

Spring 5-15-2015

Broad Shoulders, Hidden Voices: The Legacy of Integration at New Orleans' Benjamin Franklin High School

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Broad Shoulders, Hidden Voices:
The Legacy of Integration at New Orleans' Benjamin Franklin High School

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
History

by

Graham Cooper

BA History University of New Orleans, 2012

May, 2015

Acknowledgment

This work could not have been completed without the support and encouragement of many. When I stumbled onto this topic in the fall of 2013, Dr. Michael Mizell-Nelson insisted that I pursue it further for my Master's thesis. Without such insistence, I may have never pushed ahead. His passion to tell bottom-up histories continues to impact his students and colleagues, including myself. Thank you to my Chair, Dr. Nikki Brown, for helping me to find the story I wanted to tell with my research. Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Connie Atkinson and Dr. Al Kennedy, for teaching me the value of oral history and offering priceless advice on how to interview people successfully. Thank you to Dr. Molly Mitchell for spending two semesters reading draft after draft. Though not on my committee, she has offered me more than her share of assistance along the way. Finally, I'd like to thank my wife, Paige. Without her patience and support, this work would not be possible.

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Abstract

This paper seeks to insert the voices of students into the historical discussion of public school integration in New Orleans. While history tends to ignore the memories of children that experienced integration firsthand, this paper argues that those memories can alter our understanding of that history. In 1963, Benjamin Franklin High School was the first public high school in New Orleans to integrate. Black students knowingly made sacrifices to transfer to Ben Franklin, as they were socially and politically conscious teenagers. Black students formed alliances with some white teachers and students to help combat the racist environment that still dominated their school and city. Ben Franklin students were maturing adolescents worked to establish their identities in this newly integrated, intellectually advanced space. This paper explores the way in which students – of differing racial, socio-economic, religious, educational, and political upbringings – all struggled to navigate self and space in this discordant society.

New Orleans, School Integration, Desegregation, Race, Memory, Civil Rights Movement, Childhood, Adolescence, Public Schools, Benjamin Franklin High School.

Memory, Commemoration, and History – An Introduction

On November 15, 2013, New Orleans’ prestigious Benjamin Franklin High School held a dedication ceremony on the school’s Lakefront campus for the Class of 1966 Diversity Garden.¹ The garden – sporting freshly planted azaleas, blueberries, ferns, hibiscus, and hydrangea – was a gift, devised and funded by 24 members of the class of 1966. They were commemorating 50 years since the school’s integration in the fall of 1963, which made theirs the first integrated graduating class. Ben Franklin was the first public high school in the city to integrate, so surely it was a benchmark worth celebrating. Sharon Carter Sheridan, one of fourteen black sophomores who first entered Benjamin Franklin in September, 1963, spoke of her challenging time at the school. She told an audience of 50 or so people – mostly alumni, current faculty and students – that “it was difficult at that time, but now I am proud to see this diversity that has come in those fifty years.”² She spoke of her legacy as one of “broad shoulders” on which black students who came after her had stood and were now standing. She also alluded to her own isolation in the conclusion of her brief speech: “A long time ago I felt invisible, but now I feel the opposite. And I am so happy and proud that you all have the diversity garden, because as it blooms and blossoms and you see all the different colors, you’ll see that it’s much better than a monochromatic one.”³ In a mere 90 seconds, she moved many in the audience to tears.⁴

¹ The author will refer to Benjamin Franklin High School as “Ben Franklin” for the remainder of this thesis. Quoted citations from newspapers, court rulings, and oral histories may refer to the school as “Franklin”, “Ben Franklin”, or “Benjamin Franklin.” Though the school campus is now at 2001 Leon C Simon Drive, it was originally located in Uptown New Orleans, at 791 S. Carrollton Avenue.

² Diversity Garden dedication ceremony, November 15, 2013.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ The author, having recently begun looking at the integration of Benjamin Franklin as a potential research topic, attended the Diversity Garden dedication ceremony in the hopes that it might offer some leads. Sheridan revealed in a 2014 interview that the school also invited her to submit a 500 word essay for publication in their student-run literary magazine, *The Riverbend Review*. She submitted 614 words, which still left much unspoken and unwritten. Sharon Carter Sheridan, interview by author, New Orleans, March 21, 2014.

But the story of Sheridan and 13 other black students deserves far more consideration than what a 30 minute ceremony and 30 foot by 30 foot garden can provide. These black students were maturing adolescents, “[thrown] to the wolves.”⁵ They faced ridicule, displacement, racist harassment, and outright terrorization while at Ben Franklin. In the midst of the suffering, they overturned stereotypes about black intelligence, while some black students formed their first interracial friendships, ones that have endured 50 years through memory and continued contact. To understand their story, it is important to remember that the Diversity Garden was a purposefully constructed commemoration of the school’s integration, and then look beyond it. A group of white alumni, spearheaded by Class of 1966’s Daniel Russell, was propelled by an urge to acknowledge the past. But, as Russell relays about his fundraising efforts for the project:

The reactions from people were complex... some...people were very enthusiastic. Some people didn’t want to talk about it because it was ‘R-A-C-E’ and not something you’re supposed to say. Other people said politely “No, they didn’t want to support it.” [It was an] interesting test to see how people responded. One friend of mine I was pretty close to, a woman in my class, she’s kind of into colorblind racism. You know, the less you talk about it, the better it is, let’s not make an issue out of it and so on. No bigotry involved, but just taking that approach. There was that reaction to it. There were some splits within the class.⁶

According to Russell, some of the white alumni wanted no part in the Diversity Garden, while others suggested to Russell that he needed to be aware of the sensitivity surrounding the topic of *race*, and thus, tread carefully. Some, like Sheridan, were appreciative that the school was doing something to endorse diversity. But for many from the Class of 1966, their presence during the first years of integration was something that they preferred not confront, let alone commemorate. Personal memories from black students at Benjamin Franklin help to provide some insight as to where that reluctance, 50 years later, might be rooted.

⁵ Sharon Carter Sheridan, interview by author, New Orleans, March 21, 2014.

⁶ Daniel Russell, phone interview by author, July 24, 2014.

How did Sharon Carter Sheridan end up speaking that day? She was there because of the power of her own personal memories. Sheridan credits her viewing of *Lee Daniel's The Butler* for having inspired her reconnection with the school. "And of course there were stories of '63, and what happened in '63 and integration and so forth. And it occurred to me that, 50 years ago, that



Diversity Garden Dedication Ceremony. Sharon Carter Sheridan, far left, stands with faculty and alumni in front of the newly dedicated Diversity Garden on Benjamin Franklin's lakefront campus. November 15, 2013. Photo courtesy of Christy Read.

was me. And I said: 'You know I think Ben Franklin needs to know. I just want to go and let them know that there was someone around here; that I was part of this in 1963.' And I just went to visit the school. It had been heavy on my mind for a long time."⁷ Coincidence would have it that she visited the school just a few weeks before the Diversity Garden was to be unveiled. Only when Sheridan contacted the school's administration, by then deeply involved in the project, did they ask

⁷ Sheridan, interview.

her to participate. Neither school faculty nor its Class of 1966 alumni sought her out to extend an invitation, and no other African American alumni attended the ceremony.⁸

Benjamin Franklin
HIGH SCHOOL

introducing the Class of 1966

DIVERSITY GARDEN

Friday, November 15, 2013 • 4:30pm - 5:30pm

This project was made possible by:

ECO-URBAN LANDSCAPING
Hebert Trucking Equipment Service LLC
UNITED HOUMA NATION

WELCOME
DR. TIMOTHY RUSNAK
PRINCIPAL/CEO

THANK YOU
TO OUR DONORS, SPECIAL GUESTS
&
FACULTY/STAFF MEMBERS

DONOR REMARKS

KEY CLUB BIRDHOUSE PRESENTATION

CULTURE CLUBS POETRY READING

CLOSING REMARKS

RECEPTION

Thank You to our Generous Donors & Volunteers:

BFHS Class of 1966
Danny Russell '66
Wade Rathke '66
Wally Weitz '66
Sharon Carter Sheridan '66
EcoUrban Landscaping
Demetria Christo
United Houma Nation
Chief Thomas Dardar
Hebert Trucking Equipment Service
Mike Townsend
Dr. Mary Gubala
Ms. Natalie Rinehart '01
Mr. John Parauka
Mr. Daniel Schenck '94
Ms. Francoise McHugh
Kiwanis Club of New Orleans

BFHS Clubs:
Green Society
Key Club
Black Culture Club
Asian Pacific Club
German Culture Club

Student Volunteers:
Rebecca Wang
Maria Catina
Caitlyn Kelly
Amanda Cuevas
Maddie DeGrange
Linda Li
Mathieu Pitre
Briyel McKay
Christopher Dominguez

Nathan Nguyen
Anna Omojola
Kunrui Peng
Jaelyn Vigil
Grace Hebert
Corinna Zengel
Nicholas Brown
Stephen Sciortino
Nicholas Reid
Julia Fisher
Danny Do
Shirley Hong

The Flora & Fauna:
Bald Cypress Tree
Sweetbay Magnolia Tree
Eastern Redbud Tree
Native White Fringe Tree
Silverbell Tree

Native Azaleas--5 different varieties
Blueberries--2 varieties for improved pollination
Royal Ferns (bigger ones)
Wood Fern and
Southern Shield Fern mix (smaller ones)
Muhly Grass
American Beautyberry
Woolly Mallow
Papas Pink Hibiscus
Button Bush
Oakleaf Hydrangea

Native Wildflower Seed Mix

Materials:
Locally harvested pine straw
Soil from Houma Indian Nation
amended with local coffee grounds.

Diversity Garden pamphlet. Distributed at the Dedication Ceremony, this pamphlet highlights the collaborative effort involved in conceptualizing and constructing the Diversity Garden.

Though most histories on the New Orleans saga of school desegregation give considerable attention to the New Orleans School Crisis of 1960, this paper looks at a lesser-examined section of that process by exploring the personal memories of several students during those first years of

⁸ A member of the school's administration suggested that because most of the black students ultimately graduated from somewhere other than Ben Franklin, the school lacked the alumni records to seek out the non-graduating black students. It is worth noting that the school has original yearbooks from the era in its possession, including the 1964 yearbook within which 13 of the 14 black students (including Sharon Carter) are identifiable. The thirteen black sophomores pictured in the 1963-64 yearbook were: Artemise Bluxom, Leon Bradley, Sharon Carter, Kenneth Ferdinand, Jamell Freels, Larry Hill, Doris Molden, Myrna Moline, Bernadine Moore, Carolyn Payton, Valerie Petit, Edgar Taplin, and Luke Wethers.

integration at Ben Franklin.⁹ While other histories include the memories of Ruby Bridges, Leona Tate, Gale Etienne, and Tessie Prevost, the four black six-year olds that entered first grade at two previously all-white Lower Ninth Ward elementary schools in 1960, those experiences are not representative of the experience of black students at Benjamin Franklin.¹⁰ This paper makes several claims about the experience of integration for black students at Benjamin Franklin that contrasts the experience of the four six-year old black girls who attended Frantz and McDonogh 19. Based on the analysis of recently collected oral histories, the author asserts that: black students made conscious social and academic sacrifices by attending Benjamin Franklin; black and white students at Benjamin Franklin were aware of, and often engaged in, the social and political battles that raged on in the city around them; black students formed alliances with their white peers and teachers; and these alliances had positive, lasting impacts on the lives of their members. This paper argues that the teenage experience of Benjamin Franklin's integration is one of historical importance, because these teenagers were members of a generation that successfully deployed confrontational, yet peaceful tactics that forced white Americans to come to terms with the pervasive evils of racism. Several students at Benjamin Franklin were active in the growing youth movement for Civil Rights, and purposefully took advantage of the opportunities that Benjamin Franklin's integration provided for them to pursue social change. While research for this project reveals that some faculty and students willingly expressed racist sentiments with verbal and physical attacks on black students, it also reveals that others at Benjamin Franklin challenged racist stereotypes, developed

⁹The author interviewed six students, three black and three white. One of those students was a grade ahead of the integrated class; the other five were sophomores in the fall of 1963. The author reached out to dozens more white students through Facebook and the assistance of Daniel Russell. That effort yielded only one emailed response from a former student, but that email ignored race altogether. The author also reached out to one other black alumna through email but received no response. The author will also cite an email correspondence with Dr. Charles Suhor, an English teacher at Ben Franklin in the 1960s.

¹⁰Bridges attended William Frantz Elementary and Tate, Etienne, and Prevost attended McDonogh 19. The New Orleans School Crisis is further detailed later in the paper.

lifelong interracial friendships, contested racial barriers, embraced multiculturalism, and sought to impose their progressive ideals on the school, space, and city around them.

Authors including Liva Baker, Adam Fairclough, and Alan Wieder each cite numerous interviews in their own works on desegregation in New Orleans, none of those interviews are with black students beyond who experienced it firsthand after 1960. Furthermore, historians have barely made mention of Benjamin Franklin when discussing school integration beyond highlighting it for having been a few years ahead of other New Orleans high school. Personal memories of Benjamin Franklin students are entirely absent from previous histories, while only the memories of a select few black and white children are included in larger narratives on integration.¹¹

Though personal memories are often disregarded for being unreliable, oral historian Valerie Yow calls attention to research that supports the use of memory for historical analysis. Based on Yow's analysis of research by historians and anthropologists, "memory for the gist of an event – that is, the most important, core information about the event – persists although peripheral details may be forgotten."¹² Despite the inconsistency surrounding mundane details, "core information" can be preserved for decades in personal memory. Yow further summarizes that "events in which narrators participate themselves will be better recalled than secondhand information" and "events in which there were high levels of mental activity and emotional involvement will be remembered."¹³ Students interviewed for this research offer valuable recollections of their firsthand experience of integration. Their time at Ben Franklin could certainly be characterized as

¹¹ Donald E. DeVore and Joseph Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools: Public Education in New Orleans 1841-1991* (New Orleans: University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1991), 264; Adam Fairclough tells us that "under pressure from the federal courts [the Orleans Parish School Board] eventually had to abandon the pupil placement law... and integrate the Benjamin Franklin High School for gifted children." Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana 1915-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 263.

¹² Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 57.

¹³ *Ibid.*

one of high “mental activity and emotional involvement,” which only makes these personal memories more reliable. Despite the decades between event and interview, these memories offer access to important details of extraordinary life events and the accurate recall of the feelings and meanings associated with those events.

Ben Franklin’s Path to Integration

On September 5, 1963, 14 black students joined 199 of their white peers for their first day of tenth grade at the previously all-white Benjamin Franklin High School in New Orleans, Louisiana. It was the first instance of a public junior or senior high school in New Orleans to admit black students since Reconstruction. No other public school in the city was yet integrated beyond fourth grade.¹⁴ Ben Franklin was a new and exclusive white public high school in New Orleans, having just opened in 1957. It was the first New Orleans public school to require strict academic admissions standards. All students had to have an IQ of at least 120, and maintain an overall average of 85% in their courses to remain eligible for attendance.¹⁵ The Orleans Parish School Board created the school to offer an educational curriculum unmatched by any other public school in the city. Ben Franklin offered a legitimate option for white parents searching for college-preparatory level education who would rather send their children to a public school than a costly or Catholic institution. But for black students in New Orleans, there was no public school equivalent to Ben Franklin.

Ben Franklin students were maturing adolescents, which made their experiences starkly different from the experiences of integration that younger children had. As no children past fourth grade had yet experienced public school integration in New Orleans, this age difference contributed

¹⁴ *Facts and Finances*, 1963-1964. *Facts and Finances* is a yearly publication by the Orleans Parish School Board which compiled school attendance statistics across the city. These statistics are broken down by school, grade, and race. *Facts and Finances* can be found in the Louisiana Collection at UNO’s Earl K. Long Library.

¹⁵ “Orleans Board Studies High IQ Applicants,” *State-Times*, July 30, 1963; Sheridan, interview.

to an experientially different phase of integration at Franklin. Adolescence, encompassing the teenage years, is a prime stage for physical, emotional, social, and mental development. The transition from the end of childhood (puberty) to the beginning of adulthood, adolescence “is a period marked by rapid physiological change, increased independence, a change in family relationships that is more interdependent, prioritizing peer affiliations, initiation of intimate partner relationships, identity formation, increased awareness of morals and values, and cognitive and emotional maturation.”¹⁶ Coming of age in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement meant that the identities of Ben Franklin students were being formed within a quickly shifting environment of social and cultural ideals. The newly integrated space of Ben Franklin, thus, became a primary arena for highly gifted adolescents to experiment with and carry out these teenage tasks of development. The way students interacted with one another, and with and within this space was crucial in both the formation of their own identities and their effect on the space itself. While the policies developed by the school board and approved by judges tended to preserve the whiteness of Ben Franklin, students in the first years of integration also sought to define the space on their own terms as they struggled to discover their own identities.

For Kenneth Ferdinand, a 15-year-old black student from the Lower Ninth Ward, his sophomore year was anything but typical. “There was a social and a political good to be accomplished. It was almost like being a soldier, saying ‘I’ve got a mission. This is what I have to do. I’ve been recruited. Here I go.’ Whereas most young people think about going to school for their social gratification, for us it was a social and political fight that had to be engaged.”¹⁷ Sharon Carter Sheridan described herself with less militancy. She thought of herself as a “guinea pig,” part of the

¹⁶ Jessica M. Sales and Charles E. Irwin, Jr., “A Biopsychosocial Perspective of Adolescent Health and Disease,” in *Handbook of Adolescent Health Psychology*, ed. W.T. O’Donohue (New York: Springer-Verlag, 2013), 13.

¹⁷ Kenneth Ferdinand, phone interview with author, New Orleans, February 20, 2015.

giant social “experiment that was integration.” While she admits that she didn’t fully appreciate the significance of “the cause” at the time, she recognized that she had been assigned a role within it.¹⁸ Ruby Bridges, knew nothing about the significance of her transfer to Frantz. In a 2001

interview for *Instructor*, Bridges remembers:

I knew that I was going to a new school--and, basically, that was it. I really wasn't aware of what was going on. It's very hard to explain to a child what racism is all about. And it was extremely hard, I'm sure, for my parents to explain to me what I was about to venture into. And therefore, they didn't. The only thing I remember my mother saying is that I was going to a new school and she would be with me.¹⁹

For the 14 black students transferring to Ben Franklin, there was no shielding them from the reality of their impending challenge, like there was for Bridges. Ferdinand, Sheridan, and Taplin had all seen the events of 1960 unfold on TV. Ferdinand and his family lived in the Lower Ninth, so he was even closer to the mayhem. Whether best described as soldiers, guinea pigs, or agents of social change, these students played a major role in a process that completely demolished the segregated schooling of black and white children.

Historian Adam Fairclough has described the experiences of Louisiana’s black children that became token integrators of previously all-white public schools as “miserable,” asserting that during ten years of disputes and delays surrounding integration policies, “by and large, black transferees were treated as lepers, with white children shunning them and the teachers trying to keep the two groups as separate as possible.”²⁰ Though Bridges, Prevost, Etienne, and Tate were by and large separated from white children during their years at Frantz and McDonogh 19, this isolation was not so severe at Ben Franklin.

¹⁸ Sheridan, interview.

¹⁹ Lucille Renwick, “The Courage to Learn,” *Instructor* 111, no. 1 (Aug 2001): 35-38.

²⁰ Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 438; Most instances of public school integration prior to 1970 in Louisiana were token in nature. By this, the author refers to the trend in which a small number of black students were admitted to previously all-white institutions to create a perception of racial inclusion, though in reality, most blacks were still deprived of such opportunity. By this description, Ben Franklin remained token well into the 1970s.

Things were not so stark at Ben Franklin, but black isolation was still very real. While the actions of some students certainly contributed to black isolation and misery, other students, black and white, and several of the faculty members at Ben Franklin actively challenged the racist status quo. Black experience at Benjamin Franklin should not be oversimplified as unamicable, as that discredits the real efforts made by black students to dispel stereotypes of black intellectual inferiority *and* the efforts of some white faculty and students to welcome and support their new schoolmates. Of course, it would be equally untrue to assert that the atmosphere at Ben Franklin was always placid or pleasant, as the terrorization of one black student once quite literally climaxed in an explosion.

The story of Benjamin Franklin's integration offers a perfect lens through which to re-examine public school integration in Louisiana, specifically because of its peculiarities. It boasted a population of *only* intellectually advanced students *and* many pro-integrationist faculty members. It drew students from across the city, without regard to residential zones like the rest of the city's public schools, so though it was in the affluent, uptown neighborhood of Carrollton, it was not a *neighborhood* school.²¹ This contributed to a diverse student body. The white and black students had vastly differing backgrounds, both between and within racial bounds. Mostly, white students came from middle class families. Some white students were of older New Orleans lineage. Others came from families that had recently relocated to New Orleans: some from the American West, some from the Northeast. Some were Jewish. Some were protestant. There was at least one Quaker and likely many Catholics students.²²

²¹ Because the school was integrated before the busing policies of the 1970s, students had to rely on their parents or public transit to get to campus, while some of the upper classmen could drive to school.

²² Leo Laventhal, interview with author, New Orleans, February 6, 2015; Russell, interview; Sheridan, interview.

The vastly differing backgrounds within the black student population are also significant. Most of the black students were significantly poorer than their white peers. About half of those first fourteen black students came from the “A” classes of the city’s best black Catholic schools, Xavier Prep and St. Augustine. When black parents applied to transfer their children from these two schools, they were removing their children from institutions that had a track record of sending many of their graduates to prestigious colleges across the country. On the other hand, several of the students to first integrate Ben Franklin were also coming from black public schools like McDonogh 35 and Booker T. Washington. A 1938 study of local public schools pointed to countless inadequacies and inequalities in black schools, problems that went largely unresolved in the years leading up to desegregation.²³ But the fact that black students from these neglected schools could make it through Benjamin Franklin’s admissions process shows that black public schools had their own cohort of gifted students, despite the lack of OPSB support. How did these students of different belief and background interact with one another?

Also unusual is that at Benjamin Franklin between 1963 and 1975, black students averaged only three percent of the school’s population, peaking at five percent in 1973.²⁴ That long-preserved whiteness of Ben Franklin should not go unquestioned, as it was maintained in the midst of a starkly contrasting trend of declining white enrollment across the city’s public schools. The year that Ben Franklin integrated, white students made up only 38.2 percent of the total public school population and that figure shrunk to 20 percent by 1975[See enrollment charts in Appendix I]. How did students, parents, and faculty contribute to, challenge, or accept that whiteness through their interactions in the newly integrated space and the still contested spaces in the city which surrounded them?

²³ DeVore and Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*, 214-215.

²⁴ *Facts and Finances* ceased publishing race-based enrollment data for each school after 1975.

It will help to briefly trace the events that led to Ben Franklin's 1963 integration. Fairclough and Baker have done well to analyze the slow and complex process of desegregation in New Orleans and Louisiana public schools. Though the 1960 New Orleans School Crisis, in which Bridges was front and center, can be considered the first instance of post-*Brown* public school integration in the state, efforts to integrate New Orleans public schools can be traced back a century earlier. During the federal occupation of New Orleans during and after the Civil War, school desegregation was a heated issue. Donald E. DeVore and Joseph Logsdon, the authors of *Crescent City Schools*, highlight the first integration of New Orleans schools under radical Republican leaders. That experiment of integration began in 1870, but lasted only seven years, until the Compromise of 1877 removed federal power from Louisiana government. Estimates from that book suggest that one-third of New Orleans public schools were integrated, one-third all black, and one-third all white.²⁵ Once Louisiana returned to segregationist policies post-Reconstruction, black students were barred from white schools in the state until 1960.

Fairclough and Baker each offer thorough accounts of the local efforts to integrate Louisiana public schools that gained momentum after World War II. Before the 1954 *Brown* ruling, the local NAACP had filed its own suit to desegregate. In 1951, A.P. Tureaud petitioned OPSB, demanding that they end segregated public schooling. OPSB's denial of that request prompted the 1952 filing of *Bush v. Orleans Parish School Board*.²⁶ It would take eight years of litigation and the unanimous 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown* before any New Orleans Schools would integrate. Baker's book considers dozens of interviews by herself and others that help to chronicle the build up to

²⁵ DeVore and Logsdon, *Crescent City Schools*, 68-81.

²⁶ Liva Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans: The Hundred-Year Struggle to Integrate the Schools* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 175-188.

1960. Subjects interviewed by Baker include federal judges, attorneys, parents, teachers, activists, US Marshalls, and politicians, though the only black student interviewed is Ruby Bridges.²⁷

The story of Ruby Bridges, Gale Etienne, Leona Tate, and Tessie Prevost is crucial to the story of Ben Franklin, as it set a precedent. On November 14, 1960 four six-year-old black children entered two previously all-white elementary schools in New Orleans' working-class Ninth Ward neighborhood, marking the beginning of OPSB's tenuous submission to *Brown v. Board of Education*. Ruby Bridges had been admitted to Frantz, while Tessie Prevost, Leona Tate, and Gail Etienne would attend McDonogh 19. As word spread that morning, crowds began gathering outside of each school and frantic white parents rushed to pick up their children, fearful of both their proximity to black peers and any violence that might erupt. Though there was no violent reaction to integration that day, there would be soon enough.²⁸

On the second day of school, crowds of picketers gathered outside of each school to jeer the young black girls. Dubbed "cheerleaders" by the scores of local and national press that also flocked to the schools, they continued to picket the schools for months. Leander Perez, the political boss and District Attorney of neighboring Plaquemines and St. Bernard parishes, founding member of the New Orleans Citizen's Council, and hate-mongering demagogue all in one, gave a rousing speech to thousands at a Citizens Council meeting on that first evening of integration.²⁹ His speech was laced with race-baiting vitriol, most famously his call to white parents: "Don't wait for your daughters to be raped by these Congolese. Don't wait until the burr-heads are forced into your

²⁷ *Ibid*, 499-500.

²⁸ Juliette Landphair, "Sewerage, Sidewalks, and Schools: The New Orleans Ninth Ward and Public School Desegregation," *Louisiana History* 40, no. 1 (Winter, 1999): 58-59, accessed February 5, 2015, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4233555>; Wieder, Alan. *Race and Education: Narrative Essays, Oral Histories, and Documentary Photography*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1997, 71-82.

²⁹ White Citizens Councils were ultrasegregationist and white-supremacist organizations that cropped up across the deep South, largely in response to *Brown v. Board*. They were responsible for aggressive and intimidating tactics that intentionally oppressed, threatened, and disenfranchised black southerners. For more on the efforts of the Citizens Council in Louisiana, see: Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 191-233.

school. Do something about it now!”³⁰ The audience took his words to heart, as the speech inspired a march by about a thousand whites, mostly teenagers. It took city police in riot gear and firemen with their hoses to disperse the crowd, just a block before it reached its planned destination, the downtown school board office near Carondelet Street and Poydras Avenue. Once disrupted, the march devolved into a disorganized riot of racial violence across the downtown area. Along with inciting riots with his speech, Perez also encouraged parents to boycott segregation by enrolling their children in the still segregated St. Bernard Parish schools instead. White parents jumped at the opportunity, and boycotted both schools en masse. With racial violence and intimidation peaking, even the few white parents who preferred to keep their children at Frantz or McDonogh 19 were fearful of retaliation. For the remainder of the school year, only a handful of white students would attend Frantz with Ruby Bridges, while the faculty and three black girls at McDonogh 19 witnessed a complete boycott by whites.³¹

For the coming months, four little black girls and two Ninth Ward elementary schools made headline news nationwide. Ultra-segregationist citizens and politicians did all they could to derail the token integration, while TV, newspaper, and print magazines reported endlessly on the madness. The event soon came to be known as the New Orleans School Crisis. The following year, the Louisiana State Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights released a damning 83-page report on the crisis, implicating the city’s social and financially elite, as well as

³⁰ Wieder, *Race and Education*, 71-82; *Southern School News*, December 1960, accessed March 10, 2015, http://dlg.galileo.usg.edu/gua_ssn/pdfs/ssnvol7no6.pdf; Landphair, *Sewerage, Sidewalks, and Schools*, 58-59

³¹ Wieder, *Race and Education*, 71-82.

local and state bureaucratic powers, for their failure to prepare, accept, or earnestly carry out public school integration.³²

In the case of 1960, popular culture has helped to engrain the violent and vitriolic reactions to those school integrations into the local and national memory of a complex, locally-resisted but federally-enforced, deliberately slow desegregation of public schools in the American South. Norman Rockwell eternalized the innocence of six-year-old Ruby Bridges and the contrasting threat of her racist surroundings in his 1964 painting, *The Problem We All Live With* [see next page]. In 1998, *ABC Family* premiered a dramatized version of 1960 in the eponymous TV movie *Ruby Bridges*. Alan Wieder and Mary Lee Muller have both contributed several articles to the topic. Adam Fairclough devotes an entire chapter from *Race & Democracy* to the crisis. By offering extensive historical analysis, these works have helped to supplement popular culture's memory and depiction of New Orleans' first year of public school integration.

Fairclough does well to explain the process by which Louisiana progressed towards substantial public school integration between 1960 and 1970, also highlighting that integration was least successful in big cities: Baton Rouge, New Orleans, and Shreveport. Each of those cities ultimately experienced a *de facto* re-segregation due to public school enrollment trends and white flight. But within his explanation, Fairclough offers only a few fragments of student experience. For instance, Fairclough highlights the commonality of black suspensions in integrated schools that were due to heightened tensions between white teachers and black students.³³ Fairclough concludes that "to analyze the path of school integration between 1964 and 1969 is to arrive at an inescapable conclusion: unrelenting white opposition meant that schools were integrated under the

³² US Committee on Civil Rights, Louisiana Advisory Committee, *The New Orleans School Crisis*, 1961. The report laid out an extensive chronology of events, as well as analysis on: the impact on the community, public opinion, the role of leadership, and psychological and legal aspects.

³³ Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 429-462.

worst possible circumstances.”³⁴ While this was probably true in most cases, it is a blanketed statement that overlooks outlying examples and circumstances like those at Ben Franklin. It perpetuates the perception that school integration looked a specific way.



The Problem We All Live With, Norman Rockwell, 1964. Rockwell depicts a six-year old Ruby Bridges protected by four U.S. Marshalls. Racist graffiti and smashed fruit deface the wall behind her. While the Marshalls could protect her from physical harm, they could not shield her from the racism that surrounded her.

In the midst of the 1960 crisis, *Time* released a brief profile on New Orleans’ School Superintendent James Redmond that twice mentions Benjamin Franklin High School, a school that courts had yet to consider integrating. The journalist declares that “against hot opposition, [Redmond] started the Benjamin Franklin High School for bright youngsters, which graduated its first class last year (‘It was in orbit before Sputnik’). His proudest memory of the first day of integration three weeks ago, when truancy was rife, is that ‘my Franklin kids stuck with it.’”³⁵

³⁴ Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 435.

³⁵ “Hot Seat in New Orleans,” *Time*, December 12, 1960, 42.

Perhaps seeking to save face, as New Orleans was being battered over the crisis by most of the press outside of the Deep South, Superintendent Redmond highlighted Ben Franklin's exceptionalism as a silver lining. Thousands of children missed school during the first days of integration, including the hundreds of teenagers that marched and rioted three days in. But according to Redmond, Ben Franklin's students carried on. The article reveals no clarifying detail, and there is no mention of how students at Ben Franklin reacted, beyond that things must have been comparatively tame. Three years later, Ben Franklin, too, would integrate. Would Ben Franklin's white students be so willing to stick with it when it was their own school in play?

The 1960s were marked by constant litigation between the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) over the process of integration. Each year seemed to repeat the same interplay between the District Court Judge (Skelly Wright, then Frank Ellis) and attorneys representing each side of aisle: the judge would recommend hefty plans to integrate, the school board attorneys would cry foul, and counter with a plan of their own that did much less, the judge would allow the school board to carry out their plan, the NAACP would object that the snail-paced speed of integration was too slow, while the judge would counter that if the school board's plan proved insufficient in practice, the court could then act to ameliorate things. The result was constant uncertainty and years of tokenism. The 1963 ruling that ordered Ben Franklin's integration was just one in a decade of foot-dragging. Judge Skelly Wright oversaw the initial enforcement of *Brown v. Board* in New Orleans' as judge of the US District Court in the Eastern District of Louisiana. Though he consistently pushed for school integration from the bench, only a handful of schools had integrated by 1962, at which time he was

appointed to US Court of Appeals in DC.³⁶ His replacement was Judge Frank B. Ellis. In a May 1963 ruling, Ben Franklin was ordered to integrate. Judge Ellis' ruling read that:

The Benjamin Franklin School presents quite another question. This is a high school operated by the Orleans Parish School Board for especially gifted children, preparing them for college. For admission to the school a child must have a minimum I.Q. of 120 and for the tenth grade, score at or above the fiftieth percentile in the achievement test administered, as well as have certain academic credits from the ninth grade. The school draws its enrollment from the city as a whole without regard to attendance zones. It is operated solely for white children. The Fifth Circuit has specifically suggested that desegregation of the Franklin school represents an opportunity for transitional desegregation. *Bush v. Orleans Parish School Board*, 5 Cir. Supra at 500. So long as this Court does not require Franklin school to lower its high academic standards and since administrative problems like those involved in transition from a dual to a single-zone are not involved, there is no good reason why the Franklin school should not be open to Negroes who can meet and maintain its high standards. Consequently, this Court will order that the board accept applications on a non-racial basis for the Benjamin Franklin High School for the school year 1963-1964.³⁷

Ellis reasoned that because the school's integration should be unabated by the administrative challenges of merging dual attendance zones, since it drew gifted children from across the city. The administrative burden argument was one that OPSB regularly made in an effort to limit the scope of integration, but Ellis didn't think it applied here, citing a Fifth Circuit opinion from August, 1962 in which Circuit Judge John Wisdom (a New Orleans native) singled out Ben Franklin:

There are other possibilities for a good faith use of the Act during the transition to full desegregation. The Orleans Parish School Board operates one of the finest schools in the country for superior students, Benjamin Franklin High School. To be admitted, students must meet exceptionally high intellectual standards. School adjustments between Negro and white students meeting on the same intellectual plane should not be difficult. And, eight years after *Brown v. Board of Education* is not too soon for a qualified Negro to be admitted to Benjamin Franklin High School. We suggest that the Board consider opening all four high-school grades at this school to Negroes who can meet the school's exacting requirements. Here, too, although the dual or biracial system now controls the high schools, would be a proper place for the good faith, non-discriminatory use of the Pupil Placement Act.³⁸

³⁶ Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 234-238, 242-247, 259.

³⁷ "Text of Ruling for Mixing of 2 Grades," *The Times-Picayune*, May 18, 1963.

³⁸ *Bush v. Orleans School Board*, 308.F.2d 491 (1962). Permanent electronic link at: <https://www.laed.uscourts.gov/200th/notablecases/34%20Bush%20-%205th%20Cir.pdf>

Indeed, the school's exceptionalism sealed the fate of its early integration. While Ben Franklin integrated in 1963, Kennedy High School was the next previously all-white public high school to admit black students (one in 1966). The following school year, the city's remaining seven all-white senior high schools were integrated. Notably, Ben Franklin immediately became the least integrated of those nine high schools in 1967, a status which it would maintain through at least 1975, which was the last year that *Facts and Finances* published race-based statistics broken down by school [see enrollment data charts in Appendix I].³⁹

Judge Wisdom's believed that at Ben Franklin, black and white students "on the same intellectual plane" could intermingle without much difficulty, but would the white parents and faculty be as willing to accept change? Compared to the intolerance that was displayed three years prior in New Orleans' Ninth Ward, the community of parents and teachers at Ben Franklin seem to have been more accepting of integration. It is worth noting that not all school communities were so staunchly opposed to school integration. Ironically, parents from at least two Uptown elementary school PTAs had requested in 1960 that they be among the first schools to integrate. Of course, OPSB ignored such requests.⁴⁰ In fact, Fairclough and Landphair have argued that white residents of New Orleans' Ninth Ward were probably the least receptive of the idea as a whole. Baker explains that the "politically powerless, materially disadvantaged, and psychologically impoverished Ninth Ward" white residents felt a resentment and anger rooted in their ideas about class and race. One cheerleader's sign read "IF YOUR [sic] POOR, MIX. IF YOUR [sic] RICH, FORGET IT. SOME

³⁹ To qualify this statement, a couple previously all-white high schools would become mostly or entirely black within a few years of integration, while previously all-black high schools largely remained so. Of previously all-white high schools, I describe Franklin as "least integrated" because it had the lowest percentage and net total of black students from 1967-1975.

⁴⁰ Landphair, *Sewerage, Sidewalks, and Schools*, 57-58.

LAW!”⁴¹ While Ben Franklin did not draw strictly from the moderately-progressive Carrollton neighborhood wherein it was located, it was nonetheless considered to be comparably progressive its surroundings, which were heavily populated by the wealthy and white Tulane and Loyola communities. But considering the 1960 survey in which 80 percent of white parent respondents preferred school closure to integration, many of these parents must not have been pleased about their children’s proximity to black children.⁴²

Recruiting Black Students

Though the parents at Ben Franklin did not offer any invitation to integrate like the elementary school PTAs three years earlier, at least one mother, Rosalyn Laventhal, was actively recruiting black parents to apply for their children’s transfer to Ben Franklin. Leo Laventhal was a class ahead of integration at Ben Franklin, when his mother began to reach out to black parents. As Leo recalls, Rosalyn and a small group of activist women decided to seek out black students from St. Augustine and other schools to participate in integrating Benjamin Franklin. Though incredibly proud, Leo reiterated that “it was a secret. I didn’t want to tell people [at school] at the time.”⁴³ He was still in his first year at the school and did not want to risk social ostracization. Though he knew that several of his friends were pro-integration, he preferred to keep his mother’s efforts to himself. The timing of Rosalyn’s activity around coincides with the 1962 and 1963 court rulings that contributed to and then mandated the school’s integration. Considering his mother’s membership to the NAACP and her employment under some of the leading Civil Rights attorneys in New Orleans, she was likely fully aware of that May order. She may have even been aware of the possibility

⁴¹ Baker, *Second Battle of New Orleans*, 398.

⁴² Landphair, *Sewerage, Sidewalks, and Schools*, 54. One 1960 school board survey sent out to local parents found that of nearly 15000 white respondents, 80% of them preferred school closure to desegregation.

⁴³ Laventhal, interview.

sooner, as Leo thinks she was recruiting before May.⁴⁴ Notably, Laventhal remembered that these efforts were restricted to Franklin's first year. While 14 black students started at Ben Franklin in 1963, only fifteen black students would do so in the next three years combined, showing that the limited timeframe of these recruiting efforts contributed to a larger number of black students that first year than subsequent years.⁴⁵ Without those efforts, new black cohorts were substantially smaller in the eleven years following.⁴⁶

Rosalyn was not the only recruiter of black students. Sharon Carter (Sheridan) remembers being recruited by NAACP worker Llewelyn Soniat:⁴⁷

And, Llewelyn Soniat, who was a member of the NAACP New Orleans chapter at the time, came to my home. I remember him sitting in our kitchen and talking to my parents about integrating Ben Franklin High School. Well, I'm 14, I don't know much of what all of that means. I knew what integration meant; I knew that everything had been segregated; I knew we sat on the back of the bus when we went to school, and I knew we couldn't sit at the counters, or dry my clothes. I went through all of that, but, my situation was that I was very insulated. Close knit family... So, my mother was quite the maverick, and, of course, she thought all of her children were just the smartest children in the whole wide world. So, she decided well, yes, I'd be a guinea pig. And, my daddy pretty much went along because when it came to education issues, well, whatever my mother said went. So, I was going to go to Ben Franklin.⁴⁸

There appears to have been a substantial recruiting effort by the NAACP and possibly other pro-integration activists in the months approaching September 1963. Those efforts had the most success getting students to transfer from St. Augustine and Xavier Prep's "A" classes, but they also convinced the parents of some public school children to do so. It is not clear if each black student

⁴⁴ Rosalyn Laventhal worked for the law office of Ben Smith and Bruce Waltzer. These law offices were raided in 1964 for their pro-integrationist work with SCEF, during Louisiana's McCarthyesque battle against "subversive" elements.

⁴⁵ *Facts and Finances*, 1963-1966. Six black students started at Ben Franklin in both '64 and '65, and just three began in '66.

⁴⁶ *Facts and Finances*, 1963-1975.

⁴⁷ Soniat passed away in December, 2014. An obituary that celebrates his life as a Civil Rights activist can be found at <http://theadvocate.com/news/neworleans/neworleansnews/11019985-123/llewelyn-soniat-new-orleans-civil>.

⁴⁸ Sharon Carter Sheridan, interview.

at Ben Franklin was actively recruited or not, though it is likely the case that most, if not all, were assisted by activist collectives of some sort. Sheridan assumes they were all “chosen” by the NAACP.⁴⁹ The system at hand left the burden entirely on parents to have their children tested (both an IQ and an academic assessment test), apply for a transfer, and confront the school board with such a request. Such tasks would have been uncharted territory for black parents at the time, and the NAACP has a documented history of helping black parents with the transfer process in previous years.

For Edgar Taplin, Jr., he remembers walking down the halls of St. Augustine one day near the end of his freshman year with his mother and the school principal, Reverend Robert Grant, when they told him he was going to take the IQ test for entrance into Ben Franklin. When asked recently if his mother was supportive of the idea that he would be one of the first black students to integrate, Taplin replied: “You might call it supportive. I remembered it as Father Grant was fairly persuasive as well: ‘Taplin, you’re doing this.’”⁵⁰ This was particularly significant because the administrative head of St. Augustine was conscious and willful in encouraging, if not demanding, that some of his best students should go to Ben Franklin.

Edgar Taplin was born and raised in New Orleans. He was born in the Seventh Ward, and then moved to Congress Avenue in the Pontchartrain Park subdivision in New Orleans’ Gentilly neighborhood, just west of the Industrial Canal. He attended St. Raymond Elementary, a private all-black Catholic school on Paris Avenue, through eighth grade, and then attended St. Augustine for ninth grade before applying and getting in to Ben Franklin in 1963. At St. Augustine, Taplin was in the “A” class with Kenneth Ferdinand. Speaking with them 50 years later, they are still conscious of the sacrifices they made by transferring to Ben Franklin. Ferdinand and Taplin had both wanted to

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Edgar Taplin, Jr., phone interview by author, November 10, 2014.

attend St. Augustine since they were young boys. Taplin had wanted to study and play basketball for a school that competed for championships. Ferdinand had always wanted to play for the Marching 100, a dream that he realized as an eighth grader at St. Augustine. As he recently recalls:

I was there under protest. Because I thought that [St. Augustine High School] was a much better school than was Franklin. And I know it had a ten-times-better music presentation, and sports, and academics. I was in the “A” class. All of us were recruited from the “A” class. It was a big sacrifice to leave St. Aug. Because you had a well-rounded education: music, sports, and academics. And our class was very, very strong. So the agreement that I had with my mother was that I would go to Franklin for a year, and I could return to St. Aug. And it wasn’t like I didn’t like the kids there or anything. In fact, it was a very positive experience in some ways, socially. But I felt that the education I was getting at St. Aug was equivalent.⁵¹

Black students were losing opportunities when it came to playing sports, in the band, and other extracurricular activity. Black students coming from Catholic school “A” classes were leaving established, school communities in which they stood out as some of the brightest scholars. These were schools that had a track record of sending graduates on to esteemed universities. In attending a white school, even one as prestigious as Ben Franklin, they were not necessarily gaining much, academically. They certainly were losing in terms of social and extracurricular involvement. But as these students were coming to understand the complex relationship of moral, social, ethical, and personal value systems, they tended to appreciate the gains of their action beyond personal gratification. Taplin was happy at St. Augustine, but he understood at the time that: “This was an opportunity that, even I, at that age – with a little help from my mother – recognized it was something that we have to take advantage of. We couldn’t exactly open the door and have no one willing to walk through. And so, I was one of the lucky people that was able to walk through that

⁵¹ Kenneth Ferdinand, interview by author, New Orleans, January 7, 2015. St. Augustine, or “St. Aug”, is a prestigious black Catholic school in New Orleans. It was founded by Josephites in 1951 to provide college-preparatory education to black Catholics in the city. It boasts the celebrated “Marching 100” school band. Ken was a section leader of the “Marching 100” in eighth and ninth grade, playing baritone horn. He would return to St. Augustine for 11th and 12th grade, at which point he immediately rejoined the marching band.

door.”⁵² Recruiters had to successfully convince black parents that the sacrifices they and their children were making were worth the “cause,” and the parents, in turn, had to convince their children to go along with their wishes.

Ferdinand offers a slightly different perspective. He had already participated in Civil Rights Movement activism for at least two years with his older brother, Kalamu ya Salaam, born Val Ferdinand, III.⁵³ The brothers both contributed to the very active local branch of the NAACP Youth Council, led by Raphael Cassimere.⁵⁴ The Ferdinand brothers worked to register older black voters in New Orleans when Kenneth was in eighth and ninth grade, barely a teenager, and his brother, just a year above him. But the Civil Rights Movement was at the forefront of their consciousness already. “We at the NAACP Youth Council had to learn the preamble – recite it – so that we could teach adults, grown people, many of whom weren’t literate how to read it so they could register to vote.”

The Ferdinand brothers and other NAACP Youth Council members had also started to picket downtown department stores like Maison Blanche, Sears-Roebuck, D.H. Holmes, and Mark Isaac beginning in July, 1963.⁵⁵ Ferdinand even committed himself to almost daily picketing during his year at Ben Franklin. He remembers catching a streetcar downtown after school, picking up his sign from a local church, “typically it was two plus hours... school would let out at three [o’clock] or so,

⁵² Taplin, interview.

⁵³ Kalamu ya Salaam is a celebrated and accomplished activist, author, scholar, critic, and teacher – to name a few of his talents – with a long history of work in New Orleans. His own story deserves far more than could fit in these footnotes. For interested readers, *Mississippi Quarterly* published “Kalamu ya Salaam: A Primary bibliography (in progress)” in Winter 97/98, Vol. 51, Issue 1. Essentially a list of published material across venue and medium credited to Kalamu ya Salaam. That list stretches beyond 40 pages, and it does not list his any of Salaam’s work beyond 1997.

⁵⁴ Dr. Raphael Cassimere, a college student at LSUNO (now University of New Orleans) at the time, was the first president of the New Orleans’ branch of the NAACP Youth Council. Dr. Cassimere earned his BA and MA degrees in History from LSUNO, and his Ph.D. in History from Lehigh University in 1971. He taught history at UNO for decades, where he is now Professor Emeriti

⁵⁵ National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, New Orleans Branch Collection (MSS 28), Louisiana and Special Collections Department, Earl K. Long Library, University of New Orleans.

and I would hurry down to the picket line and go and do my picketing until the stores closed, and then go home and do my homework. And go back to Ben Franklin the next day.”⁵⁶ He and his fellow picketers sustained their efforts while being spit at and facing beatings and verbal abuse.

While Kenneth Ferdinand had already established himself as a youth activist by age 15, he felt differently about his place integrating Ben Franklin. When his mother told him that he would be going there, he felt “betrayed.” He lamented that he should “go to school for [himself] not [his] community.”⁵⁷ In Civil Rights Movement activity, he was sacrificing time for social good, but he was not sacrificing all the value and gratification he received from attending St. Augustine. To integrate Ben Franklin, he felt like he was giving up so much. He ended up compromising with his mother. He would go to Ben Franklin for sophomore year, and return to St. Augustine for junior and senior year. Hastily, his mother agreed.⁵⁸

Though Sheridan and Taplin made no such compromise with their mothers, they and Ferdinand each ultimately graduated from their original high schools. In fact, only three black students returned to Ben Franklin for their junior year in 1964: Taplin, Myrna Moline, and Doris Molden. And of those three, only Myrna Moline returned for senior year, graduating from Ben Franklin in 1966. Only 91 of the original 199 white students graduated from Ben Franklin with Myrna Moline, which meant 46% white retention.⁵⁹ Alone, Myrna represented a seven percent retention rate for black graduation at Ben Franklin within the first integrated class. The uneven success rate of black students must have been caused by more than an intense curriculum. Having willingly transferred to Ben Franklin, what factors contributed to their departure?

Walking Through That Door

⁵⁶ Ferdinand, interview, Jan. 7, 2015.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Ben Franklin *Falcon* 1964-1966.

The Ben Franklin yearbook pictures of 1963 depicted the sophomore class as a happy and well-groomed bunch. But what was hidden behind the smiles of black and white students? How happy were black students to be there? Did they and their white peers come in such close contact on school grounds as they did in the yearbook? How many of those white students might have stopped smiling when they felt that black people were encroaching on their space?⁶⁰

Sharon Carter Sheridan vividly remembers her first day walking into the school:

I can remember my mother had made my outfit, because again we came from a relatively poor family, and my mother didn't – couldn't – buy clothes for me, so she made all of my clothes. So, there I was going up the walkway to Ben Franklin in my homemade outfit, and there were TV cameras watching us walk up and I can remember just walking that straight line up that walkway into this humongous building – because it was a former courthouse, it was on South Carrollton Avenue – and I just can remember the hallways being just so wide, I mean, it was like a boulevard. So, we get assigned to home room and we get assigned to our classes. And I can remember my homeroom teacher, I think her name was Miss Sentilles, it was as if I were not there. I mean she called the roll, but I just really felt like a fish out of water.⁶¹

While Benjamin Franklin was a newly integrated space, it was still a white space. Official OPSB publications continued to list the school as a “White Senior High School” until the 65-66 school year.⁶² Upon entering Ben Franklin for her first time, Mrs. Sheridan was immediately conscious of her foreignness. Not only was she black, but she was poor. She remembers the white students wearing store-bought designer clothes, while she was wearing a homemade outfit. Sheridan's mother made most of the clothes for Sharon and her seven siblings. The imposing main building of Franklin's campus was in stark contrast to the schools she'd previously attended. “To say I experienced culture shock would be an understatement. I had never been around so many white

⁶⁰ 13 black students are pictured in the 1964 yearbook: Artemise Bluxom, Leon Bradley, Sharon Carter, Kenneth Ferdinand, Jamell Freels, Larry Hill, Doris Molden, Myrna Moline, Bernadine Moore, Carolyn Payton, Valerie Petit, Edgar Taplin, Luke Wethers. The fourteenth black student had likely withdrawn from the school before yearbook pictures were taken. The author was unable to determine their fourteenth black classmate's name.

⁶¹ Sheridan, interview.

⁶² Directory of the Public Schools of New Orleans, La. Session 1964-1965. Facts and Finances New Orleans Public Schools, 1963-1964. Facts and Finances New Orleans Public Schools, 1964-1965. Facts and Finances New Orleans Public Schools, 1965-1966.

people in my life.”⁶³ Indeed, coming from black neighborhoods, black schools, and black churches, this was likely the most significant contact with a nearly all-white space for each black student at Franklin for several years to come.

Daniel Russell was as unfamiliar with black people as Sheridan was with whites. Before Ben Franklin, most of his contact with blacks was limited to a domestic worker employed by his family. Daniel’s parents were both northern transplants to New Orleans. His father was from Buffalo, New York, and his mother from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. They moved to New Orleans when Russell was only two. Their Lakefront home was cleaned by a black maid once a week. He recalls getting to know her well over the years. His parents were both progressive, particularly when it came to racial equality. But that did not translate to significant exposure to black people during his early childhood. New Orleans was still segregated, and even though his parents disapproved of such policies, he was still exposed to the reality that Jim Crowism had created in New Orleans. Other white students also came from families with domestic workers.

The black students were aware equally aware of the class and race divides that limited interaction between races in New Orleans. Ferdinand remembers how strange it was to be around wealthy white students:

That was a real experiment, being around kids that had means. We were all coming from the community, but this was our first time being around Uptowners. Coming from the lower ninth ward or the projects, that was a new experience. For me it was going to somebody’s house that had a maid working there. “Sally didn’t make my lunch right.” [these students had] somebody in [their] house that’s not [their] mommy or [their] daddy or [their] grandma doing things for [them]. I heard a kid saying “Somebody didn’t iron my clothes” [Ferdinand thought,] “Damn, how do you have people ironing your clothes?” That was a new little social world that we were exposed to, where there were services that were paid for in other kids’ lives that we had no experience being with people that had those kinds of services.⁶⁴

⁶³ Sharon Carter Sheridan, Ben Franklin essay submission.

⁶⁴ Ferdinand interview, February 20, 2015.

For white students like these, their experience with black people was largely limited to such subservient relationships. Thus, at Ben Franklin the result of integration was in the hands of students and faculty that had extremely limited experience with people outside of their own race.



1963 Sophomores part 1, *The Falcon*, 1964. Kenneth Ferdinand is pictured in the second column of the sixth row (starting from top left). Sharon Carter Sheridan is pictured at the top right corner.



1963 Sophomores part 2, *The Falcon*, 1964.

The first days at Ben Franklin were the tensest for the fourteen black students. Everything was fresh and new and unfamiliar. To make things worse, few of them shared more than one or two classes with another black student.⁶⁵ Within the first day, most of the black students were congregating around a bench on the river side of the school grounds during lunch and breaks. “We huddled for safety and social support.”⁶⁶ New to the environment, they sought each other out. Edgar Taplin, Kenneth Ferdinand, and Leon Bradley knew one another from St. Augustine. Sharon Carter, Luke Wethers, and Myrna Moline knew each other from Xavier Prep, which was a coeducational school at the time. These previous ties helped to give them some sense of support. Some white students also offered bits of support. Leo Laventhal approached Ken Ferdinand on the first day and shook his hand. He told the young black student that “he was happy to have him on campus.”⁶⁷ Leo Laventhal was also loosely affiliated with the NAACP Youth Council, though he

⁶⁵ There were a total of 430 white students at Ben Franklin that year, making black students a mere 3.15 percent of the student body, and 6.57 percent of the sophomore class. This would translate to an average of 1.97 black students in a classroom of 30 sophomores. Interviews corroborate this limited classroom contact between black students. *Facts and Finances*, 1963.

⁶⁶ Ferdinand, interview, January 7, 2015.

⁶⁷ Laventhal, interview.

doubts he was officially a member at the time. He and Ferdinand may have seen each other at a Youth Council meeting before, but Ben Franklin was the first place that the two spoke. For Ferdinand, early support from students like Leo Laventhal went a long way. Ferdinand was sure that Leo and some other Jewish students made some planned effort to welcome the black students. Laventhal recalls no explicit plans, though he figures that many of his friends were equally glad to have black classmates.⁶⁸

There was limited media coverage accompanying the first days of integration. WDSU's Alex Gifford was on location.⁶⁹ His TV crew arrived early to get a few shots of students filing in. He found most of the black students, all gathered together by their newly-claimed riverside-bench, and interviewed them on camera. *The Times-Picayune* included a blurb about Ben Franklin in its rundown of how many black students were attending which formerly-white schools. The local paper would offer reports each fall on the total number of black students that had integrated the schools in the area. One report mentioned that "Public school Supt. O. Perry Walker announced that 14 Negroes have been qualified for admission to the 10th grade at Benjamin Franklin Senior High school for superior students."⁷⁰ Newspapers frequently referred to the black students as *mixers*. In a slowly integrating society, this language served to assign a specific identity to integrating black students. Perpetuating the idea that they were somehow invading white spaces, media outlets had twice-branded these *mixers* with otherness, once for being born black, and again for being black integrators. As has been shown, black students challenged these externally assigned identities, preferring to identify their role as "guinea pigs" or "soldiers". Though they mostly were on board for the mission, it was not the black students' idea to go to Ben Franklin. From this perspective,

⁶⁸ Ferdinand, interview, January 7, 2015; Laventhal, interview.

⁶⁹ Ferdinand and Sheridan, campus visit.

⁷⁰ "Further Desegregation of Institutions Indicated," *The Times-Picayune*, September 4, 1963, 1.



1963 Sophomores part 3, *The Falcon*, 1964. Above are the pictures of the sophomore class of 63-64, the school's first integrated class. Edgar Taplin, Jr. is on the second to last row, third from the left.

they were not the mixers. The NAACP and the quarreling policy-makers were. They were just the ones deployed by decision-making adults. While the black students were ostracized with labels by the press and community, pro-integrationist whites were subjected to similar treatment. They were labelled *traitors*, *communists*, or *nigger-lovers*. Judge Skelly Wright was effectively shunned by the city for his role in enforcing *Brown*. Some locals even went as far as burning a cross on his

lawn.⁷¹ Activists that attempted to break the 1960 boycotts by carpooling white parents and students were constantly harassed by vandalism and late night phone calls. Anyone that challenged racial segregation was risking retaliation.



Benjamin Franklin Façade. *The Falcon*, 1963. Pictured above is an image of Benjamin Franklin High School, with its scroll-topped columns that were indicative of the Greek-revival movement that hit New Orleans mid-19th century.

White supremacists hated integration because it posed the possibility of interracial dating and sex. As Perez's statement from his November 15, 1960 speech has already illustrated, these ultra-segregationists promoted the falsehood that black men were sexually aggressive and predatory towards white women. "Don't wait for your daughters to be raped by these Congolese," Perez had warned parents. Student memories reveal that there was little, if any, romantic interest between races. For Kenneth Ferdinand, the psychology surrounding their circumstance left little interest for any romance at all. "For all of us, most of the social stuff was preceded by integration.

⁷¹ Liva Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans*, 301.

The challenge of integrating sucked up all the air.”⁷² Ferdinand explains how the psychology of integration made socialization and dating an afterthought:

The first days, they were like, you’re going into battle, you don’t know where the landmines are. You don’t know if the teacher is gonna hate you or take advantage of you, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And in a way you’re looking for it, so that kind of taints it also. When you have expectations, those expectations are filled with nightmares. Dreams are another thing. But expectations, you’re expecting abuse and all that. You just live every day is a nightmare. That’s the way it was going in. As it played out, it wasn’t all that bad. Now that I say that, thinking back, the white folks, the red necks, were thinking the same thing. “Oh man you’re going to be around all those black kids? No telling what they’ll do.” The expectations were for naught. You’re just making stuff up. Making stupid stuff up. It’s amazing how human beings do that kind of stuff.⁷³

Ferdinand now writes off the constant threat of racist-driven violence and harassment, suggesting that hindsight proved that it was hyperbolic imagination. But that “nightmare,” imagined or not, was still an experienced one, and noticeably, it remains engrained deeply within his personal memory. While fear of interracial sex existed within the minds of some white parents, the prospect for romantic relationships with black or white girls was barely an afterthought for black boys like Taplin and Ferdinand while at Ben Franklin. They were far too preoccupied with their own imagined nightmares. The only allusion to romance for black students was in an exchange between Sheridan and Ferdinand, as they toured the vacant remains of the school’s old Carrollton campus together in January, 2015. Ferdinand made a sly remark about Edgar Taplin being a good-looking guy, so, surely the black girls were attracted to him. “Oh yes, Edgar was tall, dark, and handsome,” Sheridan replied. But for her, dating was just as much of an afterthought. Her approach to Ben Franklin was one which she described as disciplined and focused; as if she had tunnel-vision. While at school, she was only concerned with school work. She was uncomfortable pursuing anything else.⁷⁴

⁷² Ferdinand, interview, February 20, 2015.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Sheridan, interview.

Though Ferdinand was more sociable than Sheridan, he corroborates the level of intellectual focus that Ben Franklin expected of its students: “I developed a lot of curiosity. I sharpened my intellectual muscle at Franklin. I probably would have also sharpened it at St. Aug, but it was different now: we were with white kids. And so we had to be sure that we put our best foot forward, at least intellectually. That challenge was a good one. I appreciated that experience.”⁷⁵ If students at Ben Franklin were to keep up academically, they would need to continue to grow intellectually. Ferdinand was conscious that by performing well in school with white students, he was challenging racial stereotypes about the intellectual capacity of black people.

While Sheridan was uncomfortable thinking about romance or other social and school activities, other black students were also reluctant to involve themselves in extracurriculars. None of the black students joined a club at Ben Franklin that year. Sheridan, Ferdinand, and Taplin all agreed that it was not an option for them. Though they likely were not openly banned from clubs, students and faculty put forth no invitation for them to join. None felt like they were welcome to join, and they certainly did not know who to approach if they had been interested. In 1965, Myrna Moline joined the French Club and Computer Club for her senior year. Later yearbooks suggest that black students joined an occasional club, but remained mostly detached from clubs into the 1970s.⁷⁶ The lack of black presence at Ben Franklin was even more pronounced in their lack of club involvement.

Ferdinand had a brief stint with the schools band in those first weeks. He had heard that the school band would play at football games and that he could just bring his horn out and join them. So, being the lover of music that he was, he came out one evening. To his dismay, the ‘band’

⁷⁵ Ferdinand, interview, January 7, 2015.

⁷⁶ Taplin, interview; Sheridan interview; Ferdinand interview, January 7, 2015; *The Falcon*, 1964-1971.

was a handful of kids goofing about with their instruments, “playing songs backwards,” and “making fun of the music.” Ferdinand was appalled and embarrassed. He wanted no part in a band that didn’t take itself seriously.⁷⁷ Ben Franklin’s band was the antithesis of the Marching 100 that Ferdinand had been a part of at St. Augustine. At St. Augustine, Ferdinand had been a section leader, playing the baritone horn above juniors and seniors during his eighth and ninth grade years. The school’s yearbook from that year pictures 20 kids in the band photo, but according to Ferdinand, however many band members did show up certainly were not taking it seriously. Apparently, since football was not an arena in which Ben Franklin excelled at the time, the games were opportunities for students to show off their cleverness and playfulness. Ferdinand remembers a popular cheer that exemplified this: “Retard them, retard them. Make them relinquish the spheroid.” Rather than a simple “Defense! Defense!”⁷⁸ Ben Franklin students preferred to cheer on their team with much less common vocabulary.



Computer Club Photograph. *The Falcon*, 1966. Myrna Moline, middle of second row, sits with her white peers for the Computer Club yearbook photo.

The Living Memory of Racism at Ben Franklin

⁷⁷ Ferdinand, interview, January 7, 2015.

⁷⁸ Ferdinand and Sheridan, campus visit.

While all six former students interviewed agreed that there were few instances of overt racism at Ben Franklin, there are several episodes that illustrate the way in which some whites attempted to reaffirm racial superiority within the newly integrated campus. Kenneth Ferdinand recently recalled his first time showering in the boy's locker room. He and Larry Hill were in the showers with the white kids from their gym class, when one white boy suddenly yelled "Monkeys! Monkeys in the showers!" All the white boys, still naked from the showers, ran from the locker room, leaving Ferdinand and Hill alone, exposed, and shocked. Ferdinand was able to brush off the instance as "silliness" but in the same breath, he admitted that "it was embarrassing, and psychologically dislodging. And people don't know how you get psychologically wounded, because all the little taunts are the big ones. The big taunts are the community, the police, all that. But when they run out of the shower, who are you going to tell?"⁷⁹ Granted, he figured the P.E. coach must have said something to the offending white boys. After all, the fully-exposed group had just run past his locker-room office. While Ferdinand and Hill were not witness to any scolding by their Physical Education teacher, Coach Robert O'Neil, he did approach them after the incident. Saying something akin to "Don't you worry about that foolishness," the coach was simultaneously being supportive of the two black students and minimizing the offensiveness of the ordeal. The actions of the white children were not mere foolishness.⁸⁰ They were likely symptomatic of the prejudiced community in which these children were raised. Maybe it was an impulsive racist reaction by one which caused a rippling effect as his other white friends rushed out behind him, none wanting to be the lone white kid still in the showers. Regardless, the moment that a seemingly civil situation suddenly reverted into something entirely different, their racism was as exposed as their bodies. Kenneth Ferdinand is sure that none of the white students faced actual punishment for their

⁷⁹ Ferdinand, interview, January 7, 2015.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

actions. Meanwhile, repeated acts of “low-grade racism” took their toll on Ferdinand: “death by a thousand cuts.”⁸¹

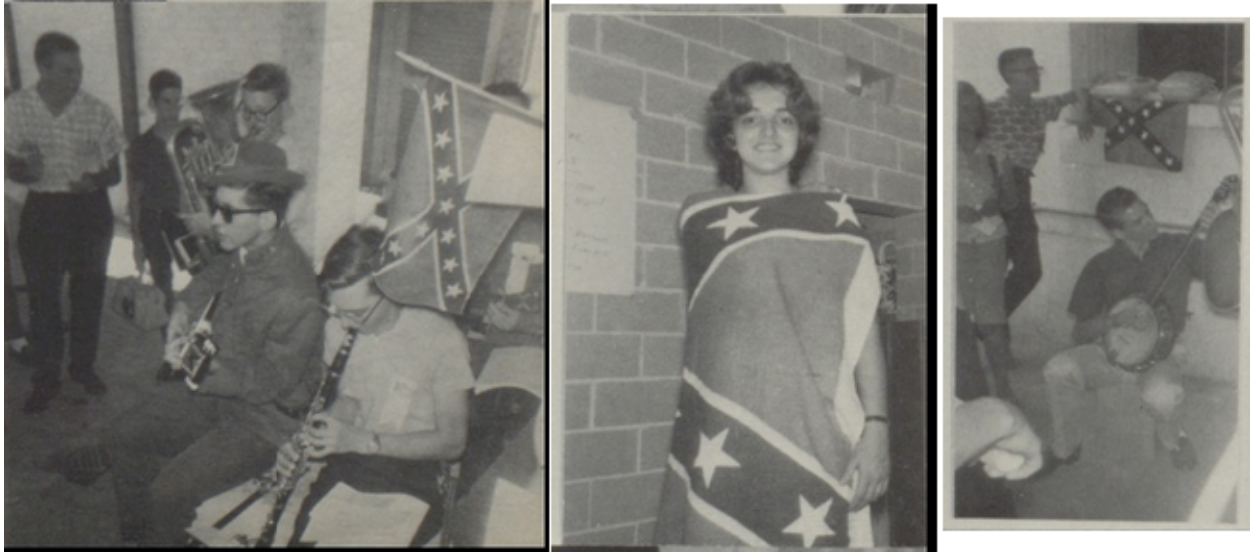
Daniel Russell, one of the white former-students from the first integrated class, recalls of 1960s New Orleans: “Racism was in the air. It was just assumed. There was a lot of pressure to be a racist in those days.”⁸² While a few white students had resorted to racist name-calling to express themselves, others chose to display their feelings symbolically, with the Confederate Flag. In the yearbook from that first year of integration, there is a collage of photographs on the last two pages. The rest of the yearbook is structured by theme: clubs, athletics, sophomores, juniors, seniors. But the collage was freeform, and the photos were likely a collection of favorites as selected by the yearbook committee. Only 22 images made the cut. Three of those pictures [see next page] show students in close proximity to the Confederate Flag. In one instance, a girl with a broad smile is wrapped in the flag. Not only were these kids displaying racist opinion through the flag, but the yearbook committee was endorsing that racism by including these pictures. These white adolescents were asserting their forming identities for all to see. With the clash of conflicting ideals around them, they had picked their side.⁸³ One former white student recalls of the time that “you had to pick sides”.⁸⁴ Though many, like Leo Laventhal, Daniel Russell, and Wade Rathke had sided with equality and tolerance, many other students were not as willing. And even for those white “allies,” as Kenneth Ferdinand describes some of his white peers and teachers, all three interviewed for this project have acknowledged that they could have done a lot more to offer support. While they offered varying degrees of support, others continued to express their own objections.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Russell, interview.

⁸³ Although some have contended that the Confederate flag was used to symbolize Southern pride in the time period and not meant to advocate racism, its racist heritage – tied to a system based upon the brutal exploitation and suppression of enslaved African Americans – is difficult to ignore, and it is hard to imagine students did not have some of this in mind when they purposely chose to have their picture taken with the flag.

⁸⁴ Wade Rathke, interview.



Students and Confederate Flag. *The Falcon*, 1964. Here we see several photographs that depict Ben Franklin students in close proximity to the Confederate flag.

Students willing to carry a confederate flag and the naked white kids that ran from the showers were easily identifiable, but black students were also terrorized through anonymous actions. The schools statue of Benjamin Franklin was subjected to repeated acts of vandalism. In the first instance, one of Franklin's hands was broken off. After which, the statue was moved indoors. But in September that year, someone managed to get inside and paint "K.K.K." across the statue. This racist-themed vandalism is right in line with what would be depicted in Rockwell's *The Problem We All Live With*, released the following year. But despite the anonymous nature of graffiti, there was no mystery surrounding its purpose or its targets. Whether a student, a Klansmen, or some other protesting racist, the vandal was reaching out to the black students, reminding them of their invasion of white space, their proximity to his own racism, and the unapologetically violent and bigoted KKK still lurking in the shadows.

★ ★ ★

Their hackles up at vandalism to the statue of Benjamin Franklin at the Benjamin Franklin High school, the Louisiana Landmarks Society has asked the city for added protection. When vandals defaced it some months ago on the school grounds, it was moved indoors. But that didn't stop the defacers, who entered the building and smeared it with paint and the lettering "K. K. K."

★ ★ ★

Vandalized statue. *The Times-Picayune*, September 29, 1963. Repeated vandalism of the school's namesake statue served as a reminder to students, white and black, of the lurking disapproval of white supremacists.

For the students of Franklin, white and black, it was nearly impossible to avoid the racist attitudes that still permeated in New Orleans. Sheridan remembers an instance in which she was spit on by a young white boy after getting on the streetcar at Carrollton, across the street from Ben Franklin. While Ferdinand described the psychological sting of repeated racist taunts, Sheridan, too, felt impacted by the taunts she faced. Revealing how she came to discover her own "broad shoulders," we see how instances of trauma and survival throughout her life, including her experience at Ben Franklin have contributed to her identity today.

My mother used to always tell me that I had narrow shoulders, again my mother sewed, so when she was fitting the clothes on me, she always had trouble with my shoulders because they were so narrow she told me. So she always had to adjust the pattern to fit my shoulders. And I thought of that, and then I thought well no I have broad shoulders because I've gone through cancer, and I've gone through chemo, and I've gone through divorce, and I've gone through two divorces, and I thought of going through Ben Franklin and getting spat on and then I'm like ok, my shoulders are broad. These shoulders have carried a lot of stuff.⁸⁵

For Sheridan, it took her decades of strife and struggle to come to peace with her time at Ben Franklin. With the support of a group of fellow breast cancer patients and survivors much later in

⁸⁵ Sheridan, interview

her life, Sheridan could face the pain of her past in a new light. She began to write simple poetry as therapy. Attributing her creative stint to “the drugs” from her treatment, Sheridan wrote a poem, “Narrow/Broad Shoulders,” that offers an account of her trials and tribulations, growth and healing, and eventual self-discovery [see Appendix II].⁸⁶ While she was at Ben Franklin, she often felt invisible, alone, and tormented. More than that, she felt bitter for having been subjected to the social experiment to begin with. Her older brother, Ken Carter, had spent a year at Loyola University in 1962, when it admitted four black students. He had a similarly difficult struggle during that year, and was openly upset with their mother when she decided to put Sharon through integration at Ben Franklin. Sheridan’s resentment mirrors that of her brother. She, too, disagreed with being put there. She tried her hardest to succeed, but ultimately, for Sheridan, the culmination of social, emotional, and psychological challenges would prove too much. Her final average was an 81.5 percent and she returned to Xavier Prep for her junior and senior years.⁸⁷

Other black students left in between semesters or earlier. At least one of the fourteen appears to have withdrawn before yearbook pictures. Sheridan and Ferdinand recall that several other students were gone after Christmas break, including Jamell Freels and Leon Bradley. Jamell Freels struggles at Franklin frequently brought her to tears.⁸⁸ Sheridan remembers that Freels “really had a rough time.”⁸⁹ Only three of the fourteen returned to Ben Franklin the following year, a statistic that was certainly affected by the racist attitudes and episodes that they endured at the hands of students and staff.

On Halloween night of 1963, those racist attitudes boiled over to overt terrorization. An unknown culprit or culprits placed a homemade bomb on the outside of a residential bathroom

⁸⁶ Sheridan, interview.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*; Sheridan, Ben Franklin essay submission

⁸⁸ Ferdinand and Sheridan, campus visit.

⁸⁹ Ferdinand and Sheridan, campus visit.

window on Congress Drive in Eastern New Orleans. It was the house of Edgar Taplin, Jr. (age 14) and his family. Edgar, his 13-year-old sister, his mother Lois, and his grandmother were at home, but escaped physical injury. The front page of the following morning's newspaper read that "the homemade bomb ripped out a bathroom window and damaged the walls, ceiling, and fixtures of a bathroom... The explosion shook the entire house and was felt in adjoining homes."⁹⁰ Taplin downplays the event in a recent interview, unwilling to assign motive to the attack. Oral historian Valerie Yow describes the impact of traumatic events on memory: "Research suggests that to reduce present anxiety, people sometimes remember themselves as being safer than they actually were at the time of the traumatic event. We may try to minimize the impact of negative events, if possible, by downplaying our distress over them."⁹¹ Though Taplin faced a serious risk of physical injury that night, he admits that he prefers not to "dwell on that kind of thing" because of the continued anxiety caused by its recall.⁹²

Kenneth Ferdinand remembers hearing about the incident soon after, and was more confident than Taplin about what happened. Having not been the target, he is more willing to speak about the bombing than Taplin. Ferdinand says he was certain about the motive: it was because Taplin was a black kid at a white school. He speculated then that it was white kids from one of the Gentilly subdivisions near Pontchartrain Park, and as he remembers it, all the other students agreed. The bombing was an invasion of Taplin's space, his home, his place of leisure in which he and his family should be allowed to set the rules. But for Taplin and his family, like so many black New Orleanians over the years, white terrorization was a constant threat to the black body and mind.

⁹⁰ "Four Uninjured by Bomb Blast," *The Times-Picayune*, Nov. 1, 1963, p. 1.

⁹¹ Valerie Yow, *Recording Oral History*, 52.

⁹² Taplin, interview.

On that same Halloween night, Daniel Russell happened to be out vandalizing houses with his friends, throwing eggs. They were picked up by a police officer who brought them each home to face their parents. “They dropped my friends off and I was the last one in the car... and he got a message on the radio that there had been an explosion and they gave the name and I told him ‘that kid goes to Ben Franklin. He was one of the kids that integrated the school.’ I don’t know if he cared for that information or not.” Daniel has no doubt in his mind that they were targeting Edgar for having been a black student at Franklin. “Oh, absolutely...but you know, at the time, and looking back, when you consider the violence and protest in New Orleans when they integrated the first grades, this was much, much less... I was relieved that there wasn’t a problem.”⁹³ To Russell, even considering the attack on Taplin’s residents, things were relatively calm compared to 1960. While media coverage broadcast the verbal abuses of Bridges, Tate, Etienne, and Prevost across the nation, the terroristic nature of the bombing of Taplin’s house received zero consideration in the press. Though Russell told a police officer about the connection Taplin had with Ben Franklin’s integration, these details went unprinted.

Russell, like Taplin, seems to downplay the presence of racism at Ben Franklin, but Daniel Russell also admits that he only recently, while planning commemoration, began to learn of some of the racism that took place. He maintained contact with Edgar Taplin over the years. It was through this relationship that he came to learn of some of the racism that he was either unexposed to or unaware of at the time. Russell learned of an admired Spanish teacher who chastised a black girl for her mispronunciation: “You can’t do your dumb fieldworker accent when you’re speaking Spanish.” He heard of the Chemistry teacher, Mrs. Hindson, who was “abusive” to Taplin, but had treated the white students well. Taplin struggled with math and science, but remembers Mrs.

⁹³ Russell, interview.

Hindson was unbothered by his difficulties. Taplin reflects: “In another school, in another setting, I’m convinced that a chemistry teacher would have offered more support, tutoring or otherwise. I had the sense that this teacher would have preferred that I had not been at Franklin.”⁹⁴ Stories like these challenged Russell’s own personal memories of a relatively problem-free process of integration.⁹⁵ White students often failed to recognize the struggles that their black peers faced, as Russell explains that it is only recently that he and some of his white friends have begun to recognize the impact of racism at Ben Franklin.⁹⁶

Black and White Alliances Testing Boundaries

While the above stories help to highlight how racism persisted within Ben Franklin and contributed to a quickly declining black enrollment, white and black students nonetheless continued to navigate contested space within the school and in the city around them. Occasionally, black and white alliances challenged these spaces. Some of the relationships that were acceptable within certain parts of Ben Franklin were discouraged or threatened elsewhere in the school and city. How did these students and faculty navigate these complex spaces with bendable rules in regards to race-relations?

Some of the most obvious alliances were between the few passionate and inclusive teachers and the black students they taught. Dr. Andrew Romeo taught Latin and Mrs. Ruth Ave’Lallemant taught Social Studies and History. Ferdinand remembers that the two were married. Sheridan was unaware of their romance, but all the students interviewed attested to their sincere and successful approach to the classroom. As other teachers ignored or openly chastised black students, Dr. Romeo and Mrs. Ave’Lallemant engaged their entire classes. Taplin remembers that “Doc[tor

⁹⁴ Taplin, interview.

⁹⁵ Russell, interview.

⁹⁶ Russell, interview.

Romeo] encouraged fraternization, the way a high school experience should be... You learn more about yourself and more about the world.”⁹⁷ Sheridan still beams about Dr. Romeo:

I had really good grades in Latin, and the Latin teacher whose name was Dr. Romeo, I think he had suffered polio, because he was on the metal crutches. He was always so wonderful. And he called me Sharon Ann cause that was my name and that was what my family called me and he just picked up calling me Sharon Ann. And he would say “A Latin scholar, you’re just a Latin scholar.” So he was just really nurturing and gave you good feedback. And he did that with everybody. But he was the only teacher that really made me feel comfortable and made me feel like I belonged there. And I can remember one time my mother went to a PTA meeting, and was talking to some of the other parents, and once one of the parents found out, realized who I was, well apparently, that person’s son had mentioned how this colored girl was really smart in Latin. So they mentioned that to my mother, so that just made my mother’s day.⁹⁸

Here, Sheridan reveals how Dr. Romeo was able to create an inclusive classroom and even extend that sense of inclusion and validation to her mother. Taplin reveals an even bolder show of support by Dr. Romeo:

Doc Romeo one of the best teachers I ever had. He was inspiring. He was great, and I loved taking Latin. However the course that killed me was Chemistry...I never got a good grade in Chemistry, 77. And if somebody gave you a 77 or 75, getting up over an 85 was hard to pull, because Franklin wasn’t an easy school...my other grades weren’t that much higher than 85, except for Doc and Latin. Doc would have to take a look at what my other grades were, see what I’d had in Chemistry, and he’d jack me up to a 99. I will never forget that guy. He knew what was going on. He knew the lay of the land. And I mean, yeah he was helping me a little bit, but I was doing pretty well in Latin anyway. He tried to offset what Hindson was doing to me.⁹⁹

Here, not only was Romeo creating a welcoming environment, but challenging one teacher’s racist-driven ineffectiveness with his own covert system of bonus points to try and keep the black students, or Taplin at least, in the school. Understanding “the lay of the land,” Dr. Romeo did what he could to fight back.

⁹⁷ Taplin, interview.

⁹⁸ Sheridan, interview.

⁹⁹ Taplin, interview.

Ferdinand credits Mrs. Ave'Lallemant with having an effect on him far beyond the grade in her class. He credits her with whetting his interest in History, a discipline that he ultimately followed into college:

Mrs. Ave'Lallemant was a teacher who inspired me in terms of History. She was a little lady, she did an excellent job of presenting history as a discipline. That's when I really dug in. One thing I remember is her bringing in a set of bones, a skull and all of that, and going through the evolution of man. And she talked about the earliest evidence we have... that humanity started in East Africa. And that was like, she said it in the class with a very straightforward, intellectual curiosity. And I was the only black kid in class. And it was like, "why don't you make it up, that white people came first? Why don't you do something to seem like they preceded Africans?" And she didn't, and so it set the course for what history really is for me: intelligent truth as you know it, about what you see and what you know occurred... And it made me sit up a couple of notches and say, "Oh yeah, I think I want to pursue that."¹⁰⁰

Here, Ferdinand saw History, through Ave'Lallemant's unbiased presentation of facts, as something that directly challenged the notion of white superiority. She relayed the message that civilization began in East Africa, and Ferdinand, a fifteen-year-old so accustomed to hearing the propaganda of white supremacy, was taken aback. With a pile of bones and a few anthropological facts, she had trumped the myth of white supremacy. Ferdinand does not remember any negative reaction to this news from the white kids. Though he is unsure how white students might have felt about it at the time, he acknowledged that students there were mostly well-behaved and respectful. "Usually, they would think before they act."¹⁰¹ If any student did consider saying something that might challenge Ave'Lallemant's historical authority, they kept their mouth shut about it in the classroom.

While these teachers provided black students with a sense of belonging, most teachers treated them "fairly" at best. For English teacher Charles Suhor, he explains a slightly different approach to his classes:

¹⁰⁰ Ferdinand, interview, January 7, 2015.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

I was anxious about many of the incoming black students' preparation for the rigor of the school (also for many of the white kids who came in mainly. E.g., from the Ninth Ward feeder schools). I hasten to add that this was a class-wide problem with each grade 10 groups that entered. There were always many who were not ready for the amount and depth of study that the school required for maintaining the 85 average that would allow them to stay on. I was "pulling for" the black kids but didn't want to patronize them with visible favoritism. A bit smugly, I knew that I had long been an activist for integration, even risking my job during the 1960 integration crisis at Frantz and McDonogh Elementary (which I've written about in a couple of articles). So I wasn't as thoughtful as I might have been about going an extra mile or two—I wouldn't have known how to, actually—with the black students. The point being, I worked damn hard to help all students, and saw some amazing results with many who started out with poor skills. Some mediocre and crappy results, too. I have no idea why some kids lit up in a flash, others gradually, and others very little, over the years. But again, I gave what I thought was intensive feedback to all.¹⁰²

Here we see a teacher that was outwardly pro-integration, wanting the black students to succeed as much as Romeo and Ave'Lallemant, but one that was uncomfortable – he "didn't want to patronize them with visible favoritism" – and maybe incapable – he "wouldn't have known how to, actually – with the black students" – of connecting as intensely with the black students as Romeo with Taplin or Ave'Lallemant with Ferdinand. Ironically, Ferdinand felt a secret connection with Suhor, because Suhor was also a jazz musician, scholar, and critic with articles published in *Down Beat*, a popular magazine dedicated to jazz and blues music. Ferdinand, like many aspiring jazz musicians in New Orleans, frequently read *Down Beat*, so he quickly made the connection that his English teacher was actually writing for the magazine. Ferdinand, who loved to play the horn, imagined that the concepts of jazz permeated into Suhor's teaching method. He recalls "Charles Suhor, that's my man," though Suhor never knew it. The two never spoke about their shared affection of jazz.

While a few teachers combatted the racist status quo with varying levels of success, white student allies also had to navigate complex space. In a classroom like Dr. Romeo's, fraternization was encouraged, but that was not necessarily the case elsewhere. Ferdinand attests that his most significant ally was Leo Laventhal. As they were a grade apart, they lacked the safety of an inclusive

¹⁰² Dr. Charles Suhor, email correspondence with author, November 20, 2014.

classroom to build their relationship, thus they were forced to seek or establish other safe spaces for interaction. Reflecting on that alliance:

Leo was always thought to be out of his mind. Oh you can go talk to Leo, anyone can go talk to Leo. He was human scale. He was approachable. And that made it much, much easier. He probably didn't know how important it was to have somebody just bridge the gap, and you know, you could kind of talk to him... He took a little bit of the edge off. He didn't have enough sense to be racist. He didn't think of it.¹⁰³

Ferdinand felt that Laventhal stood out, simply for his lack of racism. And in standing out, he offered a "bridge" between black and white social groups. Ferdinand continued:

That says a whole lot, you know what I mean? People don't really get it that there was a southern culture that was so deep, that for young people were intimidated into the way they would behave. He didn't have that and I know he didn't have it, because he didn't have it. And for some reason, it was unusual that there was actually a white kid there that didn't have that kind of perspective on race.¹⁰⁴

While it may seem unremarkable that southern culture indeed affected the actions of white southerners, Ferdinand helps the historian acknowledge the impact that intimidation had on "young people" and the interracial socialization. Laventhal, having moved with his family from Brooklyn as a young child, was raised in a family that understood the evils of racial and ethnic discrimination. So he was less inclined to succumb to the pressures to be racist that he encountered in New Orleans. Ferdinand goes on to disclose that Laventhal, too, may have been a target for bigotry at Ben Franklin:

What they did have, some of the other kids would share some of their disdain for Jewish kids, even then. That was kind of interesting, going into Franklin you would think that the only person who would be disdained would be people of color, but they had a lot of unexpected resistance from kids who didn't care to be around Jewish kids. That was a phenomenon that I hadn't experienced before.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Ferdinand, interview, February 20, 2015.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

Here, Ferdinand was struck by two things that his time at Ben Franklin exposed him to: white allies and anti-Semitism. Indeed, many of those students that made anti-Semitic remarks likely felt similarly towards black students. But Ferdinand had never considered that somebody would be discriminated against for anything other than skin-color.

Black and white students had to tread carefully just to hang out with each other outside of school. Though instances of interracial gatherings were few and far between, they each required careful planning to avoid upsetting any social norms. When that planning was ill-advised, they faced the consequences. Kenneth Ferdinand recalls two parties that draw light on this. December of his sophomore year, he was invited to a Christmas party by a few of the Jewish kids. It was at the Uptown house of one student's family, maybe off Napoleon or Broadmoor. The fact that it was a Jewish Christmas party did not strike Ferdinand as strange until the guests joined together to sing Christmas carol parodies. In his own religious background, "you didn't make fun of Christ." Despite their religious differences, Ferdinand enjoyed the party and went home a little more culturally aware than he had been before.¹⁰⁶ He had successfully entered a white space, with no authoritative push back.

In traveling daily to and from their Uptown high school, Ferdinand and some of his black classmates had begun to gain a slight level of comfort and confidence in these white spaces. That confidence sticks with Sheridan today. Today, she reflects on her the ability and frequency with which she crosses cultural lines as a lone black woman: "I grew accustomed to [being] the only black face in the room. Why am I always the only one? It still happens to this day. In 2014. It just amazes me. I tell my daughter, well you know I went to this meeting and I was the only one

¹⁰⁶ Ferdinand, interview, January 7, 2015.

there.”¹⁰⁷ That ability is one that she took away from her brief time at Ben Franklin, but she suspects the many of the white students never learned the same skill.

Leo Laventhal once decided to extend his alliance with Ferdinand beyond the relative safety of Ben Franklin’s campus. Laventhal and other NAACP Youth Council members were invited to Kenneth Ferdinand’s house for a party that school year. Kenneth’s brother and parents were both there, as was Raphael Cassimere, the Youth Council’s president. Laventhal drove his car down to the Ferdinand residence in the Lower Ninth Ward, and started to enjoy the company of some of his black friends. As he tells the story:

Val? Yeah everybody was at the party, Raphael Cassimere was at the party, too...they were dancing, and people realized that I was uncomfortable. They were very friendly. Some of the girls asked me to dance. At a certain point they said, “Well we don’t have any more wine.” I think you could get a gallon of sweet vino for less than a dollar down the street. So me and Raphael Cassimere – this is an embarrassing story and yet I tell it a lot – we went to this bar, the two of us, to buy the sweet vino... He says to me “why don’t you wait outside. I’ll go in and get the wine.” So I wait outside the bar and a cop car comes, white police officers. And they said “what are you doing here?” and I started shaking. I said “uh, just waiting for a friend inside.” “Well what do you have a friend inside for? What’s your relationship to that friend?” And I thought, this is so stupid, you’re gonna wonder why I said this, I said “I employ him.” So then they thought I was some rich kid who was, I don’t know, getting a blow job or something. They must have thought something like that. And then Raphael came out, he had more of his mind to him. He explained to them, and the cops look at me, I’m still just shaking in fear. “Why didn’t you just say? You’re here for a party aren’t you?” And I said “yeah.” “well, go back home and don’t you ever come back here.” I was still shaking like crazy, I got in my car, I drove to somewhere on St. Claude or something like that and found a payphone. I called the party and told them what happened, and that I wasn’t coming back.¹⁰⁸

While Laventhal was willing to test the boundaries, entering a black neighborhood, and driving with his black friend to a bar frequented by black residents, the fear of white police officers was enough to run him off. Though Laventhal never returned to that party, he continued a life of activism and community involvement. He is a lifetime member of the NAACP and was an active member of New

¹⁰⁷ Sheridan, interview.

¹⁰⁸ Laventhal, interview.

Orleans' teachers' union – AFT-UTNO – even serving as the branch's Vice President for a time. When all things activism were “hot in the sixties”¹⁰⁹, he attended countercultural, anti-establishment meetings and nuclear-war protests.¹¹⁰ The identity he had established as a maturing adolescent would help to define his life's work as an educator and activist.

Another interracial alliance found a brief existence on the football field, before outside forces would pressure it to fold. Less than a week after the first black students entered Ben Franklin, ten schools from the Riverside High School League voted to cut their ties with Ben Franklin athletics. This disrupted Ben Franklin's football schedule, cancelling three of their seven remaining games for the season.¹¹¹ Ironically, other measures had already prevented black inclusion in sports at Ben Franklin, so these schools were voting against playing an integrated school, even though its football and basketball teams both remained all-white. As Edgar Taplin recalled:

Coaches of the schools invoked a rule, saying that Luke and I weren't eligible to play, because we had both played at a – quote – four-year high school – unquote – before attending. So we had to sit out a year. That made socially and, if you will, the experience of going to high school, kind of, fairly difficult, very difficult for myself and Luke because we lived it. Sports and academics were really, at that age and time, were a big part of our lives.¹¹²

Of course, only the black boys (there were no competitive girls sports yet), mostly coming from four-year Catholic high schools, were deprived of eligibility by the rule. The white kids had mostly come from the white public schools that implemented a 6-3-3 grade system. At the time, the only ‘four year high schools’ in New Orleans also happened to be black ones. So any aspiring white athletes, having come from ninth grade at a junior high, had no problems with this eligibility rule. By the time the next school year came around, Taplin was the only black male student still enrolled

¹⁰⁹ Ferdinand, interview, February 20, 2015.

¹¹⁰ Laventhal, interview.

¹¹¹ *State-Times*, Sept. 19, 1963 “Riverside Teams Vote not to Play Integrated School”

¹¹² Taplin, interview

at Franklin. The six black students in the incoming sophomore class were all girls, though any boys likely would have remained ineligible like Luke and Edgar during their sophomore year. But Taplin did get a chance on the football team coming into his junior year, albeit a far too brief one. He was playing on the squad as both offensive and defensive end. He remembered the team's first scrimmage in the summer of '64, just before the school year started. Franklin was playing Alcee Fortier High School. Edgar remembers distinctly the Fortier players verbally harassing him during warm-ups. From the other side of the field they chanted "Get that nigger. Get that nigger" while doing jumping jacks.¹¹³ Fortier got the ball on offense first, and ran three consecutive end sweeps directly at Edgar:

But the thing I remember most, quite frankly, was my teammates. There was a kid named Shawn Savedra, who was a little guy, but he played defensive guard or tackle, and I think went on to become captain of the team. He had a lot of spirit and called the guys over in our huddle and said, "you guys see what they're doing, they're just gonna run it at Tap. So we know what they're doing so let's counterattack it." So we kind of ganged up, everybody kind of came to my side... I was kind of pleased, because otherwise I would have gotten killed. They really had my back.¹¹⁴

But it was hardly a happy ending for Edgar. When the scrimmage was over, Coach O'neil called him into his office and cut him from the team. Edgar remembers the coach essentially explaining that he did not feel like he could protect him on the field. Of course, in football, being the full-contact sport that it is, the entire team was risking physical injury. The coach could not truly protect anyone from personal injury beyond providing padding and a helmet. "But don't worry, you can still try out for basketball," the coach told him. Unfortunately, when the basketball season came around, which was further into the school year, Taplin's grade point average had just fallen below the required 85 percent. He was devastated knowing that he would never play basketball for Franklin. Edgar Taplin recalls going to his mother's Xavier University office in tears when he realized he would miss out on

¹¹³ Taplin, interview.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

basketball, too. “She basically told me to buck up.”¹¹⁵ While Taplin had consciously sacrificed the social and educational advantages of attending St. Augustine, his unanticipated exclusion from team sports was harder to swallow.

In a school that was lacking in athletic success, Taplin likely would have stood out on both the football and basketball teams. Taplin considered himself to be the best athlete on the team. Though he says he may have had a conflated ego at the time, Daniel Russell corroborates Taplin’s athleticism:

One of the black students [Edgar] was just an outstanding athlete, and a couple others were good, they were good athletes. It didn’t bother anybody I knew that they were on [the] team, in fact it was kind of fun. And we needed all the players we could get. We had a little school, a lot of nerds and not a lot of athletes. Hell I played on the football team, which is crazy. I mean, I had no business being on a football team... I played center, I weighed like 145 pounds, but you know, somebody had to do it.¹¹⁶

But despite the readiness of the rest of the team to accept a black teammate, and despite a consciously formed alliance to physically hold him up, outside pressures prevented Edgar Taplin from staying with the team. That year, the team reverted to an all-white one for the regular season, but played an unusual schedule, only against private schools in the New Orleans area. They had their first ever winning football season, going 4-3-1 (wins-losses-ties), but Edgar Taplin stayed at home for those eight games. After that, yearbook photos suggest that there were no black football, basketball, or baseball team members at Ben Franklin until 1971, when two black students joined the football squad.¹¹⁷ Indeed, this reveals that Franklin was both integrated and segregated. When it came to sports, the school conceded to external (and perhaps even internal) pressures to keep black students off the team.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Russell, interview.

¹¹⁷ *The Falcon*, 1964-1971.

First Winning Season

0 Franklin vs. St. Stanislaus	28	20 Franklin vs. Shaw	19
6 Franklin vs. Newman	19	6 Franklin vs. St. Martin's	0
7 Franklin vs. Country Day	0	41 Franklin vs. Ecole Classique	6
0 Franklin vs. St. Paul	31	6 Franklin vs. Rummel	6

First Winning Season. *The Falcon*, 1965. All of Franklin's opponents were nearby private schools. This suggests that Ben Franklin remained banned from the Riverside High School league that year.

Taplin maintained friendships with Shawn Savedra and Daniel Russell despite their lost opportunity to play sports together. Though Taplin mostly interacted with his white friends on school grounds, he remembers one otherwise minor social event for taking place off-campus:

Once, Shawn Savedra, one white girl, and I went to see a movie together, and that was highly unusual at the time. [It was] Probably my second [junior] year. Anita Rubbo, a friend of Shawn's, might have been who we went with us. Given that there were no other outside social events that any of the black kids really participated in, that was fairly important. I vaguely remember the theater because it was one that they didn't make a big deal about African Americans, because there weren't any really openly integrated theaters, this was more like a little place somewhere between the Seventh and Ninth wards.¹¹⁸

Off-campus interracial social gatherings were so uncommon, that black and white students still remembered the significance of the event fifty years later.

One candid example of the friendships that developed between some of the white and black students can be found in Daniel Russell's signed copies of his sophomore and junior yearbooks. In his sophomore yearbook, inscriptions from Kenneth Ferdinand, Edgar Taplin, and Luke Wethers help to reveal the nature of those friendships. One year, Taplin wrote to Russell: "May all the girls never forget the handsomest guy the dolls all get." And the next year, Taplin

¹¹⁸ Taplin, interview.

signed Russell's yearbook in two spots: once in the allotted space in the back, and once by his own junior class picture. "Take it easy, Danny, Remember Mookie, and I will always remember you. [signed] Tap." Taplin furthered his friendly encouragement for Russell's romance: "Danny, Keep Chasin [sic] Linda (She's worth it.)" Taplin wrote knowingly about Russell's love interest, even suggesting an appreciation for Russell's apparently numerous successes (or failures) with female classmates. We also see that they use nicknames for one another, suggesting of the "comradery" between the two that they both recall vividly, today.¹¹⁹

Yearbook inscriptions from Luke Wethers and Kenneth Ferdinand show how these friendships are each based off of shared experience. Russell explains that Wethers is alluding to Latin class themes about Caesar's Gallic Wars in his inscription: "To Hungarian Danny, A real Chooky [illegible] fan, and a great amoristic man. [signed] Luke, Julius Spartici, Wethers." Wethers managed to make several inside jokes with Russell in a few short words. Not only that, but Russell can decipher the references 50 years later. In just a few quips, Wethers' note suggests much more than cordiality between two teenage boys. More than that, it shows how the two had learned to communicate in a covert manner, which should not be ignored. Despite the note's harmless good nature, it is evidence of the discreet manner in which these black and white alliances challenged social norms as they learned to safely navigate the contested terrain of 1960s New Orleans.

Though Ferdinand didn't remember Russell 50 years later, his note to Russell in 1964 illustrates an alliance between the two: "To Danny. To a good friend who I hope I'll always remember, Danny, You're a blast, (like Reade), signed Ken. P.S. Don't lose your pillow case and sheet, 'The South Shall Rise Again!'" Russell interprets the postscript to be "mock hostility,"

¹¹⁹ Russell, email correspondence with author, Nov. 8, 2014; Russell, interview. Taplin, interview.

perhaps referencing the racist sentiments of some of their other white classmates.¹²⁰ Ferdinand's words, though joking, make clear that he grasped the uncertain future of race relations in New Orleans. Despite Russell having been a "good friend," Ferdinand's words served as a warning to Russell that the South's stubborn insistence to hold onto relics of a racist past was still an obstacle to interracial friendships and alliances.

While these alliances and friendships may seem insignificant to outside observers, they were part of a larger trend of interracial cooperation and collaboration that became increasingly visible and influential during the peak of the Civil Rights Movement. At "The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom," which took place the summer before Ben Franklin's integration, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his now famous "I Have a Dream" speech. Leo Laventhal, who still spent summers with family in Brooklyn, relays his opportunity to go to the march:

1963 must be the banner year for [Civil Rights]. That was the year of the March on Washington. I was fifteen at the time, visiting the family in Brooklyn, and there was a chance to go to the march, and I went with the Harlem Democrats and a cousin. I think that was in the air, though I should tell you that I missed the "I Have a Dream" speech, because just about the time he delivered that speech, I walked off to see a museum: The Mellon Gallery, The National Gallery. I was probably more interested in Botticelli than Martin Luther King, though I didn't know he was going to speak.¹²¹

Though Laventhal was engaged in what he thought was "a coming revolution" during the protest-centered countercultural trend of the 1960s, he was also a fairly wealthy teenager curious to take in the high culture displayed by the very establishment against which he was marching.

The Freedom Riders from CORE offered young activists another example of interracial alliance in the early 1960s. Beginning in 1961, the Freedom Rides illustrated the effectiveness and danger of non-violent protest. Black and white passengers boarded buses in D.C. with the intention of riding them into and through the Deep South, challenging racial barriers at stops along the way.

¹²⁰ Russell, email correspondence.

¹²¹ Laventhal, interview.

White and black participants faced brutal attacks and imprisonment, but their harsh treatment at the hands of racist southerners was broadcast across the nation, helping to sway public sentiment and inspire more riders to follow.¹²² Civil Rights Movement activity offered example and inspiration to progressive students at Ben Franklin. These black and alliances, while occasionally participating in overt protests, also challenged the establishment more discretely: with inside jokes, shared experiential bonds, political and social alliances, and the practice of racial tolerance.

Conclusion

Ben Franklin's story of integration offers a lot of takeaways. Black students made conscious sacrifices, knowing that a transfer to Ben Franklin would almost certainly have a negative impact on their quality of life. They lost out on the promise of tolerant classrooms and communities in the schools they left behind. They lost out on time with friends at old schools, while they spent much of their emotional and psychological energy confronting the harshness of their new environment. Though the experience of black students at Ben Franklin has not been printed in other histories, it reveals the pervasive nature of racism that continued to impact the lives of black students. Black isolation from sports, clubs, and other extracurricular activities meant that black students at Ben Franklin were not receiving the all-around education that their white peers enjoyed. The social, intellectual, psychological, and emotional pressures on black students at Ben Franklin contributed to a retention of black students through graduation that was significantly lower than that of whites. On the other hand, alliances between black students and some white faculty and students were a form of social protest, challenging the intolerant and indifferent treatment that black students faced otherwise. These alliances challenged racial boundaries, and stimulated racial tolerance and interracial friendships at a time when social norms shunned mixed company. Though the eventual

¹²² *The American Experience*, season 23, episode 12, "Freedom Riders," directed by Stanley Nelson, aired May 16, 2011, on PBS, accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/freedomriders/watch>.

integration of other New Orleans public high schools was followed by a continued white exodus, Ben Franklin managed to maintain a disproportionate white majority. That white majority was promulgated by racist taunts and terrorization, insufficient support systems, and restricted recruiting efforts, showing that the blame fell on many.

Epilogue

When sophomore, Edmund Harris, and freshman, George Holland, played football for Ben Franklin in the 70-71 school year, what might they have known of Edgar Taplin six years earlier? They likely could have known that they were the first black players to play a regular season game for Ben Franklin's football team, but were much less likely to know about Taplin's scrimmage-long stint in the summer of 1964. What had changed at Ben Franklin and in New Orleans that finally allowed for a black student-athlete to participate as both a student *and* an athlete? The yearbook tells us that Robert O'neil was still the school's football coach. We also know that the other white high schools in New Orleans were now considerably integrated. [See enrollment charts in appendix] Alcee Fortier High School, the all-white school whose students had compelled Coach O'neil to remove Edgar Taplin from Ben Franklin's team in 1964, had a student population that was 51.3 percent black in the 70-71 school year.¹²³

Beyond that, these are questions that this research cannot answer, but they are worth pursuing. Noticeably that same yearbook is the first to show a black senior receiving a "Class Superlative". Michelle Harris, also African American and perhaps Edmund's older sister, was voted "wittiest" girl. Also, those voted "most industrious" were Dickie Kay and Eve Higginbotham, an Asian-American boy and African-American girl. White seniors were still voted "most attractive," "best dressed," "best natured," and "most creative" in 1971.

¹²³ *Facts and Finances*, 1970-1971.

Football 1970-71



Football 1970-71. *The Falcon*, 1971. Edmund Harris is pictured at the top left. George Holland is on the bottom row, second from the left.

While a scan of yearbooks suggests that the inclusion of black students remained limited at Ben Franklin for years beyond 1963, history points to numerous prominent black New Orleanians have attended Ben Franklin over the last 50 years. A short list of notable black alumni include: Kim Boyle, Cedric Richmond, Wendell Pierce, and Wynton and Delfeayo Marsalis. I would add to the of notable alumni list Sharon Carter Sheridan, who, after graduating from Xavier Prep, attended Newcomb College. At Newcomb, she encountered some of the same white students that she had seen at Ben Franklin, though they remained in separate social groups. Seeing that she had made it to the same college as them, Sheridan felt “vindicated.” It had come “full circle” and as a college student, she could begin to cope with the trauma of her past. She no longer saw herself as a failure for struggling at Ben Franklin. She went on work for Orleans’ Parish’s Civil District Court, where she

continues her career today.¹²⁴ I would also add Edgar Taplin, Jr. Taplin went on to Yale College and Yale Law. He found a job working as a Wall Street attorney after earning his law degree. After some time on Wall Street, he began working for Mobil Oil first as an attorney, then moving into International Marketing and Supply and Trade. He retired from Exxon Mobil in 2003, and is now living in Maryland. I would also add to the list Kenneth Ferdinand. Ferdinand would study History at Xavier, Yale, and Columbia. He returned to New Orleans, to work as a businessman. He served for three years as Executive Director of the influential French Market Corporation, and currently co-owns and operates Frenchman Street's Café Rose Nicaud with his wife, Melba.

MYRNA MOLINE
Nat Ach Scholar Finalist French Club-2, 3,
Programming Course-3.

CARLA ANN MONROE
Almanac-3, Latin Club-1, 2, Music App Club-1
(Treas), Red Cross-3 (Sec), Spanish Club-3,
Christmas Program-1, 2.



Myrna Moline Senior Picture, *The Falcon* 1966.

In a list that still grows, I would also add Myrna Moline. Though I was unable to contact Mrs. Moline through this research, her story moved me tremendously. As the Ben Franklin careers of thirteen black students from that first integrated class succumbed to the social and intellectual challenges at school, as well as internalized emotional and psychological struggles trauma, Myrna Moline survived to be the first black graduate from Ben Franklin High School. Sheridan remembered Moline as an introvert at Xavier Prep. None of the students I spoke with remembered

¹²⁴ Sheridan, interview.

much about her, so she likely continued to keep to herself, much like Sheridan, to cope with those same challenges. And yet, there she is, in the 1966 yearbook: still smiling back at us.

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Appendix I – Attendance Charts

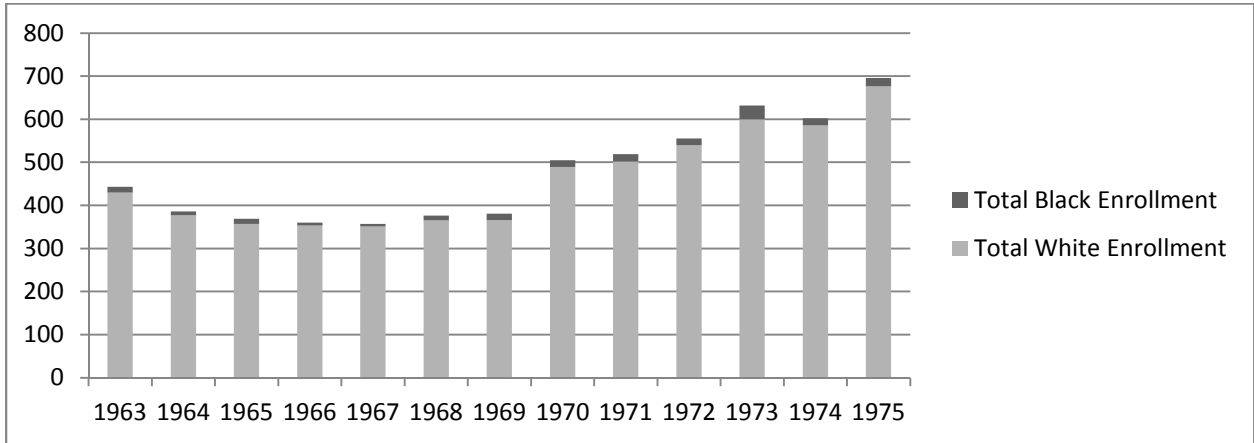


Figure 1 – Benjamin Franklin High School Enrollment, 1963-1975.

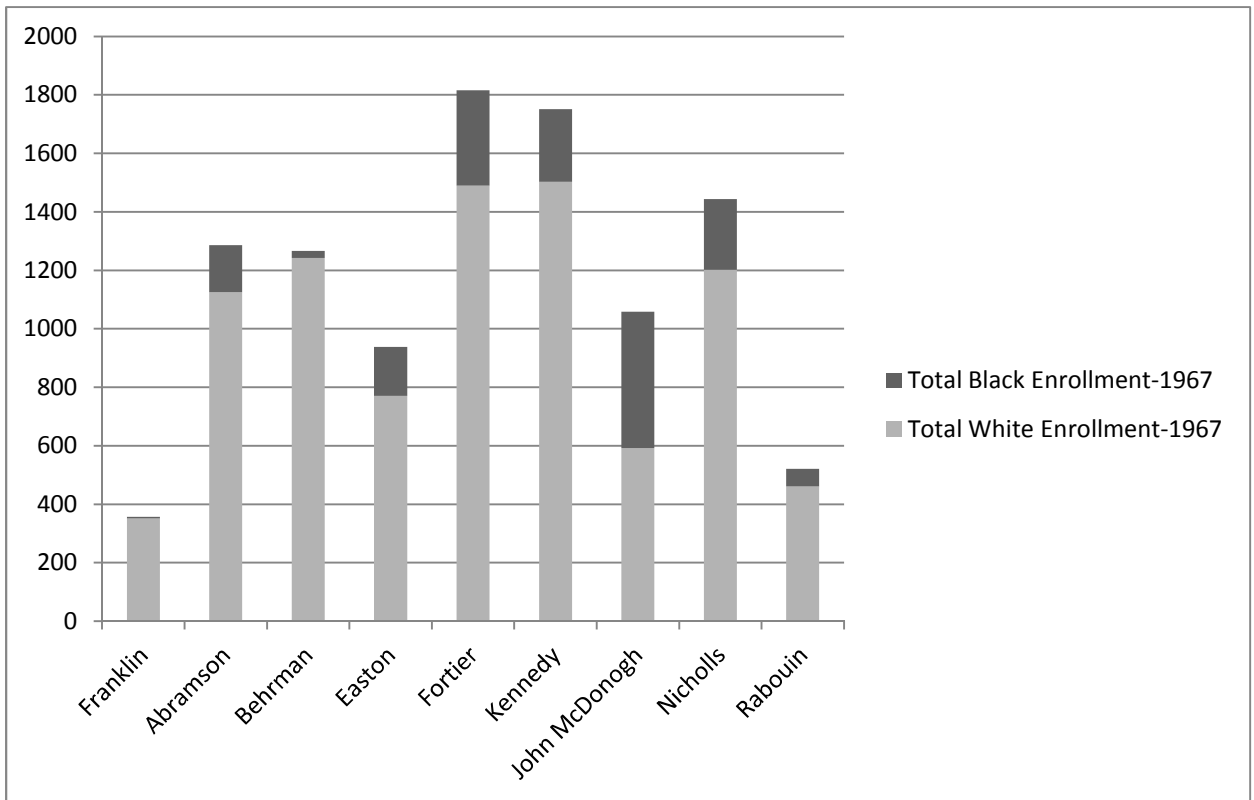


Figure 2 – Black and White Enrollment at New Orleans Public High Schools, 1967.

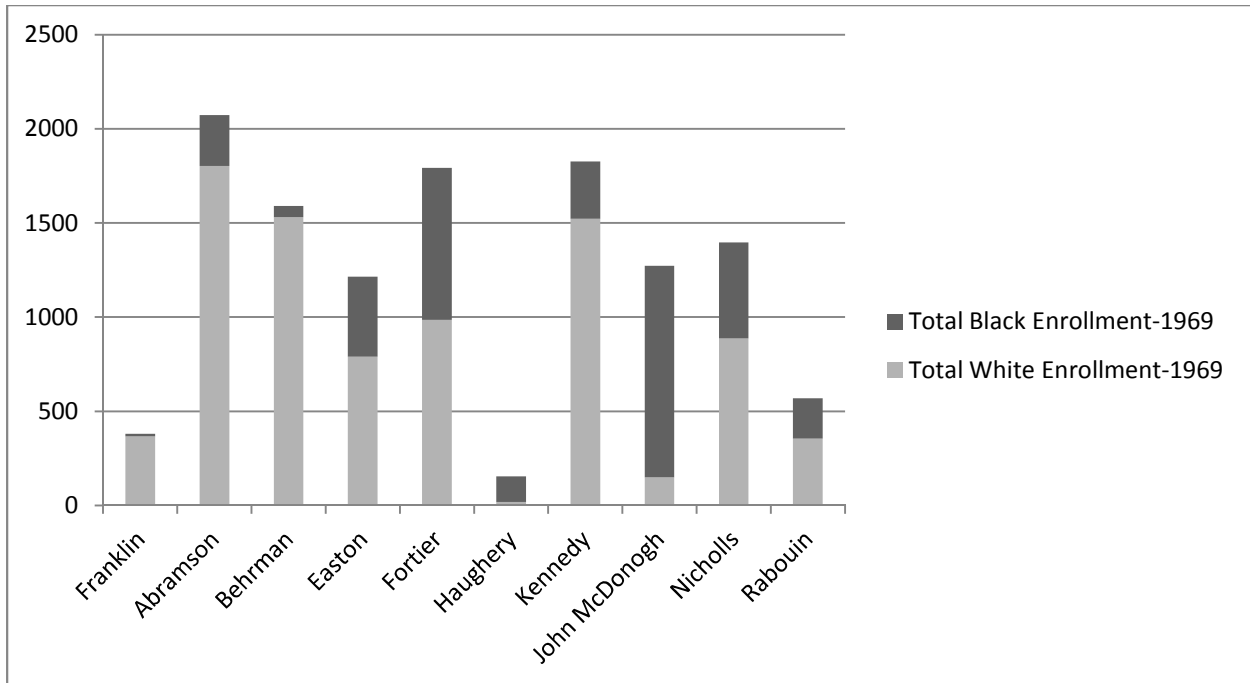


Figure 3 – Black and White Enrollment at New Orleans Public High Schools, 1969

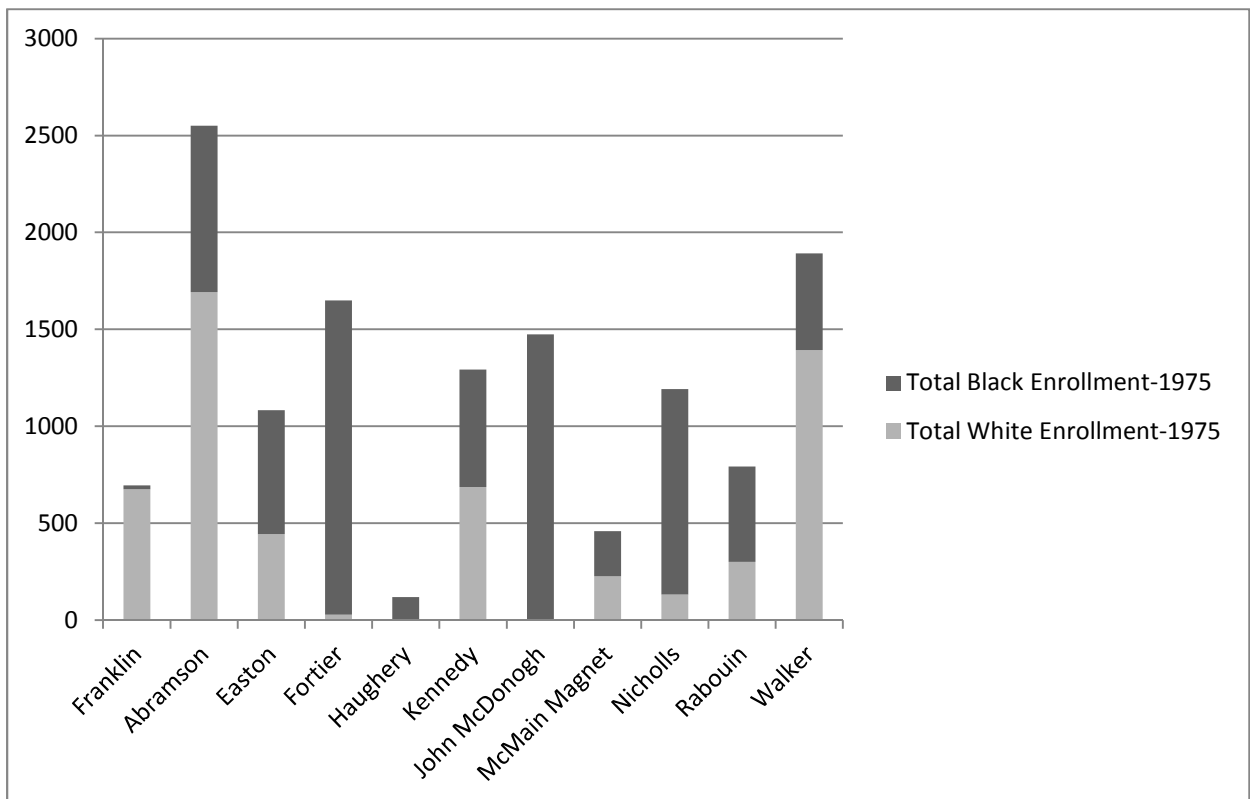


Figure 4 – Black and White Enrollment at New Orleans Public High Schools, 1975.

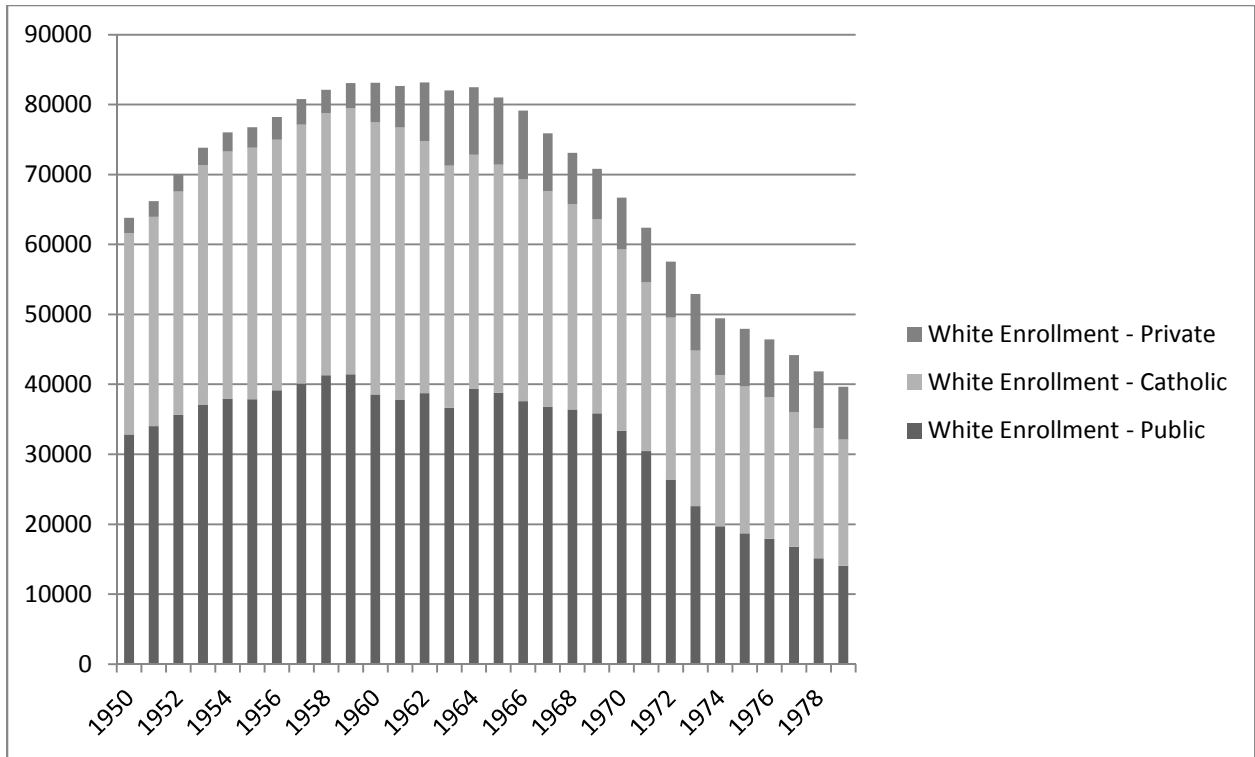


Figure 5 – White Enrollment in New Orleans, Private, Catholic, and Public 1950-1979

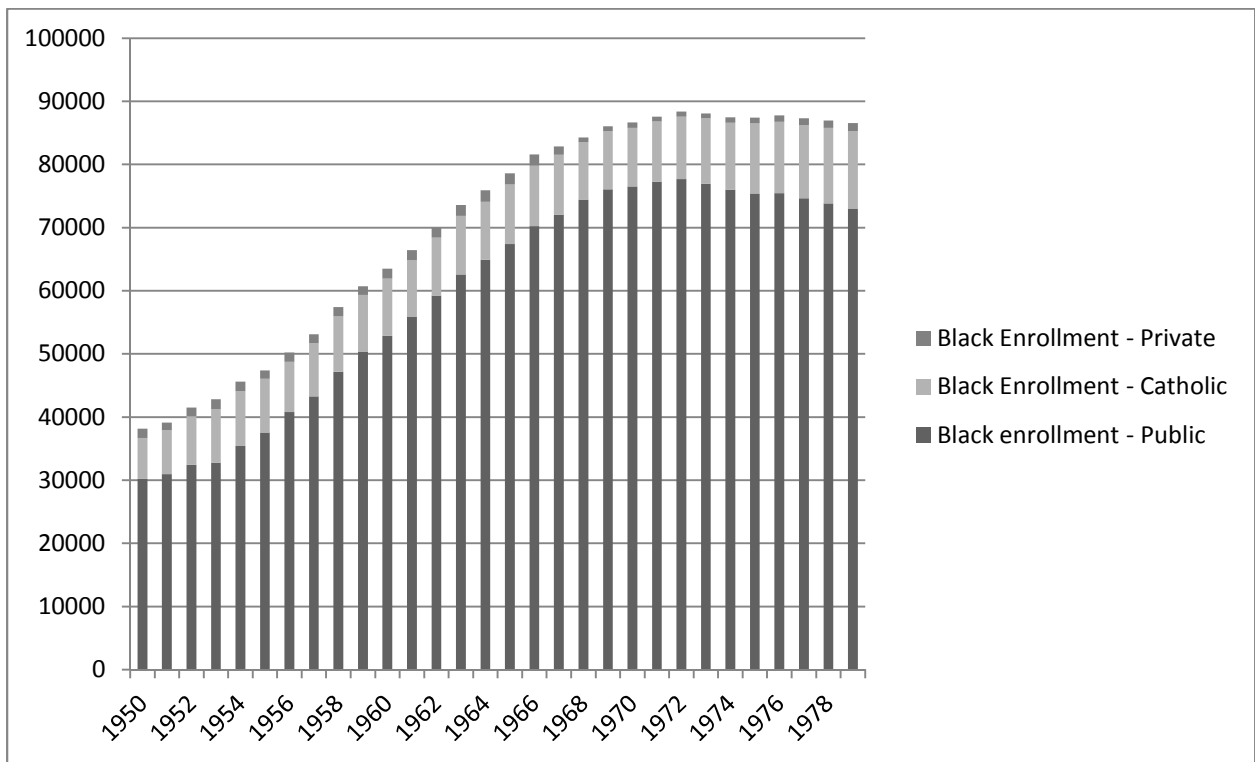


Figure 6 – Black Enrollment in New Orleans, Private, Catholic, and Public 1950-1979

Appendix II – Narrow/Broad Shoulders

My mother always told me I had narrow shoulders
She sewed all of my clothes, but the sleeves were always problematic
She ran those cold scissors around my narrow shoulders, in a semi-circle
To assure a good fit on those narrow shoulders.

Those words always seem to reverberate in me,
“You have narrow shoulders”, as if it were a disability
Was my mother trying to tell me something,
That my shoulders weren’t as broad as hers?

But now, I beg to differ
Not that I would dare argue with my mother
But I’ve come to know better
My shoulders are as broad as hers were.

They’ve carried me through trials, tribulations
Illness, deaths, hurricanes, even breast cancer
Yes, that horrible, insidious, odious, despicable, breast cancer.

My shoulders are broad
Because of breast cancer, I earned my first trip to New York
Because of breast cancer, I’ve helped many women take control of their health.

My shoulders are broad
I work with my high school alma mater where girls are taught morals and values
I raise funds for the American Cancer Society, to help educate and advocate,
I do it for my daughter, granddaughter, nieces.

My shoulders are broad
I dance with an NBA Senior Dance team
I attend NFL games
Go to concerts
Live life with gusto, dance like no one is watching.

I attended the inauguration of the first African-American President
Of the United States of America, Barack Hussein Obama
I witnessed the New Orleans Saints win Superbowl XLIV
As the proud mother of one of the Assistant Coaches.

My shoulders are broad
I can handle anything, I’m a big girl now
I am not disabled, I am ABLE.
Ben Franklin High School is in the past
Breast Cancer is history

No more illness, no more struggles.
I speak my mind, I do as I please
I have no fear, I am a warrior, a conqueror.
I will continue to stand; I will continue to rise.

My shoulders are broad
My shoulders are broad
My shoulders are broad
I'm a bad-ass broad!

A poem by Sharon Carter Sheridan

Vita

The author was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He obtained his Bachelor's degree in History from University of New Orleans in 2012. In 2013, he joined the University of New Orleans History program as a graduate assistant to pursue an MA in History.