian's way of life is rooted in instincts of graciousness, chivalry, generosity and a benevolent aristocratic idealism, all attributes of the plantation society upon which the state once subsisted (p. 18).

Out-of-town visitors often were struck by the polite reception they received. Helen Baker, a Black woman who began working in the county for the American Friends

Service Committee in October 1960, said, "I came here expecting all sorts of strife and tension, and I have found instead a great restraint and unfailing courtesy. These people are not gun-toting bums" (Graves 1961, p. 1C).

The extent to which violence went unreported by its victims or the media is not altogether clear. J. Barrye Wall, as the editor and publisher of the only newspaper in the county and a leader of segregationist forces, had a clear incentive to cover up any threatened or actual violence that did occur, and to insist that Whites were kind to their Black neighbors, willing to help them in any way they could. Robert Crawford, the local dry-cleaner owner who headed the Defenders, said emphatically: "If this community should suffer just one incident of klannism, our white case is lost. No matter who starts it, the whites will be blamed. We must not have it" (Hanson 1955, p. 15).¹⁶ Richmond-based sociologist and activist Ed Peeples, who published the first scholarly account of the school closings, describes the role of violence and intimidation thus: "That very special Virginian form of intimidation was at work, and they didn't really need a bully, a Klansman, and they didn't need the White Citizens Council because they had the Defenders, who were the equivalent of it . . ." Still, Peeples maintains, "I'm confident [people working under direct or indirect orders from White leaders] beat up people but we'll never know . . . I can't prove it" (Peeples 2007).¹⁷

Local contractor and former school board chairman Lester Andrews, who wanted to see schools reopened, believed that there were a small number of Whites in the county who would resort to violence.¹⁸ For their part, White leaders laughed at the expectations of violence that outsiders brought with them. "Outsiders come here expecting to see the white people of the town running around with baseball bats trying to hit the Negro," Blanton Hanbury, the head of the segregated academy, told a reporter (Ripley 1962b, p. 12). Fifteen years after the schools reopened, Reverend Griffin summed up the local atmosphere during the closings era: "What little violence there was, was isolated and unorganized. There were reprisals, yes, but they were more tactful and sophisticated" (Egerton 1979, p. 64). Such reprisals might include social shunning, threatened or actual economic reprisals and physical intimidation (Peeples 2007). This relative aversion to explicit violence was reflected statewide. The Southern Regional Council counted 225 acts of racial violence in the eleven Southern states from January 1, 1955, to January 1, 1959. Only two took place in Virginia (Yorktown and Alexandria), both involving intimidation of Black families in formerly all-White residential areas.¹⁹ The apparent tranquility in the county and the state stood in pointed contrast to the more explicit violence and intimidation that occurred most often in the Deep South. Had overt violence emerged in PEC, the legitimacy of White claims, in the public sphere and in the courts, would have suffered considerably.

THE SILENCING OF DISSENT

These explicit or implied threats of social and economic reprisals were effective in silencing many voices of dissent. (The small population of the county made silencing easier to enforce than in a larger, less intimate community.) Thus, the dominant narrative of the school closings appeared to be authoritative in part because there was so little space for counter-narratives disputing the good intentions and rightful cause of the school-closing forces. In the context of this apparent unanimity, White leaders could depict the closings as reflecting broad public opinion and common sense.

"Moderate" Whites were pressured to refrain from open dissent. An informal group of White businessmen began meeting secretly to explore possibilities for

reopening the schools. The Bush League, as it was referred to derisively by segregationist Whites who rejected any whiff of compromise, counted an estimated 350 to 500 people who were willing to help in the effort, among them 150 or so who had attended at least one meeting. The fifth meeting, in June 1960, became the final one after the identities of approximately forty attendees leaked. In addition, clandestinely recorded meeting minutes circulated around town, along with an unsigned diatribe against the Bush Leaguers:

It has come to the attention of those of us who have worked so hard and sacrificed for the preservation of segregated schools. . . .that an insidious movement instituted by certain businessmen . . . who are willing to sell their honor and the moral upbringing of our children for a few dollars which they allegedly lost by a business slump that was nationwide. . . .have allowed greed to compromise them into an alliance with these socialists, integrationists, 'do-gooders' and educationalists who would sacrifice our children in order to further themselves economically and politically (Smith 1965, p. 181).

One businessmen said with resignation: "We say nothing any more. We have to be all for the private schools. Otherwise they say we're all against" (Goodman 1961, p. 89; Smith 1965).

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), which had staff members in the county from 1960 to 1965, set out to round up White moderates who supported reopening of the schools.²⁰ They had a very difficult time trying to find people willing to adopt this position publicly, though AFSC staffers spoke with a number of Whites troubled by the situation in the county. Lester Andrews was one of the Bush League leaders. He told AFSC's Harry Boyte that his business and manufacturing had declined as a consequence, and that the Town Council had acted punitively in setting parking regulations for his shopping center. Andrews went on to say that it was only when his wife and children suffered reprisals that he withdrew temporarily from these efforts. All of his employees had experienced blatant reprisals as well.²¹

Saturday Evening Post reporter Irv Goodman estimated in a 1961 article that roughly 5% of Whites were not in complete sympathy with the private-school movement. "They do very little talking," he observed, recounting the costs paid by several Whites who dared question the strategy. Among them were a school board member branded a "nigger lover" when he opposed the sale of the county's public schools (he subsequently withdrew from the dispute); a barber who questioned the turn to private schools and lost customers as a result; and a Presbyterian minister who lost his pulpit in 1955 after saying it was wrong to close the schools. It was not until 1962 that a White parent of school-age children criticized the school closings publicly (Hamilton 1962). When Goodman visited the county in 1961, he found only one White person who continued to speak against the closings. He did not reveal the person's name, but it was presumably Longwood College Dean C. G. Gordon Moss, whose opposition grew increasingly vocal as the closings dragged on. Even this one dissenter felt it necessary to qualify his position: "I am not an integrationist in the sense that I believe the two races can mingle closely. But I can't see why this mistreatment is necessary" (Goodman 1961, p. 89). (Moss would later become an avowed integrationist.)

The muting of dissent was possible in part because a small group of people had a virtual stranglehold over the county's affairs. During this time, the Board of Supervisors—which made all of the important political decisions in the county—was dominated by native-born farmers, who held five of the six seats. The remaining one

was held by John Steck, an editor at the *Herald* who marched in lockstep with his boss there. AFSC's Harry Boyte sighed: "My amazement continues to grow and it sometimes seems as if this is not really America when one begins to realize the total control exercised over the people of this town and this county by a very small select group of White citizens."²² In Prince Edward, farmers had little reason to seek outside investment or to assure an educated workforce. Uneducated workers were more desperate, more pliable. The business community held limited influence, and those members of the business community who did wield power backed the political leadership. Their controlling interest in local banks, and thus their influence over a large portion of the business and home mortgages in the community, lent weight to the veiled threats of economic reprisals.²³ In this light, the political leadership's disregard for possible economic consequences of the closings, and the scarcity of objections to the school closings, is intelligible.²⁴

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR CLOSED PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

Beyond Prince Edward's claim that its (White) residents stood unified in defending sacred constitutional principles without rancor, violence, or intimidation, White leaders insisted that they were not responsible for depriving Black children of education. That onus lay with an overreaching federal government and with outside agitators—mainly the NAACP—who had misled Black residents into relinquishing public education. The refusal of local Blacks to accept the help of Whites in starting their own private schools drew repeated criticism in the pages of the *Farmville Herald*. In 1958, the president of the Prince Edward Educational Corporation—which raised money to fund the segregated academy—insisted that "we have thought of [the Negro children]. In our policy statement we declare our intention to cooperate with Negroes in the setting up of their own school system, if they ask for such cooperation. So far, they have shown no interest. Maybe they think we are bluffing. Maybe they are characteristically trusting to luck. When they wake up to reality, we will be there to help them in every way except financially" (Chodorov 1958, p. 3).

In December 1959, the *Herald* ran a front-page story on Southside Schools, a public corporation chartered by some of the county's most ardent segregationists to help local Blacks form their own private, segregated schools. The Black community was not consulted about the formation of Southside Schools. The board issued a statement explaining that "the formation of this corporation was delayed because it was our opinion that responsible Negro citizens of the county should provide the leadership. There has been no action along this line, however . . ." (*Farmville Herald* 1959f, p. 1).²⁵ Wall, whose son served as the registered agent for the school, had acknowledged privately in September 1959 that "there is no hope that the Negroes would be interested in private schools even as a stopgap."²⁶ He was right: only one Black family submitted an application to these Black private schools run by White segregationists. In the view of the Virginia State Conference of the NAACP, "the parents had the dignity and common sense enough to appraise the scheme as another subtle technique to tighten segregation about their necks and the necks of their children."²⁷ Southside Schools President Roy B. Hargrove admitted that the group of Whites formed the corporation "not just out of love of education but because we knew that public opinion was going to be better with the Negroes in school than out" (Smith 1965, p. 172).

Whatever the motivations behind it, the Black private-school proposal served to bolster White self-justifications. In a typical editorial, Wall asserted that "Negro

parents, under misguided leadership . . . chose to follow leadership which has no background of doing anything for the upbuilding of the community in any field instead of accepting a possible solution for continuing an educational program offered by people who had led this community in its many accomplishments” (*Farmville Herald* 1962b, p. 1C). Wall later claimed, in a July 1963 editorial, that county Whites would have been willing all along to make financial contributions to aid in the operation of Black private schools (*Farmville Herald* 1963c). It appears likely that such an effort would have been contingent on the plaintiffs dropping their desegregation case. Even if this were not the case, Blacks in the county had ample reason to believe that the formation of Black private schools, particularly with help from local Whites, would undermine their court case.²⁸

Wall argued in 1962 that reopened schools would not end the controversy: “Contrary to some uninformed opinion, the opening of public schools (racially integrated) but attended predominantly by Negroes will not satisfy the militant NAACP, and its handmaidens the Southern Christian Association [Southern Christian Leadership Conference]. They . . . would attack state and county scholarships to parents whose children attend any ‘private school that excludes the Negroes by reason of race’” (*Farmville Herald* 1962c, p. 1B).²⁹ Defending the county’s commitment to the education of black citizens, Wall asserted that “public education made phenomenal [*sic*] strides until certain minorities (by no means do we confine these to the activities of the NAACP) attempted to control it” (*Farmville Herald* 1963d, p. 4A).

Senator Byrd claimed that “the NAACP alone is responsible” for the closed schools because it “is more interested in the integration of public schools than in the education of colored children.” NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins responded at a May 1961 rally in Farmville: “The NAACP controls no schools or school boards,” and Negroes “have no representation in county government . . . It was the county authorities who decided to close all schools rather than comply with a federal court order.”³⁰

While White leaders in the county insisted repeatedly that they were fighting a principled constitutional battle and harbored no ill will toward Blacks, a spirit of vindictiveness is evident in the school closings. A year after the county completed construction of a new Black high school, the Supreme Court decided in favor of the Prince Edward plaintiffs in the *Brown* case. In the eyes of Hampden-Sydney Professor of Religion Charles McRae, “this so enraged the county supervisors that they seized the opportunity when it came to them to cut off all funds for public schools and so defy the ruling of the courts.”³¹ PEC’s congressional representative, Watkins Abbitt, also revealed animosity toward Blacks calling for integrated schools. In November 1958, the state’s massive resistance laws were on the verge of invalidation by state and federal courts. Looking ahead to alternate strategies of preserving segregation, Abbitt asserted: “It may be necessary for some localities to give up public schools temporarily.” “However,” he added, “these localities should start at once considering closing all schools and not just the White schools” (*Richmond News Leader* 1958b, p. 1). (No White parents wanted their children to transfer to Black schools, so the latter would not need to be closed under massive resistance legislation, unless Whites applied for transfers solely to force closure of Black schools.)

Although the proximate causes of the county’s decision to close public schools in PEC were the *Brown* decision and the Black community’s demand for integrated schools, some suspected more far-reaching motives. Gordon Moss argued in a 1962 speech that [members of] the county’s small wealthy population

have desired to relieve themselves of the financial burden of being the principal supporters of a public school system and to substitute for that the financial burden of maintaining a private school for their own children. But that primary purpose is to destroy public education for both, yes, the Negro children of the county, but also the white children of the county in order that they might retain an unlimited cheap labor supply for the few, for the industries of the county. A cheap labor supply, a non-organized labor supply, and they don't have to bother about the fact that . . . it will be an unskilled labor supply. There are no industries in the county that need or require high skills. That, I believe, explains the fact, the depth and the length that people in the county have been willing to go to, to accomplish their purposes. In other communities in Virginia there has been opposition to integration of the schools, but . . . it has quickly collapsed.³²

The Defenders stood firmly in favor of abolishing public schools, and both state and county attorneys warned as early as December 1954 that public schools might close for a number of years if the state were not permitted to make a “gradual adjustment” to the *Brown* ruling (*Southern School News* 1954, 1955). Indeed, *U.S. News and World Report* spoke admiringly of the Commonwealth’s plans to fight desegregation, and observed: “[S]ome Virginians predict that several communities might find themselves maintaining public schools attended only by Negroes—with all the white children going to private schools” (1955, pp. 49–50).³³

An August 1958 article in the right-wing publication *Human Events* looked with some glee at the prospect of White private schools sprouting in the wake of court deadlines for desegregation:

The effect will be that only the Negro half of the school population will attend tax-supported schools—provided enough taxes can be collected to support them. The chances are that the revenues will not be enough, for the whites who pay most of the taxes will at the proper time see that the levies are lowered in proportion to the services they do not receive. Thus, the prospect is that private schools will replace the tax-supported schools in Prince Edward County and a ‘sacred cow’ will have been slaughtered. (Chodorov 1958, p. 1)³⁴

Earlier in the year, Wall’s *Farmville Herald* had also mused on this “sacred cow”: “The basic concept of universal education might be examined for some changes. An opportunity should be given every child for a basic [*sic*] education—certainly so far as literacy is concerned. That is a duty of the parents, the state and the local community. But pupils who do not apply themselves, nor have the capacity, nor the ambition need not tear down an educational system which has cost so much to provide and to maintain” (*Farmville Herald* 1958d, p. 9). In private correspondence, Wall was more blunt. In January 1957, he told Congressman Abbitt that “we are working [on] a scheme in which we will abandon public schools, sell the buildings to our corporation, reopen as privately operated schools with tuition grants from Va and P.E. county as the basic financial program . . . Those wishing to go to integrated schools can take their tuition grants and operate their own schools. To hell with ’em.”³⁵

Others insisted the public schools had shortcomings that went beyond the threat of desegregation. School Board Chairman W. Edward Smith argued that “many people of the County, as is true of many of the people elsewhere, had become greatly disturbed by many of the innovations and procedures being followed in public schools but which did not appear to be directed toward the education of the child but which . . . seemed to be directed toward the conditioning of the child for a particular

way of life.”³⁶ More pointedly, a *Richmond News Leader* editorial warned that “nothing is to be gained by slavish devotion to the cause of *public* education” (1959, p. 12).

WHITE TAX DOLLARS FOR WHITES

Behind the county’s stubborn refusal to reopen schools, no matter the cost to black residents, was a vexing legal question: “Can a legislative body be forced to levy taxes by a federal judicial edict?” If the answer is yes, Wall wrote, “the control of the public school system is in the hands of the courts, for if they can order taxes levied, they can dictate the amount of taxes to be levied, and if they can dictate the amount of the levy, we find ourselves being taxed without representation contrary to the basic principles upon which this Republic was founded” (*Farmville Herald* 1963d, p. 4A). (Unsurprisingly, Wall did not mention that Black residents were perpetually taxed without representation.) The Supreme Court’s 1964 decision to uphold the District Court’s mandate that the county must assess taxes for the operation of public schools did not come easily. In his study of the Supreme Court’s decisions regarding racial equality, Klarman observes that this was “a virtually unprecedented decision, about which several justices had doubts. Who knows whether they would have overcome these doubts, had it not been for the county’s extraordinary defiance of *Brown*, which had lasted for an entire decade?” (2004, p. 342).

For all of their ostensibly high-minded rhetoric about principles of governance and local decision-making authority, White leaders also suggested that they simply did not wish to spend tax money on the education of Black children. This strain of thought was not unique to Prince Edward County. Indeed, Southern states and localities typically only made any real effort toward equalizing Black and White school facilities when desegregation loomed. In congressional testimony, Sen. A. Willis Robertson (D-VA) warned that “if the South is forced into private schools it means no education for the majority of the colored children of the South, who cannot afford the private schools. We have been hard pressed in the South. In most Virginia communities colored people do not pay one-tenth of what it costs to provide schools comparable to the white schools and teachers comparable. In most communities we have met that test.”³⁷ Criticizing NAACP opposition to taxpayer funding of private schools in locales with no public schools, a *Herald* editorial argued:

It should be remembered that over a period of many years Virginia has attempted to educate its children. Incidentally the white people have supplied the greater amount of taxes to make education possible. It has been argued that segregated education has resulted in lower Negro income, therefore less tax contribution. We leave that argument to the extremists, certainly it cannot overrule experience. None-the-less, the white people have encouraged, assisted and aided the Negro people in education. We cannot believe that the Negro people of Virginia approve of legal action to prevent white children from receiving their education. It is ungrateful far beyond the real character of the Negro, who is inherently grateful (*Farmville Herald* 1958e, 1C).

These words aptly illustrate the strong strain of paternalism that characterized Whites in Virginia, who viewed themselves as the most genteel of Southerners. Gordon Moss noted in a 1962 speech that the paternalism in PEC “was probably more pronounced, more self-conscious, and the citizens thereof took more pride in it than in any other place that I had ever lived in the state of Virginia.”³⁸

County leaders—most of whom, with the exception of Wall, were quite well-to-do—were also practicing the politics of self-interest. Eighty-one percent (\$761,489) of Prince Edward County's budget for the fiscal year beginning July 1, 1958, was devoted to school expenditures. While state and federal funds covered more than half of school outlays, \$349,189 in school funds were to come from local sources. With projections of slightly under \$400,000 to be collected locally from taxes and other fees, around 87% of local revenues went to fund public schools (*Farmville Herald* 1958f, g, h). For those county leaders dubious about the wisdom of operating public schools—much less integrated ones—the incentive to carve public school funding out of the county budget was obvious.

When the county Board of Supervisors passed a budget in June 1959 that included no funds for public schools, they also proceeded to cut property taxes by 53% (*Southern School News* 1959c). Three years later, the Supervisors slashed property taxes again, from 3.5% to 1% of valuation. This large decrease was made possible by an unused allocation of \$600,000 for local tuition grants, which a federal court disallowed in 1961. In the wake of this ruling, the Prince Edward School Foundation still managed to collect \$10,000 in combined state and local money from students living in neighboring Cumberland County (*Southern School News* 1962).

In a 1962 conversation with AFSC staffer William Bagwell, Barrye Wall said that if the courts ordered the school doors unlocked, “certainly we could reopen our schools and do a good job with it . . . Of course, only Negroes will attend the public schools and some of us do not see why we should support such schools when the Negroes pay almost no taxes.”³⁹ (Wall failed to explain how Blacks could be expected to contribute more tax dollars without access to quality education and good jobs.) When the county was forced to reopen schools for the 1964–1965 school year by verdicts in the U.S. Supreme and District Courts, this attitude was evident.⁴⁰ Though enrollments in the county's public and private schools were expected to be roughly equal, the Supervisors appropriated \$189,000 for public schools—desegregated in theory but expected to be virtually all Black—and \$375,000 for local tuition grants.⁴¹ PEC Whites did not see themselves as acting callously or unfairly. “The taxpayers of Prince Edward have graciously supported public schools for many years,” Wall argued. “Even though the white people pay 66.8 per cent of the local taxes, the Negro citizens 9.8 per cent and the public service corporations 23.4 per cent, there has been no quibbling about the appropriations for separate public schools” (*Farmville Herald* 1961a, p. 1B). In this view, the issue was a local government's prerogative to spend its tax money as its primary taxpayers—that is, White citizens—saw fit.

TEST-DRIVING THE NEW CONSERVATISM (DISCUSSION)

By closing public schools and attempting to subsidize private, segregated schools using taxpayer dollars, Prince Edward County sought to establish the outer limits of legal resistance to public school desegregation. As part of this strategy, White leaders portrayed their position as grounded in long-established, non-racial, legal principles. In doing so, the County tested a new strain of political rhetoric. While PEC failed in its legal attempt to maintain closed public schools and subsidize segregated private schools, its public articulation of a refined segregationist ideology, designed to align with “mainstream” American values such as local self-control, taxpayers' rights and individual choice, later gained currency in a wide array of political contexts.

This “colorblind” defense of segregation can be understood as a second wave of resistance that followed earlier tactics of direct repression. Violence (or the threat thereof), once a central strategy in maintaining the racial hierarchy, lost some of its effectiveness as bloodshed began to draw Black-sympathetic media coverage and to provoke federal intervention to secure Black rights (e.g., Barkan 1984; Lipsky 1968; McAdam 1982, 1983). In locales where overt violence and repression had a longer shelf life, particularly in the Deep South, the second wave of segregationist defenses emerged after the earlier strategy faltered. Thus, as examined by Crespino (2007), many White Mississippians did not turn to this strategy until the late 1960s. In other locales, particularly in the Sunbelt, the threat of imminent desegregation did not emerge until around the same time period (Lassiter 2006). To these Whites, the colorblind defense held the most promise, as most of them did not view violence against aspiring integrators as either morally right or strategically effective.

This transition to a colorblind defense of segregation was, to use McAdam’s (1983) phrase, a “tactical adaptation” by Whites, a reaction to the progress of the civil rights movement and the growing ineffectiveness of explicit oppression. Prince Edward’s Whites made this shift well before the late 1960s. They did so not because they were forward-thinking—far from it—but because this heavily Black county, a stronghold of segregationist sentiment steeped in Virginia traditions of civilized resistance, was forced to respond to an early court order to desegregate its schools (as one of the five *Brown* cases).

The Prince Edward case calls for a rethinking of the roots of modern conservative rhetoric. Lassiter argues that “massive resistance ultimately exposed the myopic vision of the rural leadership of the white South and transformed quotidian middle-class concerns about educational quality into a grassroots political mobilization against Black Belt recklessness” (2006, p. 29). While Lassiter is correct in identifying the shift in political power from the Black Belt to the Sunbelt, the political defense of segregation did not shift from Black Belt obstinance to Sunbelt colorblindness; more accurately, colorblindness emerged as a strategy that could be employed alongside or as a replacement for explicit resistance. Local communities did not all react in the same manner and at the same time to the threat of desegregation. In light of this variation, we must look beyond the Black Belt/Sunbelt distinction and beyond rural/suburban differences to understand strategies of segregationist resistance in Southern communities. I do not mean to imply that other scholars of segregationist resistance have lapsed into regional determinism; a number do, however, suggest that suburban Whites led the way in creating the new conservatism (Lassiter 2006; McGirr 2001). I argue that rural Prince Edward, an early adopter, shared the sense with other early adopters that segregation could be best defended with reason, not brute force.

In his study of Mississippi conservatives, Crespino (2007) critiques the Southern strategy thesis, which asserts that Southern White racism was refined and euphemized to form the bedrock of modern conservatism. Instead, Crespino joins scholars such as Lassiter and Kruse in making the case that the South—having undergone profound social and economic transformations, which resulted in a shift of political power from the rural Black Belt to the Sunbelt’s sprawling suburbs—changed to become more like the rest of the U.S. As he acknowledges, Mississippi, the poorest, least urbanized state with the largest African American population and a moderate business community that was small in size and influence, was late in shifting to a more refined brand of racism. Crespino is correct in pointing to the contributions of rural and small-town White Mississippians to the formation of mainstream conservative viewpoints. But Virginia and its last bulwark of unapologetic segregation,

Prince Edward County, began to bridge the gap between the Black Belt and the Sunbelt at least a decade before Mississippi.

This is not surprising. From the very beginning, Virginia's style of resistance to desegregation—restrained, eschewing overt violence, and couched mostly in non-racialized language—was much closer to contemporary conservatism than was Mississippi's. In the late 1950s, Virginia was already beginning to experience a shift in the balance of political power from the rural Black Belt to its suburban areas (Lassiter and Lewis, 1998). While the rest of the state began shifting its focus to minimization of integration, Prince Edward “stood steady,” to use Wall's oft-repeated call to arms. PEC Whites stressed that the crux of the issue was maintaining local autonomy and individual freedoms in accord with the Constitution; that Blacks themselves were the culprits in denying educational opportunities to their children; that privately-run schools offered a greater variety of educational options, and superior ones at that; and that their rights as the primary taxpayers in the county included full discretion over how those funds were spent.

Half a century later, echoes of the Prince Edward mentality ring. In this view, localities are autonomous entities with the sole authority to tax their citizens and to distribute these tax dollars as they see fit. Prince Edward essentially adopted a “fee for service” mentality: those who pay the most in taxes should receive the most benefits. This approach is exemplified currently by many suburban localities, which attempt to “cherry pick” residents—luring taxpayers and shunning tax users—and separate different classes of residents within them (through devices such as school tracking, homeowners' associations “governing” subdivisions, and residential-only land-use restrictions). Increasing services and benefits to lower-income residents only serves to shortchange taxpayers and lure more tax users (Frug 2006). For rural locales unable to lure more affluent taxpayers, the next best thing is to strip away vital public services. At the minimum, this reduces taxation levels, and it may even drive some tax users out of town.⁴²

The persistent claims by PEC Whites that it was local Blacks who knowingly chose to shun education for their children are reflected in current arguments that it is not Whites who are oppressing Blacks, but Blacks who are holding themselves back. Stated another way, Whites are perfectly willing to help Blacks, if Blacks would only help themselves. As documented in this paper, PEC Whites claimed repeatedly that they wanted to help Blacks obtain schooling for their children, but Blacks refused. Nowadays, Whites often assert that it is “ghetto culture” or a culture of poverty that prevents Blacks from excelling in American society. The problem is not racism per se, but that Blacks spend too much time complaining about unfairness and too little lifting themselves up (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Wall expressed such a sentiment in a May 1963 editorial, contending that PEC Blacks “have shown no disposition whatever to reestablish education except upon their own terms . . . And they cry to ‘high heaven,’ to President Kennedy and Attorney General Kennedy to pull their chestnuts out of the fire and their children out of ignorance” (*Farmville Herald* 1963e, p. 4A).

An additional connection between Prince Edward's rhetoric in the late 1950s and early 1960s and current discourse relates to conceptions of education. In this view, the path to improving education lies not in putting greater resources into public schools, but in creating competition and giving parents an array of options, private as well as public, to educate their children. The earlier rhetoric about tuition grants, which gained popularity as a mechanism to avoid desegregation, bears similarities to the arguments of contemporary school voucher proponents, who by contrast depict vouchers as being particularly helpful to low-income children in failing schools.

Gary E. Johnson, a leading backer of vouchers while governor of New Mexico, wondered, “Why can’t we have an entrepreneurial explosion in this country when it comes to educational services? What we’ve got here is a monopoly” (Wilgoren 2000). Segregationists such as Wall made the case half a century earlier that parents should not be compelled to send their children to integrated schools, but instead should be able to select from a range of alternatives, including segregated, private schools.

CONCLUSION

Prince Edward County ultimately lost the legal case to keep its public schools closed. Blacks in the county won an important, nationwide victory in establishing that school districts could not legally sidestep desegregation orders by shifting to a segregated, private system. Yet it is too simple to claim that county Blacks won and county Whites lost. Many Black students lost five irretrievable years of education. Whites gained thirteen years to develop an all-White private school system that used taxpayer contributions until federal courts banned this device.⁴³

PEC was well-positioned to fight desegregation on a purportedly higher plane. As one of the five locales included in *Brown*, Prince Edward had a long lead time to prepare its strategy of resistance. As a Black Belt county in Virginia, Prince Edward’s Whites combined strong segregationist sentiments with the restrained, legalistic perspective characteristic of the Commonwealth. White county leaders perceived little potential loss from the closure of public schools. Unlike many other localities, this rural county had no great need for an educated workforce, and the leadership was not terribly concerned with attracting outside investment. They felt no great attachment to public schools, and devised a strategy to continue educating their children without having to collect tax money for the education of Black children.

In addition to these factors, White county leaders were able to construct a relatively coherent narrative that, in its continued retelling, reinforced the belief in their correctness. From this perspective, White Prince Edwardians were standing up for constitutional principles of self-determination, asserting their rights as taxpayers, offering Black families educational opportunities . . . and doing so without violence or ill will. This narrative was virtually uncontested by rank-and-file Whites who had little to gain and much to lose—social and economic reprisals, foregoing the opportunity to send their children to Prince Edward Academy—from protesting closings. With one of the top county leaders controlling the sole local newspaper, little public debate ensued.⁴⁴ Though history has proven Wall’s views to be severely wrong-headed at best, he was a careful and articulate wordsmith, well-versed in the “gentlemanly” Virginian strain of segregationist resistance. (Outside the county, the lack of violence and drama in PEC caused Washington to dither, and the national press corps to focus most of their attention on bloodshed in the Deep South.⁴⁵) The Supreme Court finally put an end to the school closings in 1964, but—as illustrated by the historic *Brown* decision ten years earlier—a court verdict alone is hardly sufficient to undo the myriad harms that it addresses.

Of course, the Prince Edward story did not end with the reopening of schools in 1964. Indeed, the county school system’s eventual transformation into a high-quality, well-integrated institution also calls for greater exploration. But the optimism provoked by this more recent chapter in the Prince Edward saga—and the recent effort by the state of Virginia to make amends for the tragic earlier chapter—should not overshadow the irreparable damage inflicted upon Black students who lost five years

of education, nor does it dilute the importance of trying to understand how this could have happened in the first place.⁴⁶

Corresponding author: Professor Christopher Bonastia, Department of Sociology, Lehman College, 250 Bedford Park Boulevard West, Bronx, NY 10468. E-mail: cbonastia@gmail.com

NOTES

1. Portions of this research were funded by a National Endowment for the Humanities Faculty Research Award, a PSC-CUNY Research Award, and a Lehman College George N. Shuster Fellowship. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect those of the NEH. Previous versions of this paper were presented at the 2007 American Sociological Association Annual Meeting; the New York University Power, Politics and Protest Workshop in the Department of Sociology; and the Department of Sociology's Brown Bag Series at Lehman College. I thank the attendees for their helpful feedback. I also thank Ed Peebles, Brian Grogan, and Prince Edward residents (current and former) who shared their knowledge and insights generously, as well as the many archivists who helped to locate historical materials relevant to this research. Destiny Cannaday, Elisa Garcia and Carla Whyte provided valuable research assistance, and Eugène Laper fulfilled numerous interlibrary loan requests with skill and promptness.
2. In *Brown*, the Supreme Court ruled that the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment prohibits states from maintaining racially segregated public schools. In the companion case of *Bolling v. Sharpe* (347 U.S. 497), the Court stipulated that the due process clause of the Fifth Amendment prohibits racial segregation in the District of Columbia public schools.
3. I use the terms "Negro" and "Black" interchangeably in this paper. "Negro" was the more common term during the time period I examine.
4. In 1830, the county had the largest population of free Blacks in the state. In 1888, Prince Edward was represented by three Negroes in the House of Delegates and three Negroes in the state Senate. Virginia effectively erased Black political representation in 1902, when the state constitution disenfranchised large majorities of Blacks. Two days before General Robert E. Lee's surrender at Appomattox on April 9, 1965, "Union troops attacked Confederate forces in Farmville" (Ely 2004, p. 415).
5. The county population remained basically flat in the 1960s, before climbing 14% (to 16,456) from 1970 to 1980. See U.S. Census Bureau (2007).
6. Juanita Morisey, Notes on Prince Edward County and the Children, n.d., Box 1960, Folder 38130, American Friends Service Committee Papers (AFSC), Special Collection on AFSC Work in the Prince Edward County Virginia School Closing Issue.
7. Prince Edward County Christian Association, Operation 1700, May 9, 1960, Box 1, Folder 13, Helen Estes Baker Papers, Virginia State University (VSU), Johnston Memorial Library.
8. Meier and Rudwick (1976) counted 14 school boycotts (including Farmville) that occurred between 1943 and 1951. Farmville was one of three to take place in the South; the other two, in Lumberton in 1946 and Kinston in 1951, occurred in North Carolina.
9. "Declaration" by Prince Edward County Citizens, May 3, 1956, Box 12, Folder: Papers Re: Integration, 1956, John Hannah Daniel Papers (Acc. No. 9886), University of Virginia, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections (UVA). See also *Farmville Herald* 1958i, 1964; Smith 1965.
10. An attempt in the Virginia legislature to adopt a new package of massive resistance laws fell short by two votes in March 1960 (Southern School News 1960).
11. W. Edward Smith (Chairman, PEC School Board), "The School Situation in Prince Edward County," circa 1961, Box 7, Folder: Prince Edward County School Case, 1959-61, C. Brian Kelly Papers (Acc. No. 10566), UVA. See also *Farmville Herald* (1960b, 1961b); Bowers (1961); SSN (1961a, b). In January 1960, the Foundation asked the school board to sell the Farmville High School building to them; the board denied the request (*Farmville Herald* 1960c).
12. Speech by William J. vanden Heuvel to Hampden-Sydney College, October 17, 1963. Filed in Rm. 5-E, Box 10, Folder 5, Robert Prentiss Daniel Papers, VSU.

13. Letter from J.B. Wall to J.H. Daniel, January 14, 1961, Box 24, Folder: Pol. Corr. (1961), John Hannah Daniel Papers (Acc. No. 9886), UVA; Letter from Wall to Daniel, September 20, 1961, Box 24, Folder: Pol. Corr. (1961), John Hannah Daniel Papers, UVA.
14. Letter from E. Louis Dahl to Watkins Abbitt, July 6, 1956, Segregation Box 2, Folder: Prince Edward County, Watkins M. Abbitt Papers, University of Richmond, Special Collections (UR).
15. In a November 1958 editorial, Kilpatrick conceded that some localities would operate integrated public schools for Blacks and the “handful of whites” willing to attend them (*Richmond News Leader* 1958a).
16. Some journalists did, however, sense underlying hostility. A reporter from the *Christian Science Monitor* found “tension” and “fear” when she visited the county in 1962 (Ripley 1962a, p. 2). A social worker employed by the American Friends Service Committee, Harry Boyte, signed a statement contending that four men in Farmville tried to intimidate him by tearing his clothing off and threatening to castrate him. See Harry G. Boyte statement, May 24, 1962, Folder: Harry G. Boyte, Edward Peeples Personal Papers (PPP), Richmond, VA.
17. The Southside refers to the section of Virginia south of the James River, excepting the Tidewater region in the east. The most vehement resistance to desegregation emanated from the Southside.
18. Memo from Harry Boyte to Jean Fairfax, July 6, 1962, Folder: Harry G. Boyte, PPP.
19. “Intimidation, Reprisal and Violence in the South’s Racial Crisis,” published jointly by Southeastern Office, AFSC; Dept. of Racial and Cultural Relations, National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America; and Southern Regional Council. Filed in M68, Box 9, Edward Peeples Papers (public), Virginia Commonwealth University. See also *Southern School News* (1964).
20. A second primary AFSC activity was arranging for Black students to live with families outside of the state so they could continue their education. AFSC sponsored 67 PEC students from 1960 to 1963 (Fairfax n.d.).
21. Memo from Harry Boyte to Jean Fairfax, July 6, 1962, Folder: Harry G. Boyte, PPP.
22. Memo from Harry Boyte to Jean Fairfax, April 9, 1962, Folder: Harry G. Boyte, PPP. Other correspondence between AFSC staffers contained in the AFSC collection and Peeples Personal Papers shed important light on the political power structure in the county. See also memos from Boyte to Fairfax dated April 10, 1962, and April 14, 1962 in PPP.
23. Memo from Harry Boyte to Jean Fairfax, July 6, 1962, Folder: Harry G. Boyte, PPP. Wall denied any suggestions of economic reprisals by Whites, also criticizing Blacks who threatened economic boycotts.
24. This relative indifference to the economic costs of the school closings weakened the potential for civil rights protests to spur a change in policy. According to Luders (2006), “economic actors that do not depend on continued local growth or attracting new investment such as those relying on prior capital investments. . . may be less vulnerable to protest activity” (p. 972).
25. Wall noted in private correspondence that Southside Schools “has met with approval, even from ardent segregationists, both here and in Virginia and other states.” See, Letter from J. Barrye Wall to John H. Daniel, December 23, 1959, Box 20, Folder: Pol. Corr. W-Y, John Hannah Daniel Papers (Acc. No. 9886), UVA.
26. Letter from J. Barrye Wall to Jack Kilpatrick, September 20, 1959, Box 29, Folder: W-Correspondence, 1959, James Jackson Kilpatrick Papers (Acc. No. 6626-b), UVA.
27. Virginia State Conference of the NAACP, “A Proposal for Temporary and Remedial Relief for the Out-of-School Negro Youth of Prince Edward County,” January 1960, Box 1960, Folder 38120, AFSC.
28. Wishing to avoid any action to muddy the moral and legal clarity of their case, Prince Edward Blacks, under the auspices of the Prince Edward County Christian Association (PECCA), operated “training centers” throughout the county in the hopes of mitigating educational losses and building morale. A number of outside groups sent teachers to the county during the summers to offer instruction to Black students.
29. Wall’s mention of the SCLC likely is related to the fact that the editorial was published a week after Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., made an appearance in the county.
30. NAACP Press Release, “NAACP Didn’t Close Va. Schools, Says Wilkins,” May 26, 1961, Part 3, Series D, Reel 9, Papers of the NAACP.

31. Memo from Wil Harzler to Jean Fairfax, June 21, 1960, Box 1960, Folder 38119, AFSC.
32. Address by C.G. Gordon Moss to Charlottesville Chapter of the Virginia Council on Human Relations, October 25, 1962, Box 1962, Folder 38220, AFSC. *Commentary's* James Rorty (1956) made a similar point.
33. The threat to close public schools reached well beyond Virginia's borders. By 1958, seven Southern states had enacted legislative provisions allowing for school closings to avoid desegregation (*Southern School News* 1958b).
34. Filed in Box 17, Folder: Papers Re: Integration 1958, John Hannah Daniel Papers (Acc. No. 9886), UVA.
35. Letter from J.B. Wall to Watkins Abbitt, January 15, 1957, Segregation Box 1, Folder: Barrye Wall. Watkins Abbitt Papers, UR.
36. W. Edward Smith (Chairman, PEC School Board), "The School Situation in Prince Edward County," circa 1961, Box 7, Folder: Prince Edward County School Case, 1959–61, C. Brian Kelly Papers (Acc. No. 10566), UVA. See also *Richmond News Leader* (1959).
37. Testimony of Sen. A. Willis Robertson, Hearing of the Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments, May 14, 1959. Filed in Box 14, Folder: Supreme Court, 1956–59, Armistead Boothe Papers (Acc. No. 8319A), UVA.
38. Address by C.G. Gordon Moss to Charlottesville Chapter of the Virginia Council on Human Relations, October 25, 1962, Box 1962, Folder 38220, AFSC.
39. William Bagwell, Prince Edward County—Interviews, September 21–28 and November 12, 1962, Folder: Duplicates, PPP.
40. *Griffin v. County School Board of Prince Edward County* (377 U.S. 218). For a detailed legal analysis of the Prince Edward case, see Spreng (1997).
41. Minutes from Prince Edward County Board of Supervisors Meeting, June 23, 1964.
42. From 1950 to 2000, the Black proportion of the county declined from 44.6% to 35.8% (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2008).
43. In 1993, Prince Edward Academy changed its name to the Fuqua School after receiving a \$10 million donation from the businessperson and philanthropist J.B. Fuqua. The school aspires to be a colorblind model for rural education. Though the school's website does not report the racial makeup of the student body, the Private School Review reports that 7% of the students are children of color (Allison 1994, Fuqua School n.d., Private School Review n.d.).
44. The *Herald* did occasionally print letters from readers who argued for the reopening of schools.
45. The Kennedy Administration tried twice, both times unsuccessfully, to join the Prince Edward case as a plaintiff (*Farmville Herald* 1962d). In 1963, William vanden Heuvel, a special assistant to Attorney General Robert Kennedy, spearheaded the creation of the privately funded Free Schools. The schools were open to both races, eventually enrolling eight Whites among the nearly 1600 students. The Free Schools ceased operations after a year, when the public schools reopened (Sullivan 1965, *Times-Dispatch* News Bureau 1964).
46. On Prince Edward's well-respected, integrated school system, see Phelps (1994), Winters (2004). On the state's attempt to make amends by offering scholarships to school closing victims, see Orth (2004), Janofsky (2005).

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