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The African-American community of Richmond, Virginia : 1950-1956

Michael Eric Taylor

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The African American Community of Richmond, Virginia:

1950-1956

Michael Eric Taylor

Master of Arts in History

University of Richmond

1994

Dr. R. Barry Westin, Thesis Director

This thesis offers a topical narrative of the history of the African American community of Richmond, Virginia, during the early 1950s. A number of areas are explored including demographics, economic issues, housing, the black business community, the church, social life, education, politics and the battle against segregation. Despite the hardships imposed by segregation, blacks in Richmond formed a vigorous community and during the period 1950 to 1956 won some victories and suffered setbacks in their quest for a better life.

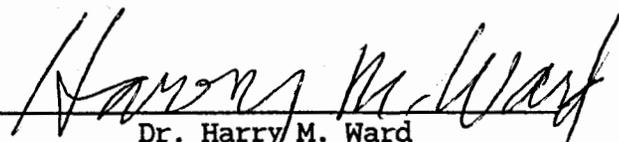
Newspaper accounts from both black and white newspapers in Richmond were the major source for this paper. Government reports, city directories, church documents, census data and journal and magazine articles were also consulted. Interviews were conducted with several people who lived through the period.

APPROVALS

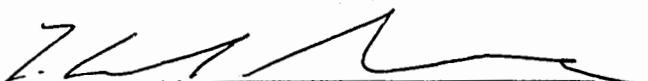
I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



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The African-American Community of Richmond, Virginia:

1950-1956

By

MICHAEL ERIC TAYLOR

B.S., Virginia Commonwealth University, 1974

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the University of Richmond

in Candidacy

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in

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Chapter One

Introduction

In September 1956, black Richmond attorney Oliver W. Hill spoke at a hearing on a bill before the Virginia General Assembly which sought to restrict the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in its fight against segregation. Hill assailed the proposal and accused the lawmakers of trying "to build a Wall of China around Virginia while segregation is breaking down outside the state." He also made a prediction: "This wall will crumble too. You can pass all the legislation you want. You obviously have the power to pass it, but power does not make right."¹

Segregation was still a harsh fact of life for blacks in Richmond during the 1950s. That a black man like Hill could speak so forcefully to the lawmakers and confidently assert that "the wall will crumble" suggests, however, that race relations in the United States were changing and that by 1956 these changes were affecting Richmond. Earlier in the century when Jim Crow was firmly entrenched and any challenge to segregation in Richmond seemed futile, blacks like Hill probably would not have spoken so boldly if they had spoken at all. This study examines the African American community of Richmond between 1950 and 1956 and its thesis centers around four points: 1) The overriding theme of this seven-year period was change. In 1950, segregation was under serious

¹Richmond Afro-American, September 15, 1956.

attack by blacks in the city and was clearly on the defensive by 1956, although it remained a powerful force. 2) The Supreme Court's 1954 decision outlawing segregation in the public schools was a major catalyst for change. The ruling complemented the battle against injustice that blacks had been waging in Richmond with increasing vigor since the end of World War II and showed that through painstaking legal action, segregation could be successfully attacked. At the same time the ruling also touched off Massive Resistance, a last ditch effort by white leaders in Virginia to maintain segregation. This pointed up the resistance any effort to end Jim Crow faced. 3) Black institutions such as the church and social organizations remained strong and played key roles in the battle against racism and in efforts to better the community. 4) Much groundwork for later advances by blacks in Richmond was laid during this period.

During the late nineteenth century, blacks in Richmond had gained a measure of political power but then lost it. The struggle during the 1950s was, in part, an effort to recover some of that power. In 1880, Richmond had a population of 63,000 people of which 27,832 were black. Many African Americans had left the city during the 1870s in search of better opportunities in Northern cities and as a result the relative size of the black population in the city had begun to decline.² But during the period of Readjuster control in Virginia under General William Mahone from 1879 to 1883, blacks played a significant role in

²Michael B. Chesson, Richmond After the War: 1865-1890 (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1981), 101-102.

the city's political life for the first time. For example, two African Americans were appointed to the Richmond School Board. During the 1880s, however, there was a shift in attitude toward the African American in Richmond from "Southern paternalism to Negrophobia." This was because blacks were caught in the middle of a struggle among whites between those who believed that blacks should have some political rights and those who believed they should be returned to a condition of near slavery. The later viewpoint won out so that between 1890 and 1900, blacks in Richmond suffered a steady reversal of political gains made during the previous thirty years.³ Between 1865 and 1895 twenty-five blacks had served in the two branches of the Richmond City Council, eight of them in the decade 1880-1890. Often the entire delegation from Jackson Ward, the black neighborhood north of Broad Street, was black. The last blacks to serve on council were defeated in the May 1896 municipal elections.⁴ These losses were a prelude to an even greater calamity. In 1901, the General Assembly passed legislation for the calling of a constitutional convention whose major goal was the disfranchisement of blacks. Suffrage provisions under the new constitution included a poll tax provision and a requirement that "any prospective voter had to answer under oath to the satisfaction of local

³Joe B. Wilkins, "The Participation of the Richmond Negro in Politics: 1890-1900" (master's thesis, University of Richmond, 1972), 2-4, 63-64.

⁴Virginius Dabney, Richmond: The Story of a City, revised and expanded edition (Charlottesville, Va.: The University Press of Virginia, 1990), 237.

registrars any question pertaining to his qualification as an elector."⁵ In Richmond, the effect of these provisions was devastating. In 1900 the city had 6,427 registered black voters, but that number fell to 760 by 1902. In addition, Jackson Ward, the center of African American life in the city, was gerrymandered out of existence.⁶

These developments gave the African American community in Richmond little cause for optimism in the early years of the twentieth century. Not only had their political rights been curbed, but numerically they were a smaller part of the city. The percentage of blacks in the city's population had dropped steadily from 45 percent in 1870 to 36.6 percent in 1910 and 29 percent in 1927.⁷ Segregation became more firmly entrenched and African Americans were clustered in overcrowded neighborhoods where they lived in cramped, overpriced and poorly constructed buildings. Children went to overcrowded, inferior schools, while their parents could obtain only low-paying, unskilled jobs.⁸ Yet the picture was not entirely bleak because during this same period, black business activity in Jackson Ward thrived. In 1902 alone the Mechanic Savings Bank was founded by John Mitchell and the St. Luke Penny Savings Bank was started by Maggie L. Walker. Still, a 1929 report

⁵Andrew Buni, The Negro in Virginia Politics: 1902-1965 (Charlottesville, Va.: The University Press of Virginia, 1967), 16-18.

⁶Ibid., 24-25.

⁷Dabney, Richmond: The Story of a City, 294.

⁸Samuel C. Shepherd Jr., "Churches At Work: Richmond, Virginia, White Protestant Leaders and Social Change in a Southern City 1900-1929" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1980), 30-31.

summed up what was the lot of many in the African American community:

It had come to be recognized in Richmond and possibly expected that in every division of human welfare, the position of the Negro was immensely disadvantageous and accordingly perhaps dangerous and certainly expensive to the community as a whole. In infant mortality, tuberculosis, venereal disease, homicide, blindness and in every adverse social situation, Negro rates far outstripped the white.⁹

The Great Depression magnified these already pressing social problems, although there were some small signs of progress during the 1930s. In 1933, Ethel T. Overby became the first black woman to be named principal of a public school in Richmond. In 1936 A. S. Richardson of Richmond became the first black to be named to the staff of the State Department of Education and after years of having only one high school, Armstrong High, blacks got their second high school in 1938 with the opening of Maggie L. Walker High.¹⁰

Events before, during and after World War II, however, proved crucial in forcing white Americans to re-evaluate their treatment of their fellow black citizens. In 1941 under pressure from blacks, President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed the Fair Employment Practices Committee, which although limited in its power, committed the federal government to opposing bias in the employment of workers in the defense industries. Black Richmonders were among the more than five hundred

⁹The Negro in Richmond, Virginia: The Report of the Negro Welfare Survey Committee (Richmond: Richmond Council of Social Agencies, 1929), 6.

¹⁰Dabney, Richmond: The Story of a City, 321. The first three black principals, all men, were appointed in 1883. See Chapter Eight.

thousand African Americans who had fought to defeat the Axis powers and their policies of racial tyranny and aggression. Black veterans returning to the United States could clearly see the contradiction of fighting tyranny abroad and facing it at home and thus they were less willing to tolerate the Jim Crow system. Among these returning veterans were men like Oliver W. Hill who became active in the Virginia NAACP, which waged a concerted battle in the courts against segregation.

Increasingly during the late 1940s and the period examined in this study the courts, especially the federal judiciary, ruled in favor of equal rights for blacks. In a similar manner, the integration of the armed forces and other policies of the Truman administration "lent the prestige" of the executive branch to improving the status of African Americans.¹¹ A 1951 editorial in The Crisis, the magazine of the NAACP, summed up the feeling that at mid-century the status of African Americans was changing. "The year 1950 is past, the harvest reaped and the soil now lies ready for the season of 1951. What did we reap in 1950? It is not easy to draw up a balance sheet in race relations. Yet we feel that Negroes reaped more wheat than tares."¹²

Just as these developments were occurring nationally, there were indications in Richmond that the status of blacks was changing. The African American community had chafed under the leadership of conservative Mayor J. Fulmer Bright during the 1920s and 1930s, but in

¹¹John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss Jr., From Slavery to Freedom, 8th ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Co., 1988), 412.

¹²The Crisis, January 1951, 34-35.

1940 a voter registration drive was launched on behalf of Gordon B. Ambler, Bright's challenger in that year's municipal election, which resulted in 2,400 blacks being qualified to vote. They backed Ambler overwhelmingly and contributed to his victory.¹³ During World War II, blacks played a significant role in the Richmond area Office of Price Administration and Civilian Supply. In 1943, black teachers were placed on the same pay scale as whites under a federal court order. In June 1946, the city hired its first black police officers and in 1949 the first black woman joined the force.¹⁴ The highlight of the decade was the election in 1948 of Oliver W. Hill to City Council. The first forty years of the twentieth century had been overshadowed by the statewide disenfranchisement of blacks under the 1902 constitution and the subsequent entrenchment of segregation. It would have been unthinkable during the 1920s or 1930s for a black to have served on City Council or for there to have been black policemen. By 1950 both were a reality and the hiring of the first black fire fighters in 1950 and more such "firsts" were in the offing.

Looking back from the 1990s, one can see that just as 1950 was very different from 1920 or 1930 for blacks, our times are very different from the early 1950s. A majority of Richmond's population is now African American and the mayor, police chief, school superintendent and most members of the City Council are black. The nation's first black

¹³Dabney, Richmond: The Story of a City, 323.

¹⁴Harry M. Ward, Richmond: An Illustrated History (Northridge, Calif.: Windsor Publications, Inc., 1985), 287.

governor, L. Douglas Wilder, who served as governor of Virginia from 1990 to 1994, was a Richmond native. These developments show that the change evident during the 1950s continued for years afterward and brought about the breakthroughs we now sometimes take for granted.

In writing this paper, my intent has been to provide a descriptive account which stressed people and events. The chapters, organized by topic, are admittedly broad in scope. Although I have attempted to provide as complete a portrait of the black community as possible, not every relevant detail may be included. In the chapter on neighborhoods, for example, a number of communities are described, but not every black enclave in the city is discussed. Similarly, because of the large number of black churches, it was not possible to list and describe all of them. Also, although the views of whites as recorded in sources from the period are often given, this paper is presented mainly from an African American perspective. Topics involving Richmond blacks during a particular period have been explored in previous studies such as "The Negro in Richmond: 1880-1890," a master's thesis from 1950 by Thomas E. Walton at Howard University. My efforts to explore the history of African Americans in Richmond during the early 1950s stem from my being a native Richmonder born during that decade and my resulting curiosity about the city during this period. The researching of this topic also allowed me to interview people who had a recollection of the time as opposed to a project on a period long past in which the sources were solely archival.

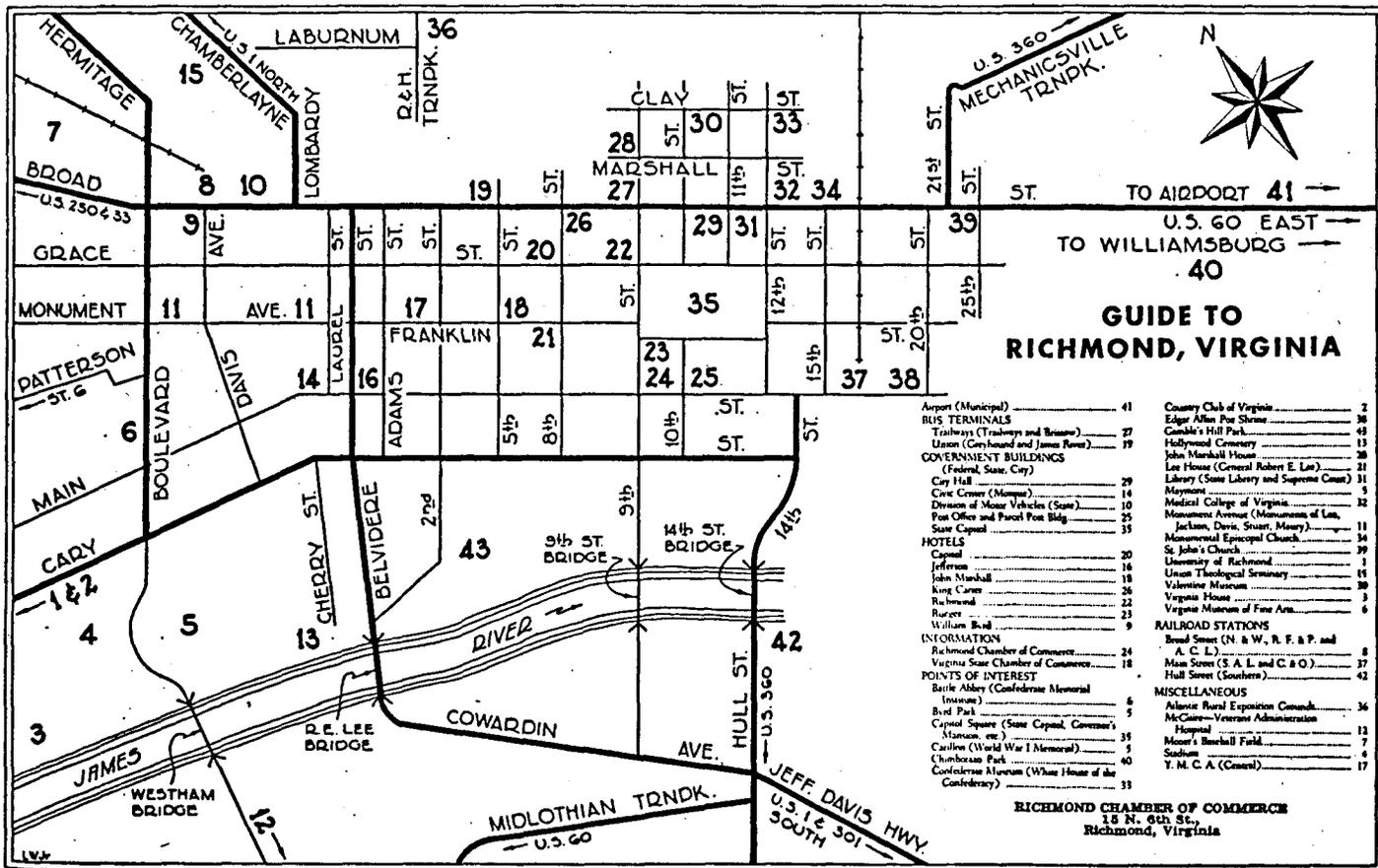
Chapter Two

A Demographic Portrait and Neighborhoods

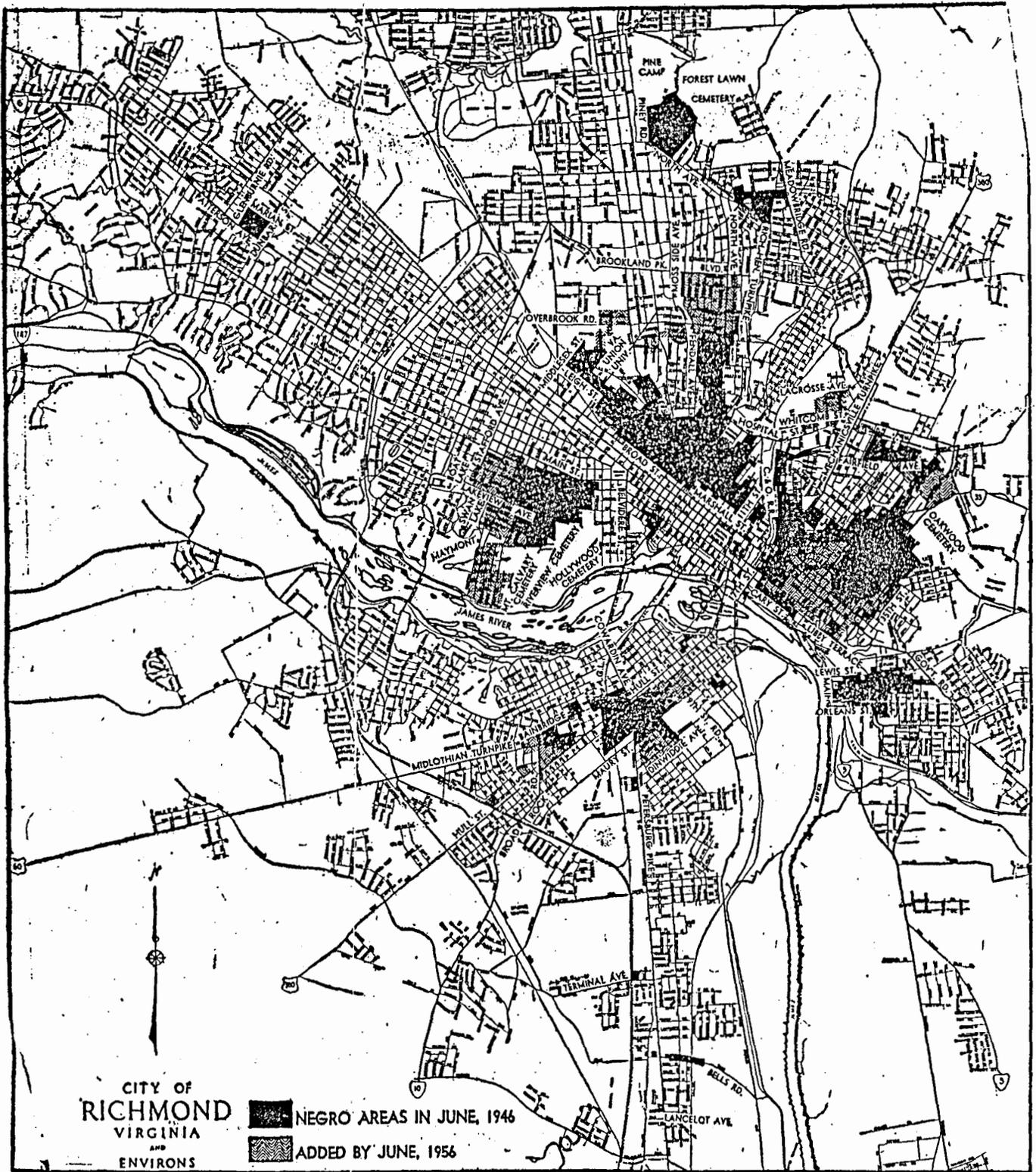
Richmond was in the throes of major demographic change during the 1950s. The city's population dropped from 230,310 in 1950 to 219,958 in 1960, or 4.5 percent, making the decade the first of the century in which the number of residents declined.¹ Even more striking was the racial aspect of this decline. Most of those leaving were white, many of whom headed for Henrico, Chesterfield and other suburban areas. The African American presence in the city, meanwhile, grew, fueled by an in-migration of blacks from rural and other areas and a sharp rise in the black birth rate. While rigid residential segregation was still the norm, the black population, nonetheless, began to seep into neighborhoods that had been formerly all-white such as Barton Heights on the North Side, the near West End and areas of the East End. Other areas like Jackson Ward, the adjoining downtown area and sections in the East End continued as distinct black neighborhoods. No wonder the Richmond Times-Dispatch reported in a 1957 article that postwar "shifts in the Negro-white population pattern have been startlingly rapid."² "White flight" and a growing black population put the capital of Virginia on the road to becoming the black majority city that we know today.

¹U.S. Department of Commerce. Bureau of the Census: 1960 Census of Population, Volume I Characteristics of Population, Part A, Number of Inhabitants. 48-20.

²Richmond Times-Dispatch, December 18, 1957.



Map 1. This map shows central Richmond and nearby areas during the early 1950s. (Source: Richmond City Directory, 1950).



Map 2. This map shows the major black residential areas in Richmond by June 1956. (Source: Richmond Times-Dispatch, January 15, 1957).

Located on the James River in the east-central part of the state, the city covered 39.89 square miles on both sides of the river at mid-century. According to the 1950 census, the 230,310 people within the corporate limits consisted of 73,082 blacks and 157,223 whites, making African Americans 32 percent of the population.³ Of the 73,082 blacks, 34,435 were male and 38,647 were female. The domination of women in the population was a phenomenon evident in earlier decades. In 1920, for example, there had been 54,041 blacks of which 29,345 were female and 24,696 were males. In 1930, there were 52,988 of which 28,634 were females and 24,354 were males.⁴ As a community African Americans were young with most falling in the under thirty age group.⁵ Among Virginia cities, Richmond ranked first in 1950 in terms of the number of African Americans, followed by Norfolk, Portsmouth, Newport News and Roanoke. Richmond was a prosperous and growing city, although blacks did not necessarily share in the prosperity. The city has been described as being in an enviable position, "industrially independent, confident of growth of the industries she had and just as confident that she could bring in new industry."⁶ Tobacco manufacturing remained the city's

³U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of the Census. Census of Population: 1950, Volume II, Characteristics of Population, Part 46, Virginia. (Washington, D.C.: GPO), 1952. 46-60.

⁴Department of Commerce. Bureau of the Census. Negroes in the United States: 1920-1932. Washington, D.C.: GPO), 46-60.

⁵Ibid., 46-93.

⁶James K. Sanford, ed. Richmond: Her Triumphs, Tragedies and Growth (Richmond: Metropolitan Richmond Chamber of Commerce, 1975), 185.

basic industry, but chemicals and allied products were becoming increasingly important in the metropolitan area. Personal income in the city rose from \$551,000,000 in 1950 to \$804,000,000 in 1956.⁷ As one observer noted, Richmond prospered because the mix of production and service industries enabled its residents, "especially its white citizens", to avoid the ravages of unemployment.⁸

Table 1--Richmond's Population 1900-1950

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Black</u>	<u>Black percentage</u>
1900	85,050	52,820	32,230	38 percent
1910	127,628	80,895	46,733	37 percent
1920	171,667	117,626	54,041	32 percent
1930	182,929	129,941	52,988	29 percent
1940	193,042	131,791	61,251	32 percent
1950	230,310	157,223	73,087	32 percent

Source: Richmond, Va., Negro and White Population Trends, report prepared by the staff of the City Planning Commission, (December 1957), 5.

If during the 1950s Richmond was losing whites, earlier in the century she had been gaining them. From just after the Civil War to 1930, the African American population increased, but at a much slower rate than the white population. This was because of the city's annexation of areas containing mostly whites in 1906, 1910 and 1914 while the percentage of blacks was dropping from 44 percent in 1880 to 29 percent in 1930.⁹ In the last annexation before the 1950s, the city

⁷Ibid., 185, 193, 206.

⁸John V. Moeser, The Politics of Annexation: Oligarchic Power in a Southern City. (Cambridge, Mass: Scherkman Publishing Co., 1982), 29-30.

⁹Richmond, Va., Planning Commission. Negro and White Population Trends. (December 1957), 5.

annexed eight square miles of Henrico and 7 1/2 square miles of Chesterfield in 1942. This area contained 22,000 people of whom 20,000 were white. If Richmond had not annexed these areas, the black-white population ratios would have been very different. Beginning in 1930, however, there was a "slow but steady" increase in the percentage of blacks. Despite the 1942 annexation, the black population increased from 29 percent in 1930 to 36.8 percent in 1956.¹⁰ Actually, Richmond had begun to lose white residents during the 1940s when about 1,300 left. From 1950 through 1956, the city actually gained 10,390 residents, but this increase came about by a loss of 5,086 whites and a gain of 15,474 blacks.¹¹ The black population was not only growing locally but statewide and nationally as well. Between 1940 and 1950, the black population of the United States increased 17 percent compared with a 14 percent for whites. During the same period, Virginia ranked high among Southern states showing an increase in black population with 11 percent. This compared with Tennessee with 4 percent, North Carolina with 7 percent, South Carolina with 1 percent and Louisiana with 4 percent.¹²

In Negro and White Population Trends, a 1957 Planning Commission report, the black population growth was attributed to a growing black birth rate and a large in-migration of blacks. In 1954 for the first time, the number of black births exceeded the number of white births.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., 6

¹²Ibid., 2-3.

There were 2,475 white births and 2,530 black births.¹³ The birth rates showed an even bigger divergence. During the mid-1940s, the rates for blacks and whites in Richmond were about even. In 1945, the white rate was 18.0 per 1,000 population and the black rate was 18.1 percent. In 1946, the white rate was 23.0 and the black rate was 23.2. By 1954, however, the white rate was 15.4 per 1,000 population, but the black rate was 32.8. As the Richmond News Leader commented in an editorial, "One does not have to be a professional statistician to see where the trend is heading."¹⁴ The newspaper continued its analysis as follows:

The causes back of this shifting pattern are clear. First, of course, is the migration of young white couples to the suburbs beyond the city limits. Second is the rising economic level of the Negro resident. The result is that colored residents, who constitute 29 percent of the city's population last year produced more than 50 percent of the births.¹⁵

¹³Richmond News Leader, February 16, 1955.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid.

Table 2-- Births in Richmond 1945-1954

Year	White	Rate	Black	Rate
1945	2,786	18.0	1,296	18.1
1946	3,625	23.0	1,525	23.2
1947	3,832	24.2	1,790	26.2
1948	3,303	20.4	1,991	29.3
1949	3,205	19.7	1,998	30.0
1950	2,928	18.6	2,014	27.6
1951	2,910	18.4	2,181	29.2
1952	2,883	18.0	2,226	29.5
1953	2,837	17.6	2,255	29.3
1954	2,475	15.4	2,530	32.8

Source: Richmond Times-Dispatch, February 16, 1955. (Rates are per 1,000 population)

The decline in the city's white population as it moved to surrounding areas, continued throughout the 1950s and has been described as "the suburbanization" of Richmond. The white populations of Henrico and Chesterfield increased dramatically between 1950 and 1960. As the table below shows Chesterfield went from 31,970 whites in 1950 to 61,762 in 1960 and Henrico went from 51,650 to 111,269.¹⁶ Many blacks, on the other hand, were moving from predominately rural Southern communities to the urban centers of the North and Midwest or as in the case of Richmond, Atlanta and Charleston, from the rural South to Southern urban communities.¹⁷

¹⁶James L. Doherty, Race and Education in Richmond. (Privately published in 1972.), 151.

¹⁷Moeser, The Politics of Annexation, 29-30.

Table 3--Richmond, Henrico, Chesterfield 1950-1960

<u>Richmond</u>	<u>1950</u>	<u>1960</u>
Whites	157,228 (68.3%)	127,627 (58.0%)
Blacks	73,082 (31.7%)	92,331 (41.9%)
Total	230,310	219,958

<u>Chesterfield</u>		
Whites	31,970 (79.1%)	61,762 (86.7%)
Blacks	8,430 (20.9%)	9,435 (13.3%)
Total	40,400	71,197

<u>Henrico</u>		
Whites	51,650 (90.1%)	111,269 (94.8%)
Blacks	5,690 (9.9%)	6,070 (5.2%)
Total	57,340	117,339

Source: James L. Doherty. Race and Education in Richmond. (Privately published in 1972.), 151.

Not only was the population increasing, the amount of land occupied by blacks in Richmond had grown considerably by the early 1950s. This change had occurred almost entirely since World War II, and the increase was as much between 1950 and 1956 as it had been in the previous fifty years. From 1900 to 1950, black-occupied land increased from 665 acres to 1,967 acres. Between 1950 and 1956 the number of acres occupied by blacks increased from 1,987 to 3,331.¹⁸ In 1940, twenty census tracts within the city's corporate limits contained 90.8 percent of the black population. In 1950, these same tracts had 5,000 more blacks but consisted of only 83.6 percent of the population. By contrast, twenty-

¹⁸Planning Commission. Negro and White Population Trends, 8-9; Richmond Times Dispatch, December 18, 1957.

five census tracts had fewer whites in 1950 than in 1940. Almost all of the new housing in the region was being built for whites outside central Richmond. Blacks, in turn, were taking over much of the housing in the city that had been abandoned by whites.

The Planning Commission report was very candid in explaining what the increase in black population and the spreading of it meant. "The Negro, the report said, "[has] burst the bounds of forced segregation." African Americans were now moving into large areas of the North Side, Church Hill and the near West End.¹⁹ Before the 1950s, most blacks lived in communities with clearly defined boundaries. The largest community was Jackson Ward, north of Broad Street, and there were smaller neighborhoods in the East End, South Side and the near West End. But by the mid-1950s, the East End was predominately black, blacks moving to North Side had formed a community that was larger than the original Jackson Ward, and a small black community was developing in the West End's Maymont section.²⁰

Identifiable black neighborhoods had long existed in Richmond. In his 1927 study, Negro Housing in Certain Virginia Cities, Charles Knight listed seven areas of the city regarded as black. They were 1) along East Leigh Street. 2) west along Marshall, Clay and Leigh streets 3) Newtowne 4) Fulton 5) along Shockhoe Creek 6) Washington Park 7) Providence Park. There were also smaller detached groupings of blacks in

¹⁹Planning Commission. Negro and White Population Trends, 9.

²⁰Richmond Times-Dispatch, December 18, 1957.

practically every part of the city, except the West End.²¹ In 1927, the West End was in the early stages of development and whites were adamant about keeping blacks out. But a few blacks still had managed to obtain property there, "through the agency of certain real estate agents, if not with the connivance of the white sellers themselves." Many deeds to property in areas like the West End contained restrictive covenants which barred their sale to blacks. Whites saw these as being "in the interest of the community as a whole," and real estate agents whose selling practices were not in accord with them were looked upon with disfavor by white homeowners and the Richmond Real Estate Exchange. Knight noted that Richmond, was "a hotbed of strong opinion" in favor of strictly enforced residential segregation.²² According to Knight, the area containing the greatest number of blacks was just north of Broad Street, having as a southern boundary the south side of Marshall Street and extending northward to Louisa, Moore and Jackson streets and to the valley separating North Richmond from the rest of the city; and extending from Bowe Street on the west to Tenth Street on the east. This area was about two miles long and from one-fourth to one-half mile wide and included about 150 city blocks. Knight estimated that about 7,900 African American families lived within this area. The neighborhood known as Newtowne was west of Brook Road and north of Leigh Street. This was an old black neighborhood that had developed just outside the city

²¹Charles Louis Knight. Negro Housing in Certain Virginia Cities. (Richmond: William Byrd Press, 1927.), 36.

²²Ibid.

limits, and which had become part of the city when it extended its boundaries. Fulton was another old black area in southeast Richmond and Washington Park and Providence Park were on Richmond's northern corporate line and were regarded as middle class black neighborhoods, according to Knight.²³

By the 1950s the portrait of African American neighborhoods painted by Knight had changed, although many of the old areas remained. Jackson Ward's luster was beginning to dim, but it still was perhaps the most important black neighborhood. Explanations differ as to how it got its name but "Jackson" had been associated with the area at least since the 1820s.²⁴ At the beginning of the twentieth century, the name was generally associated with Giles B. Jackson, then one of the most prominent blacks in Richmond. He was the first black admitted to the practice of law before the Supreme Court of Virginia and a leading businessman. Jackson Ward existed as a political subdivision only between 1871 and 1905, when it was gerrymandered out of existence. During the first three decades of the century, however, the ward was the "hub of black professional and entrepreneurial activities in the city and state." Richmond then was the home of a number of black fraternal organizations, cooperative banks, insurance companies and other commercial and social institutions that originated and were located in Jackson Ward. During the 1930s, it was home to about 8,000 African

²³Ibid., 38.

²⁴Richmond, Va. Department of Planning and Community Development. The Jackson Ward Historic District. (1978), 11.

American families.²⁵ Jackson Ward had much of the life knocked out of it during the 1950s because of the building of the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike which with much physical destruction cut off the northern part of the neighborhood. Also, many black middle class families who owned homes in the neighborhood were by the 1950s moving to North Side, Church Hill and other areas. By 1970 Jackson Ward had lost half its population.²⁶

Blacks had long been a presence by mid-century on the streets of central Richmond in and adjoining Jackson Ward. They had moved to Marshall Street during World War I, and by the 1950s, the street was almost entirely black.²⁷ Clay Street, on the other hand, had been a mostly black street since 1923. Free blacks had lived on West Leigh Street since the 1840s, but it became a bona fide black neighborhood during the the first decades of the twentieth century. African Americans had lived on Baker Street since before the Civil War, and Jackson Street had been entirely occupied by blacks since about 1898.²⁸ Second Street had become a predominately black street by 1900 as far south as Leigh Street. By 1905 blacks occupied most of the homes between Clay and Leigh. Second Street became one of the most important streets in the

²⁵Ibid., 11, 22.

²⁶Downtown Richmond, Inc., Jackson Ward: Do The Town. (1992).

²⁷Mary Wingfield Scott. Old Richmond Neighborhoods. (Richmond: William Byrd Press, 1950; reprint 1975), 223 (page numbers are from reprint edition).

²⁸Ibid., 245, 250, 257, 260.

African American community. During the early 1950s, it was still the chief shopping area for blacks and the location of movie houses, shops and hotels between Broad and Jackson. African Americans had first moved into the 500 and 600 blocks of Sixth Street during the early 1920s and by the 1950s it was populated mostly by blacks. Blacks had lived on the southern end of Fourth and Fifth streets since the early twentieth century. In Old Richmond Neighborhoods, Mary Wingfield Scott noted that Fifth was the "more prosperous looking" of the two streets, but seemed less suited as a residential area because it is a main throughfare for those headed to the viaduct going into Highland Park. "Fourth, on the other hand, is a sleepy street that seems to be going nowhere," Scott wrote.²⁹ Scott noted that until 1924, Seventh and Eighth streets were white areas, but that by the end of the 1920s, they had changed to mostly black streets. Blacks had lived in small houses on Ninth Street since the mid-nineteenth century and by the late 1870s occupied half of the 700 block. Tenth Street had been a predominately black street since the mid 1920s.³⁰

Newtowne had come into its own as a black area in the late 1920s. Its boundaries were West Leigh Street, Elizabeth and Middlesex streets and Botetourt Street. It also included the south side of West Leigh Street between Mozelle Street and Allen Avenue. Many of the houses in Newtowne had been built in the early twentieth century for workers who

²⁹Ibid., 284.

³⁰Ibid., 266, 267.

toiled in nearby meat packing plants. During the 1950s it was a stable low-income community with many longtime residents. It was hurt, however by the zoning of the area as industrial in 1927 and again in 1960. This allowed the mixing of industry and housing in close proximity and after the 1960 designation, Newtowne declined.³¹

The Shockhoe Creek area, east of downtown, was another area which had experienced a change in its racial makeup during the first half of the century, but by the 1950s it still had a mixture of white and black. In the 1890s, the area had contained many Italians and a few Jews and only on North Eighteenth Street were there blacks. During the early 1900s, more Jewish entrepreneurs moved in and began to buy stores and houses. But by the 1920s, the number of blacks began to rise and increased steadily on into the 1950s. In Old Richmond Neighborhoods offers a revealing analysis of the area in 1950 describing the familiar pattern of whites moving out as more blacks moved in, although Scott stoops to using stereotypes:

At present the racial pattern is somewhat as follows: Negroes in a good many houses on East Main, on all of Twentieth, on Eighteenth north of Grace and on part of Nineteeth. The remaining whites, largely Eastern European Jews, operate stores in the Market, on Main Street and on the blocks of Eighteenth now given over to business. Like most of their race, they are law abiding and ambitious, and move their homes out of the neighborhoods as soon as possible, even if they still operate stores there. The Negroes are of a rough class given at their most harmless to "playing the numbers" and at their worst to stabbing and shooting offenses.³²

³¹Richmond News Leader, May 20, 1988; March 13, 1990.

³²Scott. Old Richmond Neighborhoods, 85.

Shed Town was another neighborhood in the East End located in the area around Chimborazo Boulevard. Between 1940 and 1950 it had "rapidly changed" from a predominately white area to a black one, although Thirty-Second and Chimborazo was still mostly white. For many years before the 1950s, blacks had lived in the northern part of Shed Town but in the late 1940s and early 1950s more were moving south and west.³³ The area encompassing Union Hill was another East End neighborhood that seemed to be in a state of flux in the early 1950s. It was bounded by Jefferson Avenue on the south and Venable Street on the north. According to Scott, "up until right before the 1950s," this was the only neighborhood except for Oregon Hill and the eastern part of Sydney where whites of "modest means" lived. By the early 1950s blacks were steadily moving into such streets as Twenty-Fifth and Twenty-Fourth. Venable Street was still half black and half white, although blacks were the majority in the western part of the street.³⁴

The name "Church Hill" has often been mistakenly applied to the entire East End, but this neighborhood consists only of the area around St. John's Church and is bounded by Twenty-First Street, Franklin Street, Thirtieth Street and Jefferson Avenue. Church Hill had developed during the nineteenth century as a community of both middle class and poor people of both races. By the 1930s it had evolved from a "nice white neighborhood to a nice black neighborhood of middle-class people."

³³Ibid., 18, 24

³⁴Ibid., 51, 56, 62.

A growing number of blacks, many of them poor, resided there by 1950 with many living in houses built in the early 1800s in the 2300 block of East Franklin Street. Church Hill contains the largest collection of antebellum houses in Richmond, and in the decades after the 1950s became the site of tensions between longtime black residents and white preservationists.³⁵

An article in the Richmond Afro-American in March 1952 offered a description of the larger East End, although again incorrectly labeling the area Church Hill. The article noted that work was then progressing on the Creighton Court housing project which was to house 85 families. On Q Street, the Robinson Theater was a favorite for movie lovers, and was named for Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, the black tap dancer and Richmond native who had died in 1949. There was also a Church Hill branch of the YMCA in the 1000 block of Twenty-Sixth Street which provided such activities as checkers, ping-pong and reading. The Oakwood Playground was a favorite spot for black teen-agers, and a popular meeting place for fraternal and social activities was the Lily of the Valley Hall at Thirty-First and P streets, formerly the home of the Lily of the Valley Beneficial Club. Twenty-Ninth and Q streets was said to be a favorite neighborhood gathering spot, according to one account: "There is a saying that if you stand at 29th and Q streets long enough, you will see everybody in Church Hill. Whether that's true or not is

³⁵Ibid., 29, 39; Richmond Times-Dispatch, March 18, 1984.

debatable, but it is generally agreed that 29th and Q is the most popular area of the community."³⁶

The other major black area in the East End was Fulton, which in Richmond's early decades was tied closely to the economic life of the James River and which was a working class residential, commercial and industrial community. Whites had been a large presence in Fulton for many years, but by 1950, they had left in large numbers and the community was predominately black.³⁷ By then much of the housing was decrepit because speculators had bought many of the dwellings there to operate as slum rentals. The reduced stock of decent housing coupled with the loss of jobs in Fulton caused many young black families to move away during the 1950s.³⁸

Westwood, a black neighborhood on the edge of the West End, had been established by former slaves just after the Civil War. Bounded by Patterson Avenue, Dunbar Street, Glenburnie Road and Stokes Lane, it was a tiny enclave surrounded by white neighborhoods. The area had come into the city from Henrico as part of the 1942 annexation and in the late 1940s and early 1950s, its residents battled to protect and upgrade the community. A proposal to convert the area into a municipal park was defeated and water and sewer services were expanded. Life in Westwood

³⁶Richmond Afro-American, March 29, 1952.

³⁷Christopher Silver, Twentieth-Century Richmond Planning, Politics, and Race (Knoxville, Tenn: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 261.

³⁸Scott C. Davis, The World of Patience Gromes: Making and Unmaking a Black Community (Lexington, Ky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 46.

during the 1950s centered around Westwood Baptist Church, which many residents attended.³⁹

If the aforementioned areas were recognized black neighborhoods, North Side experienced a growing presence of African Americans during the 1950s in Barton Heights, the area bounded by Chamberlayne Avenue on the west, Brookland Park Boulevard on the north, Third Avenue on the east and the railroad tracks to the south. For about the first forty-five years of the twentieth century, Barton Heights was a white middle-class subdivision. The racial barrier was broken, however, in 1942 when its first black resident moved in and by 1960, Brookland Park Boulevard was the line that separated the southern black area, home to many of the city's black professionals and educators, from the northern white one.⁴⁰ In a 1991 article, the Richmond Times-Dispatch offered a description of North Side during the 1950s and early 1960s:

Barton Heights was a middle-and working class neighborhood. Teachers, shopowners, tradesmen, factory workers and clerks lived on both the black and white side of the line. The east was Highland Park, home to mechanics, merchants, salesmen and city workers. To the west were affluent white Ginter Park and Bellevue. Executives and professionals lived in the big houses, office workers in the bungalows. Ginter Park's northern streets dead-ended at a tall hedgerow. Beyond it was an old black working-class village, Washington Park.⁴¹

³⁹Richmond Times-Dispatch, August 3, 1980; Richmond News Leader, October 4, 1989.

⁴⁰Richmond Times-Dispatch, October 9, 1990; August 25, 1991.

⁴¹Ibid., August 25, 1991.

African Americans moved to North Side for a number of reasons. "'I was looking for a better and larger home,'" the Reverend Cary S. McCall, pastor of Mount Tabor Baptist Church for 54 years, said in a 1990 interview published in the Richmond Times-Dispatch. McCall moved from the East End in 1948 to a house in the 2400 block Lamb Avenue. He said that when he and his wife first moved in there were still whites in the neighborhood, but that changed as the number of blacks increased. "'North of us a black family moved in. South of us a black family moved in. Blacks began to move in until the whole street was occupied by blacks,'" he said.⁴² Edgar Duncan recalled a similar occurrence when he moved his family to Monteiro Street because he needed a bigger home. "'When I moved over here [in 1947] white people lived over here. When blacks started coming, they vanished.'" The 1991 Times-Dispatch article described this "white flight" in Barton Heights:

North Side was a racial checkerboard. Few whites lived more than a few blocks from blacks. Most residents were homeowners, and the big houses on large lots along tree-lined streets looked much the same. By the late '50s North Side's color lines had begun to blur.⁴³

Describing the fears of whites as blacks moved in the article quoted one white man as saying, "'A black family moved in on the next street and white people got jittery about property values. It was a 'Why me?' thing.'" Lawrence Charity, who in 1990 was a retired counselor and educator in the Richmond Public Schools, moved to the 2900 block Fendall

⁴²Ibid., October 8, 1990.

⁴³Ibid., August 25, 1991.

Avenue in 1955. "They were renovating downtown and the West End. That's why blacks started coming over in this area." In 1955 Fendall Avenue and the area surrounding were filled with professional people almost all of whom owned their homes, he said. By the 1990s, some parts of Barton Heights were becoming rundown, and Mary Crawford who moved to the 2000 block Lamb Avenue in 1958 with her husband, Dr. Henry S. Crawford Jr., contrasted the Barton Heights of the 1950s with that of the 1990s. "To me it [Barton Heights] was beautiful because most everybody around here were homeowners, and they kept their property up. You could leave your door open. You knew just about everybody around here."⁴⁴ Many of these homeowners were instrumental in the forming of black civic groups. In 1953 the Barton Heights Civic Association was formed and had as its goal the development, improvement and preservation of the North Side area. Among those serving on the executive committee was the Rev. Y. B. Williams, the pastor of First African Baptist Church.⁴⁵

By the early 1950s increasing numbers of blacks were living in the near West End which included Maymont and the larger area known as Sydney, whose boundaries were roughly Cary Street, The Boulevard, the James River and Harrison Street. Nearby was a black enclave known as Randolph. Its boundaries were roughly Idlewood Avenue, Meadow Street, Colorado Avenue, and Harrison Street.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Richmond Afro-American, February 7, 1953.

Across the river there was also a well-defined African American community in South Richmond. Blacks lived in the former Manchester, which had been annexed by Richmond in 1910. They lived along Midlothian Turnpike and in 1951, for example, the area around Nineteenth and Hull streets was said to be like Second and Leigh streets in central Richmond in that it "teems with activity almost all of the time."⁴⁶ Like the East End, South Richmond had a popular playground, the Stockton Street Playground, and a neighborhood theater, the Lincoln Theater on Hull Street, which was the only one for blacks in South Richmond and which could seat nearly 200 people. Many African Americans were employed at the American Tobacco plant on Jefferson Davis Highway and the Miller Manufacturing Company at Sixth and Stockton streets. The center for social and fraternal meetings was the Loving Union Hall at Nineteenth and Decatur streets.⁴⁷ South Richmond also contained the neighborhoods of Blackwell and Bainbridge. Blackwell, bounded by Commerce Road on the east; Hull Street on the north; Cowardin Avenue and Jefferson Davis Highway on the west and Dinwiddie and Chicago Avenues on the south, was a "long established black community." Bainbridge, bounded by Commerce Road on the east, Cowardin Avenue on the west, Hull Street on the south and Semmes Avenue on the north, had been a middle class white neighborhood during the first half of the twentieth century but during

⁴⁶Ibid., August 18, 1951.

⁴⁷Ibid.

the 1950s and 1960s changed over to an area for lower income blacks.⁴⁸

The areas that could be described as black neighborhoods were clearly changing during the 1950s. Despite the best efforts of whites to maintain a rigid residential segregation, a growing number of African Americans moved into formerly all-white sections of North Side, the near West End and the East End. That segregation seemed no longer able to keep blacks confined was a significant development. Large-scale integration of neighborhoods did not occur since these new areas were predominately black and whites in increasing numbers were flocking to the surrounding counties. African Americans, however, were on the move and determined to live wherever they could afford. But as this migration caused new black areas to blossom, the neighborhoods left behind such as Fulton and Blackwell often wilted because many of the exiting blacks were among the more affluent. Today in the 1990s, these two neighborhoods and others like it are economically depressed and struggling to regain stability. Although the moving of blacks to new sections of the city was a welcome achievement during the 1950s, clearly it also had a downside.

⁴⁸Richmond, Va. City of Richmond, United Way of Greater Richmond and Virginia Commonwealth University. Bainbridge Blackwell Community Needs Assessment, A Call to Action. A Cooperative Study February 1987.

Chapter Three

The Economic Status of Richmond's African Americans

Just as the Great Depression had held the United States in the grip of hard times during the 1930s, the years after World War II were a time of prosperity and this upturn extended to Richmond. Between 1948 and 1968 the gross national product of the United States, adjusted for inflation, grew at a phenomenal rate of 4 percent annually. This economic expansion narrowed the gap between rich and poor and pushed many into the middle class.¹ Richmond was helped by the diversity of its economy which was based on its being a major center for tobacco and its products, metals, pharmaceuticals, paints, food products, fertilizer and its products. It was also a regional banking and insurance center and many major firms had regional, national or international offices in the city. The city was thus able to avoid major economic problems "prior to and during the white exodus of the postwar period."² In 1951, for example, there were 132,750 non-agricultural workers in the city with 38,700 of those employed in manufacturing.³ This rosy economic picture, however, did not extend to African Americans. Despite the economic diversity, the unemployment rates for blacks in Richmond was usually

¹Michael Barone, Our Country: The Shaping of America from Roosevelt to Reagan (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 197-198.

²John V. Moeser, The Politics of Annexation: Oligarchic Power in a Southern City (Cambridge, Mass: Scherkman Publishing Co., 1982), 31.

³U.S. Department of Labor. Occupational Wage Survey, Richmond, Virginia, Bulletin No. 1058, October 1951., 1.

twice that of whites, and blacks were usually relegated to low-paying jobs.⁴

The employment situation for African Americans in Richmond mirrored the one nationally. In 1950, for example, the jobless rate for whites was 3.8 percent and 10.5 percent for blacks. Still, there were signs that employment opportunities for blacks had improved since 1940. This improvement was caused by more blacks shifting to non-agricultural jobs which were better paying and not as concentrated in the traditionally unskilled and low-wage sectors.⁵ While agriculture and the service industries remained the largest sources of black employment during the early 1950s, they were considerably less important in the total job picture than in 1940. In 1940 more than two-thirds of all employed blacks worked in either agriculture or the service industry. In 1950, one-fifth of blacks were in agriculture and one-third were in the service sector. The move away from farm work was related, of course, to the black population becoming more urban and migrating to cities like Richmond. The improvement in employment was also aided during the 1940s and early 1950s by the federal government's efforts to promote better job opportunities through the Fair Employment Practices Committee; subsequent executive orders from President Truman prohibiting discrimination in the federal civil service and the armed services; and

⁴Moeser, The Politics of Annexation, 31.

⁵Mary S. Bedell. "Employment and Income of Negro Workers," Monthly Labor Review. U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (June 1953), 596.

the adoption by eleven states and twenty-five municipalities of some form of fair employment practice legislation between 1945 and 1952, although neither Richmond nor Virginia did this.⁶ This upturn in the employment fortunes of blacks nationally had a major effect on incomes and pointed to a significant development: a growing number of blacks were entering the middle class. Between the late 1930s and the early 1950s, the annual earnings of non-white workers tripled.⁷ In 1939, 3.7 percent of black families earned between \$3,000 and \$5,000 a year. In 1950, the percentage had risen to 17.8 percent. In 1939 only one-tenth of one percent of black families earned \$5,000 or more a year, but by 1950 this has risen to 5.4 percent. The number of black families earning between \$2,000 to \$3,000 a year rose from 1.6 percent in 1939 to 23.5 percent in 1950. As one observer put it, "Thousands of have nots have suddenly become haves."⁸ Despite the improvements, the median income for black wage and salaried workers in 1950 was \$1,295 or 48 percent less than for comparable white workers. The median annual income of black families in 1950 was \$1,869 or 54 percent of the \$3,445 average for white families.⁹

In July 1955 the Richmond Urban League released a study which offers a closer examination of the economic fortunes of African Americans in

⁶Ibid., 597-598.

⁷Richmond Afro-American, July 31, 1954.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Bedell. "Employment and Income of Negro Workers," Monthly Labor Review. 600-601.

Richmond. The study showed that the median income for black families in Richmond in 1950 was \$1,565 and \$3,133 for whites.¹⁰ Sixty-five percent of black families earned less than \$2,000 but only 27 percent of comparable whites earned that. Nine percent of the black families had incomes of as much as \$3,500 while 45 percent of whites had incomes of that much.¹¹ An analysis of predominately black census tracts shows similar trends. In N-6, a downtown tract, with 2,065 families the median income was \$1,360 and the largest concentration was in those who earned less than \$500 a year and those who earned between \$1,000 and \$1,499. The median income was \$1,385 with a majority earning less than \$500 a year in N-3, also a downtown tract, with 1,875 families. In E-4, an East End area with 1,385 families, the median income was \$1,750 with a majority earning between \$1,500 to \$1,999 a year.¹²

What was the reason for the dismal income levels of blacks and the disparity between white and black? A 1954 editorial in the Richmond Afro-American blamed segregation and racism.

The jim crow system recently discredited by the United States Supreme Court, confines a large segment of the population to menial jobs, and categorically denies this group certain skilled, semi-skilled and professional jobs solely on the basis of color. A typical southern daily classified section offers 74 jobs to white female applicants. The jobs are artist, assistant clerks, bank

¹⁰Richmond Times-Dispatch, July 11, 1955.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²U.S. Department of Labor. Bureau of the Census, 1950 Census Report, Census Tract Statistics Richmond, Virginia Table 4 Characteristics of the Nonwhite Population for Selected Census Tracts (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1952), 22.

clerks, cashier, clerk-typist, file clerk-typist, general clerk, lab technician, salesgirl, secretaries stenographers and waitresses. The first qualification for each job is that you be white. Not that this will aid you in performing the duties, but simply because the law and custom of the land have been that these are "white jobs." But there are also jobs for colored women. The paper I studied carried 10 such openings. The jobs were for cooks, house keepers, maids, shirt press operators, silk finisher and a wool or silk spotter. The same pattern held true in the jobs offered men. White men were wanted as advertising salesmen, district managers, awning mechanics, awning salesmen, barbers, cab drivers, painters, crane operators, lithe pressmen, electrician's helpers, tractor-trailor drivers, and as finance company adjustors. In all 55 jobs were offered. Seven jobs were offered colored men. These were as chef, cook, dump-truck driver, silk or wool spotter, taxi drivers and wool presser. It seems to me that denying a man or woman a chance to earn a decent living is denial of a fundamental right.¹³

The editorial noted that of the more than 21,000 black men working in the Richmond metropolitan area, nearly 50 percent were employed as laborers or service workers. Only 7 percent were skilled craftsmen and 24 percent were semi-skilled workers. The editorial cited examples of the paucity of blacks in high-paying professional positions. Of the 1,360 accountants and auditors in Richmond, six were black. Of the 97 architects, one was black; of the 360 chemists, six were black; of the 450 designers and craftsmen only four were black and of the 54 social scientists only one was black.¹⁴ An analysis of census tract data, confirms this pattern of a preponderance of blacks in lower-paying jobs. Of the 1,218 males in the N-3 census tract only 35 were listed under the professional, technical or kindred workers category. The majority, 338, were listed under the service worker category. The rest were listed as

¹³Richmond Afro-American, June 12, 1954.

¹⁴Ibid.

follows: laborers, 293; operatives and kindred workers, 271; craftsmen and foremen, 112; clerical, 56; managers, 50; private household workers, 26 and sales workers, 26.¹⁵ Fifty-two of the 1,033 females were listed in the professional category, while 395, a majority, were listed under the private household worker category. The rest were listed as follows: service workers, 354; operatives and kindred workers, 143; clerical, 45; laborers, 12; managers, 19; sales workers, 9; and craftsmen, 7.¹⁶

While the Richmond Afro-American editorial assailed the discrimination blacks faced in the workplace, a 1954 Richmond Urban League report was critical of the job choices of many African Americans, especially the more affluent ones. The report charged that "thousands of jobs were going begging" because of a lack of trained workers while blacks continued to train in large numbers to be teachers or ministers¹⁷. There was a dire need for vocational training to divert more black youngsters to fields where critical shortages exist, the report said. One glaring example of this was the Richmond Public Schools system where in 1954 there were approximately 500 qualified school teachers on its waiting list, the report said. One school official was quoted as saying, "We have enough colored teachers to last us for the next ten years."¹⁸ The report noted that in previous decades positions

¹⁵Bureau of the Census, 1950 Census Tract Statistics Richmond, Virginia 22.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Richmond Afro-American, March 13, 1954.

¹⁸Ibid.

in teaching and the ministry were among the few available to an African American who wanted a good, steady job with some prestige. But the report argued that this situation was changing in the 1950s, and it cited employment with the federal government in such positions as chemists, dieticians, social workers and nurses as job opportunities blacks could seek and face less discrimination than in the private sector. Several well-known black educators endorsed the findings in the report. J. Rupert Picott, president of the Virginia Teachers Association, the teacher organization for African Americans, said, "We have too long looked upon teaching, preaching and medicine as the great avenues of progress and for the most part have missed newer fields such as chemistry, physics, vocational and business pursuits, which loom large today in our workaday world."¹⁹ Dr. Charles S. Johnson, president of Fisk University, offered an assessment of the problems faced by African Americans in the workplace that was somewhat at odds with the viewpoint of the Richmond Afro-American editorial. He argued that racial discrimination, both in the North and the South, was "fading faster than qualified colored persons are appearing to fill jobs."²⁰

Despite the predominance of African Americans in Richmond in low-paying jobs, the city, like many black communities, had long had a sizable group of prominent lawyers, doctors, ministers and the like who formed the middle and upper classes. E. Franklin Frazier, the noted

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

African American sociologist, noted in an article published in the 1950s that the number of middle class blacks was generally greater in the North than in the South. He said this was because the economic roots of the black middle class in the South was mainly in the black community itself.²¹ A good example in Richmond of the prominent middle-to-upper class black who had made good was J. Thomas Hewin Sr., who was described by the Richmond Afro-American as being the "dean" of Richmond's black lawyers.²² While many of his fellow black Richmonders were struggling to make ends meet, Hewin lived on North First Street in a \$125,000 home. Then in his mid-eighties, Hewin was a founder of the Richmond Branch NAACP, chairman of the board of Consolidated Bank and Trust Company and its second largest stockholder. In a 1954 interview he gave his formula for success:

I would advise all young people to work hard and save their earnings; it is the only way to achieve financial independence. The ability to save money is the ultimate test of human character, and any man or race which cannot save money may as well drop out of the race, he will never succeed. Colored citizens can do much to improve their plight if they will only save their earnings.²³

Whether working-class blacks in Richmond were following Hewin's advice is unclear. But what is clear is that blacks worked at a variety of jobs even if they were low-paying and the Richmond Afro-American periodically spotlighted some of these workers. In 1953, for example,

²¹E. Franklin Frazier. "The Negro Middle Class and Desegregation," Social Problems April 1957. 294.

²²Richmond Afro-American, September 11, 1954.

²³Ibid.

Ben Hamilton of West Marshall Street usually punched in around 8 a.m. at a local cold storage company. Hamilton liked his work as a laborer but said the hardest part of it was "unloading boxcars."²⁴ Luther Allen of Page Street was a driver for a local paper company. The busiest season for him was right before Christmas "when the demand for paper and containers is at its peak."²⁵ In 1954, George Edwards of East Marshall Street had worked at B&F Poultry House for twenty-two years as a chicken cleaner. A fellow worker dipped chickens in hot water then passed them to Edwards who cleaned the birds on a machine.²⁶ L. T. Johnson of East Leigh Street had been selling fruits and vegetables from his wagon for forty-six years in 1954, and said that cabbage was one of his best sellers. Roy Hayes of North Third Street and Randolph Granderson of East Clay Street worked for a lumber and mill work company. Hayes was the driver of the truck and Granderson was the helper as they loaded trucks with lumber and made deliveries.²⁷

Not all of the steadily working in the black community were adults. One common sight on the streets of downtown Richmond during the 1950s was the black shoe shine boys. These teen-agers, mostly between the ages of twelve and sixteen, had to obtain a permit from the city to shine shoes. They were said to do a profitable business "which gains the envy

²⁴Ibid., December 12, 1953.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid., February, 27, 1954.

²⁷Ibid., February 6, 1954.

eye of some shoe shine parlor proprietors." In 1952 there were 154 licensed youngsters and about 500 "bootleggers" who worked without licenses. Caesar Wilkins, fourteen, of East Leigh Street was typical of the shoe shine boys in that he was well-skilled in the trade and its shoptalk. According to Wilkins, "Give the boss a gloss and knock the toe nail off," was a tip-off to his fellow shiners to give a particular customer a fast shine because he only tips a nickel. Douglass Knight, also fourteen, worked at the corner of Fourth and Broad streets, the busiest corner after Fifth and Broad.²⁸

While these people appeared to have steady work, the unemployed and those who worked only sporadically were at the bottom of the economic ladder. According to one researcher, the black lower class in Southern cities then was made up of low-income, unskilled, untrained and poorly educated people many of whom were recent migrants from nearby rural areas and small towns.²⁹ Even then it was evident to some that the gap between these poor and the more upwardly mobile African Americans was growing. With many blacks moving to new areas like Northside in the 1950s, Richmond seemed to fit the pattern described by Hylan Lewis in his 1954 article "Innovations and Trends in the Contemporary Southern Negro Community":

²⁸Ibid., August 30, 1952.

²⁹Hylan Lewis. "Innovations and Trends in the Contemporary Southern Negro Community." The Journal of Social Issues (Volume X, Number 1, 1954): 23.

To the extent that the increased income of the upwardly mobile Negro permits him to develop new residential areas or to take over the better abandoned housing of whites, the lower income Negro is confined to slum dwellings or, if fortunate, to low-cost housing projects.³⁰

A 1952 article in the Richmond Afro-American described what the newspaper found in some of the poorest sections of the African American community:

We have visited various sections of the city and found poorly clad and nearly starving families in dire need of help. In some cases, the families are living off a diet that would not be eaten by your family pet. Some of the youngsters are so shabbily clothed that it is a miracle they have not died of exposure. One thirteen-member family was living in a two-room flat.³¹

According to documents from the city's Department of Public Welfare "approximately 90 percent" of those receiving assistance from the agency were black.³² A 1954 study examined the Aid to Dependent Children program in Richmond by comparing January to June in 1952 and 1953. Of a total of 266 accepted applications for assistance in 1952, 92 or 76 percent were from blacks and 29 or 24 percent were from whites. In 1953, 129 or 89 percent were from blacks and 16 or 11 percent were from whites. Assistance was sought mainly because of disablement or loss of the wage earner, which was usually due to death, desertion or incarceration. The average grant was \$68 in 1952 and \$71.80 in 1953. The financial status of all applicants was investigated before any

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Richmond Afro-American, December 20, 1952.

³²Richmond, Va. Department of Public Welfare. Annual Report 1953-1954 and Summary of Activities July 1948 to June 1953, 13.

assistance was granted, and the study revealed that a vast majority of those applying were practically destitute. Of the 1952 group, 81 or 67 percent had no resources available at the time of application while 98 or 70 percent had no resources in 1953. The authors' conclusion seems to suggest that the recipients of ADC grants, most of them African American, were not freeloaders but people who were in desperate financial straits: "It would appear from our study that the applicants were in need and that they used the resources of the ADC program during the emergent crisis that made continued self-support impossible."³³

One area where Richmond blacks were pushing to get more jobs during the 1950s was with the city government. As late as the 1930s African Americans in Richmond and in other Virginia cities were systematically excluded from most jobs with cities. Richmond, for example, had an "unwritten law" that barred blacks from all but a few city jobs. In 1937, there were 3,304 city employees, but only 281 were black and 273 of them were school teachers.³⁴ In 1941 Elizabeth B. Gaiters became the first black to be hired for a professional position other than a teacher when she became the first black nurse in the city's Health Department.³⁵ But it wasn't until May 1944 that Richmond got its first twenty-six

³³ Jack Burnstein, Christine Cunningham, William E. Goldsmith and Eleanor G. Wooten, "Characteristics of 266 Aid to Dependent Children Recipients Accepted for Assistance During the Period of January through June of 1952 and from January through June of 1953" (master's thesis, Richmond Professional Institute, 1954), 14-31; 352.

³⁴ Writers Program of the Works Projects Administration in Virginia, The Negro in Virginia (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1940), 319-320.

³⁵ Richmond Times-Dispatch, November, 18, 1959.

African American street cleaners and they worked apart from their white counterparts and only in certain sections of the city. "The employment of Negroes in some city bureaus has been a hot political question for some time," the Richmond News Leader noted after the black street cleaners were hired.³⁶ Discrimination in the hiring for city jobs drew strong criticism from blacks as evidenced by a 1955 letter to City Councilman Robert C. Throckmorton from Grover C. Grant, a black resident who lived on Lakeview Avenue. Grant said he believed that discrimination was a violation of "not only the spirit but the letter of The Charter of the City of Richmond on the part of the director of Personnel and the Personnel Board."³⁷ Grant noted, as did the Richmond Afro-American editorial cited earlier, that this bias was blatantly evident in the newspaper ads for city jobs:

In recruiting personnel for the Classified Service of our City government the advertisement is always directed to our white citizens only. The implication is that non-white citizens no matter how qualified cannot apply for a position in the classified service of our city government.³⁸

Grant called for the elimination of race designations for city jobs and an emphasis on qualification irrespective of race.

In 1951 a Richmond Urban League study reported that the city had 366 black municipal employees out of a total of 3,134 excluding school

³⁶Richmond News Leader, May 18, 1944.

³⁷Richmond Afro-American, July 16, 1955.

³⁸Ibid.

workers.³⁹ Richmond was ranked seventh among sixteen major Southern city governments in the hiring of African Americans. Houston with 1,007 black employees topped the list, and Norfolk, the only other Virginia city included in the study, was third with 663. Richmond ranked sixth in the number of blacks employed in managerial or professional positions with thirty-four. Norfolk with eighty-six blacks employed in such positions ranked first. Most of the black city workers in Richmond, or 251, were employed in service or unskilled occupations. There were 34 employed in the semiprofessional category; 31 in the semiskilled category; 14 in the skilled; and 2 in clerical. Most blacks, or 155, worked for the Public Works Department while others worked in the Health Department, 61; Recreation and Parks Department, 61; Welfare Department, 54; Safety Department, 21; courts employees, 9; and library employees, 5.⁴⁰

City officials, however, were becoming more receptive in the early 1950s to hiring more blacks for municipal jobs partly in response to pressure from the black community and groups such as the Richmond Urban League and because of a high white turnover in some positions. Between 1949 and 1952, the city employed African American workers for the first time in nineteen different job categories formerly filled by whites only. These included building maintenance repairman, clerk, clerk-typist, detective sergeant, dietitian, elevator operator, fire fighter,

³⁹Richmond News Leader, July 11, 1951.

⁴⁰Ibid.

heavy-duty truck operator, laundry foreman, meter reader, nurse supervisor, sanitarian, practical nurse, senior social worker and hospital laboratory technician.⁴¹ In 1952 the city's Personnel Department and City Manager Sherwood Reeder were said to believe that the city's African American population represented "the largest existing untapped labor supply of unskilled, semiskilled and skilled workers."⁴² At the end of 1955, the Urban League did a second study to assess the progress made in hiring blacks and concluded that while strides had been made, much remained to be done.⁴³ The number of blacks employed by the city had increased from 366 in 1950 to 956 in 1955 or a 161 percent increase. The report noted, however, that blacks were still not being employed in substantial numbers in clerical positions, stenographic jobs and bookkeeping positions. Not until June 1962 did City Council formerly adopt the policy that "race shall cease to be a consideration" in employment with the city.⁴⁴

As the city began to hire more African Americans there were a number of "firsts." M.A. Rasin was hired in 1951 and became the first African American sanitarian in both Richmond and Virginia. In a 1985 interview just before his retirement, Rasin recalled that when he graduated from Delaware State College in 1948 with a degree in

⁴¹Ibid., June 21, 1952.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid., December 20, 1955.

⁴⁴Ibid., September 13, 1963.

environmental health, "segregation was the watchword and jobs were scarce for black college graduates."⁴⁵ After he moved to Richmond he could only find work as a porter at Miller & Rhoads department store before landing his job with the city. As a Health Department sanitarian, Rasin was responsible for correcting problems affecting health in the city such as restaurant cleanliness and rodent problems. Rasin recalled that at first, he was greeted with surprise in some white stores and restaurants as he made his rounds and with hostility in others. Blacks, on the other hand, sometimes expected him to go easier on them if they had any violations. But over time this changed as whites adjusted and blacks realized that, "I would call them as I saw it, Rasin said."⁴⁶

Two other areas of city employment where there were "firsts" during the late 1940s and early 1950s were in the hiring of black policemen and fire fighters. Black leaders in Richmond had long pushed for the hiring of black policemen. In the 1930s, for example, the Reverend Joseph T. Hill, pastor of Second Baptist Church, had led an unsuccessful effort for such hirings.⁴⁷ The first black policemen were finally hired in 1946 with the support of Safety Director James C. Anthony and Mayor William C. Herbert. The four were Frank S. Randolph, John W. Vann, Howard T. Braxton and Doctor P. Day. By mid-1953, there were fifteen black policemen, one black policewoman, Randolph had been promoted to

⁴⁵Richmond Times-Dispatch, April 25, 1985.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid., October 18, 1936.

detective sergeant and Vann had been made a detective.⁴⁸ The hiring of blacks in significant numbers as policemen in the South was essentially a postwar phenomenon. In 1940, there were not more than 50 black policemen in the entire South. White Southerners generally were not too keen on having black officers with the power to arrests whites. By 1954, however, there were approximately 822 black police personnel employed by 165 law enforcement agencies in the South.⁴⁹ Between 1954 and 1959 there would be further improvement but not by much. One study showed that Richmond was among the larger cities which had a low ratio of black police officers to every one thousand black inhabitants. In 1949 the ratio for Richmond was .10; in 1954 it was .29; and in 1959 it was .27.⁵⁰ Still there would be slow progress in increasing the numbers of black police officers in Richmond and improving their assignments. By 1963, for example, Richmond Police Chief John M. Wright had began a plan to ease racial barriers within the bureau and by that year the city had thirty-three black police officers.⁵¹ Richmond was described in a 1961 study as being a city where black policemen faced no restrictions in arresting white offenders.⁵²

⁴⁸Richmond Afro-American, June 13, 1953.

⁴⁹Elliott Rudwick, "Southern Negro Policemen and the White Offender", The Journal of Negro Education (Volume 30, Fall 1961): 426.

⁵⁰Elliott Rudwick. "Negro Police Employment in the Urban South" The Journal of Negro Education, (Vol 30, Spring 1961): 102, 105, 107.

⁵¹Richmond News Leader, June 14, 1963; September 12, 1963

⁵²Rudwick, "Southern Negro Policemen and the White Offender", The Journal of Negro Education, 426.

While the first black policemen had been hired in 1946, the first black fire fighters were not hired until May 1950. Ten black men were hired from more than two hundred applicants and assigned to Engine House Number Nine, an all-black station house under the supervision of white officers located at Fifth and Duvall streets.⁵³ The fact that they were assigned to an all-black unit drew a terse comment from the Richmond Afro-American: "The only fly in the ointment in the opinion of local citizens is that fact that the City of Richmond, although forced to begin the program with a mixed affair (white officers and colored firemen) plans to make the move a jim crow one."⁵⁴ But even the conservative Richmond Times-Dispatch voiced approval at the hiring of the black fire fighters and of more blacks in city jobs in general:

The city administration is to be commended for its decision to employ Negro firemen to man the station located at Fifth and Duvall Streets in the heart of a Negro residential and business district. Experience of recent years has shown that Negro citizens can be of great service to their city in important municipal positions.⁵⁵

On the first anniversary of the hiring of the fire fighters the Richmond Afro-American paid tribute to the ten pioneers who were: William Brown, Oscar Blake, Douglas Evans, Warren Kersey, Arthur Page, Bernard Lewis, Charles Bell, Linwood Woolridge, Fred Robinson and Harvey S. Hicks. The newspaper noted that in their first year, the men had gained expertise

⁵³Richmond Afro-American, May 13, 1950.

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Richmond Times-Dispatch, May 8, 1950.

in everything from "rescuing children from beneath bathtubs" to fighting major fires. The newspaper also noted:

The ten who were formerly chefs, college students or businessmen will celebrate their first anniversary June 28 at the engine house at Fifth and Duvall streets with the knowledge that not a single person in distress has mentioned the color of their skin.⁵⁶

Among the ten men, Hicks would rise rapidly through the ranks. In 1955 he would be the first black fire fighter promoted to lieutenant and in 1961 to captain of the all-black unit. He was killed in 1963 at the age of thirty-nine while trying to rescue a man at a cave-in site.⁵⁷ By July 1963 when the city's twenty-eight fire companies were integrated, there were thirteen black fire fighters.⁵⁸

In addition to seeking more jobs with the city African Americans in Richmond also pursued employment with the other government entities, especially the federal government. Positions with the United States Post Office were especially coveted and blacks had held jobs with that agency for years. Letter-carrier positions were based upon civil service examinations thus allowing blacks to avoid the discrimination often found in the private sector. By taking and passing these examinations they were able to "wedge their way into this field." It has been estimated that as early as the late 1930s blacks delivered 65 percent of the mail in Virginia cities.⁵⁹ Richmond was the home of a very active

⁵⁶Richmond Afro-American, May 26, 1951.

⁵⁷Richmond Times-Dispatch, June 15, 1963.

⁵⁸Richmond News Leader, July 4, 1963.

⁵⁹Works Projects Administration in Virginia, The Negro in Virginia, 320.

chapter of the National Association of Letter Carriers, the black postmen's group. During the early 1950s Postmaster Fergus McRee and Representative J. Vaughan Gary often attended functions sponsored by this group.⁶⁰

The early 1950s would also see the beginnings of the breaking down of barriers between black and white professional groups. A good example was in 1953 when the Old Dominion Graduate Nurse Association, a group of black nurses in Virginia, disbanded after thirty-seven years and was integrated into the white Graduate Nurses Association of Virginia. The Richmond Afro-American noted that many hoped the merger would "serve as a model for other professionals aiming at integration into the organizations of their professions."⁶¹

Despite whatever gains African Americans were making in employment in Richmond and Virginia, it was estimated in 1955 that one out of every three African Americans in Virginia would eventually leave the state in search of better job opportunities.⁶² A report by the Bureau of Population and Economic Research of the University of Virginia showed that as late as the mid-1950s blacks were still not being hired for many white collar jobs in the private sector and in city and state governments. This caused many black college graduates, for example, to either settle for employment in teaching, the Post Office and the

⁶⁰Richmond Afro-American, January 21, 1950.

⁶¹Ibid., June 27, 1953.

⁶²Ibid., April 2, 1955.

ministry or to leave the state.⁶³ Overall, blacks seemed to be making some progress in improving their employment opportunities in Richmond during the 1950s, but discrimination remained the norm and really significant gains were still years way.

⁶³Ibid.

Chapter Four

Housing, Health and Crime

The Richmond Times-Dispatch noted in an article in early 1956, "Metropolitan growth not only brings progress and prosperity. It sows the seeds of future stagnation and blight."¹ Although Richmond shared in the prosperity of the postwar era, it still faced serious social problems during the 1950s such as a lack of space for residential and industrial expansion and growing traffic congestion in the central business district.² The biggest problem, however, and one that especially affected African Americans, was the poor condition of a large part of the housing in the city. In 1951, the Southern Regional Council released a report which said that Richmond was one of seven Southern cities where twice as many blacks lived in dilapidated houses than did whites.³ Little had changed by the middle of the decade when the problem of bad housing was described in 1956 as "massive," with one-third of the city's 66,000 dwelling units failing to meet the Health Department's minimum sanitation requirements. The city was said to have a "rotting core."⁴ Reuben Clay, racial relations officer for the Federal Housing Administration in Richmond for many years, noted in 1954

¹Richmond Times-Dispatch, January 2, 1956.

²Ibid., January 13, 1957.

³Ibid., November 11, 1951.

⁴Ibid., January 1, 1956.

that the housing needs of African Americans across the country were not being met and that nearly two and one-half million dwelling units would be needed by the end of the decade to house non-white families adequately.⁵

Since blacks had always been among the poorest of Richmonders, housing conditions for them had never been good. Conditions worsened during the first half of the twentieth century in large part because of both public and private policies which created rigidly segregated residential areas. Six studies released during the 1920s and 1930s confirmed that conditions were getting worse. Racially segregated areas had existed before then, although during the antebellum period, for example, things seemed to have been more fluid. Blacks sometimes voluntarily segregated themselves in neighborhoods like Screamersville, which was west of the city limits, or there were areas like Oregon Hill where the hostility of whites kept most blacks out. There were still others like Union Hill where blacks and whites lived together in integrated housing.⁶ But generally black encroachment into white neighborhoods was something that whites usually feared. As noted in Chapter Two, such encroachment occurred regularly in Richmond during the first half of this century, although not to the degree that it occurred in many Northern cities.⁷ In 1911 the Richmond City Council adopted a

⁵Richmond Afro American, July 31, 1954.

⁶Michael B. Chesson, Richmond After the War: 1865-1890 (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1981), 15-16.

⁷Christopher Silver, Twentieth-Century Richmond Planning, Politics and Race (Knoxville, Tenn: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 113.

segregation ordinance regarding zoning in which city blocks where whites were the majority were designated as white and those with a black majority were black. The moving of any member of one race into a block where the other was the majority was prohibited. Policies designed to ensure residential segregation contributed to the already low rate of home ownership among blacks and forced more to become renters. It also contributed to the development of rundown housing when whites became absentee landlords in black neighborhoods.⁸

Residential segregation ordinances were ruled unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court in 1917, but Richmond persisted in its efforts to segregate neighborhoods through the zoning code.⁹ Also, white property owners and real estate agencies began using restrictive covenants to keep blacks out of white neighborhoods. By the 1920s the confining of blacks to certain areas was causing overcrowding, unsanitary conditions and growing crime.¹⁰ In his 1927 work, Negro Housing in Certain Virginia Cities, Charles Knight noted the dilapidated condition of much of the housing in African American neighborhoods, although he said there were sections where the homes were well-kept and in good repair. These homes, he said, usually belonged to black homeowners. But generally, black areas in Richmond were depressing with

⁸Ibid., 110-112.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Charles Louis Knight, Negro Housing in Certain Virginia Cities (Richmond: William Byrd Press, 1927), 46-51.

muddy, unpaved streets, no sidewalks and houses crowded close to the street with the first floor many times below street level.¹¹ The following passage provides a description of conditions along Main Street in the late 1930s:

Along East Main Street of Richmond hundreds of Negro families live in huts overshadowed by tobacco factories. Sophie's Alley consists of a dozen one-room apartments connected with Main Street by a three-foot passageway. The apartments are substantially built for they once were horse stalls.¹²

During the 1940s the first public housing was built in Richmond, but this did not greatly improve the situation. A 1942 report called poor housing "the most serious problem facing this community."¹³ The report contained additional evidence of how bad conditions were:

It appears that the lowest percentage [of home ownership] are found in the older central sections of the city and in certain mixed industrial areas where heavy Negro populations have gravitated. Black housing areas ranked high among those without toilets and no private bath. Black housing is also mainly housing that needs major repairs. The Negro division south of Pine Camp is very bad having 59 percent of its dwellings in need of major repairs.¹⁴

In 1946 a master plan drawn up for the city by Harland Bartholomew, the renowned city planner, stressed the need for housing and

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Writers Program of the Works Projects Administration in Virginia, The Negro in Virginia (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1940), 337.

¹³Richmond, Va. Planning Commission. A Preliminary Report on Housing Conditions and Policies. June 1942, 23.

¹⁴Ibid., 16-19.

neighborhood improvements and also called for a comprehensive public housing policy.¹⁵ Five years later another report, by Ladislas Segoe, another well-known planner, again called attention to the housing problems faced by African Americans. Segoe's report noted that housing had not kept up with the growth of the black population in Richmond and he urged action:

The situation suggests that positive steps need to be taken to provide more areas for Negro housing that will meet at least the same standards in respect to location, protection and public services as applied to other living areas. This means that the Master Plan of Land Uses, Neighborhood and Community Facilities should be designed along the same lines for all living areas whether Negro or white.¹⁶

Thus as the 1950s dawned securing decent, affordable housing continued to be a major problem for many Richmond blacks, although a minority of more upwardly mobile blacks was moving into formerly all-white areas such as Barton Heights. If Richmond was such a residentially segregated city how was it that blacks were able to move into these areas? One possible answer is that some white real estate agents were willing to sell to blacks because they found that sizable profits could be made not only from the sale of white property to blacks, but from the sale of new homes to the former white occupants.¹⁷ And as the more

¹⁵Silver, Twentieth-Century Richmond, 160.

¹⁶Richmond, Va. Planning Commission. Ladislas Segoe and Associates Consulting City Planners. A Master Plan for Land Use, Schools and Recreation Facilities, June 1951, 25.

¹⁷Richmond Afro American, January 14, 1950.

affluent blacks moved to the new areas, they often sold their homes to poorer black families who had been living "doubled up."¹⁸ Home prices for blacks who were buying in Northside and other areas rose steadily. Homes which had sold for between \$3,000 and \$7,000 in the early 1940s were selling for \$6,500 to \$11,000 by 1947 and 1948. By 1950, some of the existing homes blacks were buying in Barton Heights ranged in price from \$10,000 to \$11,000, but more generally prices in practically all the new areas except the East End ranged from \$6,500 to \$9,000. Prices in the East End ranged from \$3,000 to \$7,000. Blacks who could afford to buy homes had no choice but to pay these prices because new-home construction in black areas was not nearly as great as in white areas. Builders were not interested in building low-cost housing in black neighborhoods because of the "slim profit margins."¹⁹ In 1957 Frederic A. Fay, executive director of the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority, estimated that between 1954 and 1957 approximately fifteen new homes had been built by blacks in existing black neighborhoods.²⁰ However, Reuben Clay of the Federal Housing Administration estimated in a 1957 interview that between 1954 and 1957 about 300 homes for sale to blacks had been built in the Richmond metropolitan area which included the surrounding counties. "That just scratched the surface," Clay was quoted as saying.²¹ Fay said that blacks were left with the choice of

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Richmond Times-Dispatch, January 15, 1957.

²⁰Ibid., June 2, 1957.

²¹Ibid., January 15, 1957.

doubling up in already overcrowded black sections or moving into white sections. "Those who can go into the white sections go. Unless there are other places for them, they'll continue to go," Fay said. He offered a "conservative" estimate that between 1950 and 1957 more than 1,000 white homes had been sold to blacks.²²

Expanding population, inadequate housing and a desire for better homes were not the only factors causing many blacks to move. Their displacement by highway construction and other developments was occurring and became a major issue during the 1950s. Between January 1955 and June 1957, about 1,900 black families, or 10 percent of the black population, were evicted from their homes mostly in the area north of Broad Street to make way for construction of the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike, redevelopment of the Carver neighborhood, the extension of the Gilpin Court housing project, expansion by the Medical College of Virginia and the condemnation by the city of houses as unsafe and unhealthy.²³

Displacement by civic construction projects had long been a sore point with blacks in Richmond, and the battle over the building of a Richmond expressway renewed tensions. In his book, Twentieth-Century Richmond: Planning, Politics and Race, Christopher Silver called the controversy over the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike "the most divisive political issue of the decade." He added that supporters of highway

²²Ibid., June 2, 1957.

²³Ibid., May 19, 1957.

construction almost never acknowledged that the black community inevitably suffered most from such construction.²⁴ Jackson Ward, once the heart of Richmond's African American community, was a compelling example. As Silver noted:

Highway construction during the 1950s and 1960s left indelible scars on the already tattered countenance of Jackson Ward, the hub of black community life in Richmond. Carved up into residential clusters too small and isolated to survive the pressures of encroaching business and located adjacent to a perpetually crowded six-lane highway, Jackson Ward quickly lost all claims to being the heart of Richmond's black community.²⁵

Blacks waged a strong, although unsuccessful, effort during the 1950s to prevent the routing of what would become the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike or Interstate 95 through their downtown neighborhoods. The first detailed plan for an expressway was produced by the State Highway Department in 1946. Between 1946 and 1954 more than a dozen routes were proposed in various studies. In 1950 Nat Turner, a columnist for the Richmond Afro American, complained that city engineers were ignoring the loud protests of Jackson Ward residents in proposing to route the expressway through that community. Turner said that many of the residents had struggled to become homeowners "despite starvation wages in some cases and much sweat and toil." Now, he said, many stood to be "rooted out" of their homes.²⁶ Turner complained that the prices

²⁴Silver, Twentieth-Century Richmond, 183, 185.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Richmond Afro American, April 1, 1950.

paid to those whose homes were condemned to make way for construction projects usually were not enough to buy new homes elsewhere.

Black votes played a key role in defeating an expressway plan in a referendum in 1950, as Oliver W. Hill, the only black on City Council, noted:

My feeling is that this was so primarily because they [blacks] had been convinced that a vote 'yes' meant the adoption of the Segoe plan, and that this plan called for the destruction of a large number of Negro homes and residences.²⁷

The next year a bond referendum to finance the highway construction was also defeated, again with blacks contributing crucial votes. The Reverend Everett E. Smith Sr., pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church, was among the outspoken black opponents. At a tense six-hour public hearing in May 1951, Smith complained that "colored people have been the Number One displaced persons of the city of Richmond" having been "uprooted and moved by every project executed by the city" for decades.²⁸ Before the November 6, 1951 vote, expressway supporters tried to muster black support during a mass meeting in October at Virginia Union University. But Smith again warned that "the proposed expressway for Richmond will sweep colored homes away wholesale." The Baptist Ministers Conference, an influential group of black ministers, also went on record in October as opposed to the bond issue.²⁹

²⁷Richmond Times-Dispatch, June 27, 1950.

²⁸Richmond Afro American, May 26, 1951.

²⁹Ibid., October 20, 1951.

Tired of referendum defeats, expressway supporters were successful in getting the City Council to push for the creation of a special authority by the General Assembly to build the expressway. A bill creating the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike Authority became law in April 1954. As Christopher Silver noted, this was a turning point because the creation of the authority "eliminated the chance for another referendum."³⁰ The turnpike authority eventually approved a route in 1955 that cut through Jackson Ward and other central city neighborhoods. The blatant disregard for black neighborhoods was evident in a report on the turnpike issue in which it was argued that routing the expressway through the mostly black downtown area was the proper course since it would avoid disruption to "well established suburban communities." As Silver noted, "Well established urban communities, however, particularly those of blacks were not afforded such immunity."³¹

With the building of the expressway a foregone conclusion by the mid-1950s, the question was where would the hundreds of displaced blacks live? One place for many was in public housing, and ultimately some of the displaced did find homes there. The building of public housing represented one of the few concerted efforts to improve living conditions in Richmond for low-income residents during the 1940s and 1950s. Gilpin Court, the city's first such development opened in 1943 and encompassed the area bounded by Chamberlayne Avenue, St. Paul Street

³⁰Silver, Twentieth-Century Richmond, 191-192.

³¹Ibid, 192-193.

and Hickory Street. During the 1950s four more housing projects plus an extension of Gilpin Court opened.³² Creighton Court in the East End opened in 1952 with 504 units; Hillside Court, the only public housing project for whites, also opened in 1952 in South Richmond with 402 units; the Gilpin Court extension opened in 1957 with 338 units and Whitcomb Court and Fairfield Court, also in the East End, opened in 1958, each with 447 units.³³ The building of Whitcomb Court and Fairfield Court was a direct outgrowth of the displacement caused by the turnpike. When it became clear that the turnpike would be built, the city and the housing authority studied ways to house the displaced. The result was the decision by the authority to build these two housing projects.³⁴

The push for public housing in Richmond had begun not long after the passage of the Housing Act of 1937 by Congress. Although conservative Mayor J. Fulmer Bright opposed any such effort in Richmond, Gordon Ambler, his successor, was a supporter and it was under his leadership that the Richmond Housing Authority [later the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority or RRHA] was formed in 1940.³⁵ Unlike other local agencies, the Housing Authority involved blacks in its endeavors almost from the start. African Americans worked with the agency in the planning

³²Richmond Times-Dispatch, April 21, 1968.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid., June 29, 1958.

³⁵Ibid., September 11, 1949.

and building of Gilpin Court with the Richmond Urban League and black ministers taking special leadership roles.³⁶ The five commissioners of the housing authority included one African American, Henry J. McGuinn, who was head of the Department of Social Work at Virginia Union University.³⁷ Public housing in Richmond was a program that mainly benefited blacks. By the early 1960s, about 2,500 public housing units had been built in the city and all but about 400 were occupied by blacks.³⁸

Gilpin Court was named for Charles Sidney Gilpin, a black actor from Richmond who gained fame from his portrayal of the Emperor Jones in Eugene O'Neil's play. Construction began in August 1941, but was slowed by the entrance of the United States into the Second World War in December. When the development's management office opened in December 1942, all of its personnel were black, and the Housing Authority also set aside 9 percent of the construction work for African American workers. The authority had planned to build two more developments in the early 1940s, one for whites and one for blacks, but plans were suspended in 1942 after the United States entered World War II.³⁹

In 1952 shortly before the opening of Creighton Court, the RRHA released a study which offered a profile of the "average family" living

³⁶Richmond, Va. Annual Report of the Housing Authority of the City of Richmond, 1940-1941, 7-8.

³⁷Ibid., 10.

³⁸Richmond Times-Dispatch, December 31, 1962.

³⁹Housing Authority Annual Report, 1940-1941, 1-6.

in Gilpin Court, which at that point had 1,139 residents.⁴⁰ The size of this family was said to be 3.6 persons or the same as the average Richmond family. Residents were subject to income limits which were \$1,500 for a family with up to two minor dependents while a family with three or more minor dependents could have an income of up to \$1,800. The average annual family income at Gilpin Court in 1952 was \$1,415. Responding to the criticism that once people moved in to public housing they never moved out, the study noted that only forty-five of the original tenants were still living in Gilpin Court in 1952. The average length of residency was 43.9 months. Tenants had come from a number of areas in Richmond, with nearly 58 percent from the Jackson Ward area, 12 percent from a blighted area west of Riverview Cemetery in the West End, 4 percent from the East End and less than 1 percent from the Penitentiary Bottom area. Nearly 87 percent of the residents had moved from dwellings which were substandard. The remaining 13 percent had either moved from dwellings that were overcrowded or where they were facing eviction.⁴¹

When Creighton Court opened in 1952, the Richmond Afro-American hailed it as the "biggest boost" for housing in the city since Gilpin Court.⁴² The development was located along Nine Mile Road to Twenty-Ninth Street, and the first tenant to move in was Frances Jones, a

⁴⁰Richmond Afro American, April 12, 1952.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., April 12, 1952.

widow. Thirty-eight years later in 1990, Ms. Jones, then sixty-eight, was still a resident, and in an interview she said that she had reared six children there and had lived in four different units. "This was the best house I could afford to live in and I like it here," she said.⁴³ But she acknowledged that Creighton Court was not the same place in the 1990s that it had been during the 1950s. "Crime wasn't bad when I moved in. I often ask myself what went wrong. I would like to see it back to old times."⁴⁴

Although Richmond built a public housing system, the city was not quite as active in the urban renewal movement. The biggest such effort during the 1950s was the Carver Redevelopment Project in which federal funds were used to redevelop an area north of Broad Street between Bowe Street on the west and Smith Street on the east for a mixture of industrial, commercial and residential uses.⁴⁵ The project was announced in December 1953 by the RRHA and held up as an example of "slum clearance" which would bring better housing to African Americans. But like the expressway, it meant that families were going to be displaced, in this case about 758, and for this reason many blacks opposed it.⁴⁶ Early in 1954 Carver residents formed a group, the

⁴³Richmond Times-Dispatch, September 9, 1990.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Silver, Twentieth-Century Richmond, 256; Richmond Afro-American, June 26, 1954.

⁴⁶Richmond Afro-American, June 26, 1954. (It should be noted that the 758 families also included twelve white families)

Carver Displacement League, and submitted a counterproposal to the RRHA asking that they be allowed to rehabilitate the area themselves. The residents complained that the RRHA's labeling of all the housing in Carver as "of the slum type" was wrong and that housing that did fit that description was rental property that had been allowed by the city to deteriorate over many years. They said they did not believe that the RRHA would give them a fair price for their homes and that many elderly homeowners would suffer hardship. But like the fight against the turnpike, the effort proved to be futile. The RRHA rejected their counterproposal, and the Carver project eventually went forward. Work on the development was delayed by the nearby construction of the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike, and it was not until January 1962 that Hartshorn Homes, a ninety-eight home community, opened in the Carver area becoming Richmond's first urban renewal venture.⁴⁷

Not all efforts by African Americans in the 1950s to protect their neighborhoods were unsuccessful. Residents of Douglass Court, an area just north of the Virginia Union University campus, fought to protect the residential character of the community from efforts by the city to rezone a section for light industry. The residents' leader was C. W. Florence, president of the Langston Civic Association and a professor at Virginia Union University.⁴⁸ In a speech before the City Council in July 1954, Florence pleaded for rejection of the rezoning proposal. He

⁴⁷Ibid; Richmond Times-Dispatch, January 13, 1962.

⁴⁸Richmond Afro-American, July 17, 1954.

argued that with housing already in short supply for blacks, the city should not approve a rezoning which would leave more black housing vulnerable. "The ordinance under consideration is not a simple ordinance dealing with the rezoning of an isolated piece of land. It is tied in with the whole problem of housing for colored people," Florence said.⁴⁹ Possibly because the stakes weren't as high as in the push by the city fathers for the turnpike, this time residents won. Mayor Edward E. Haddock threw his support to the Douglass Court fight, and the City Council voted six to three against the rezoning.⁵⁰

One bright spot in the housing situation for blacks in the Richmond area during the early-to-mid 1950s was the development of Randolph Ridge in Henrico County. This development was a 1950s preview of later decades when middle-class blacks would be able to join their white counterparts in flocking to the suburbs. Randolph Ridge was one of several suburban subdivisions built in the early 1950s that was aimed at the African American market. Others included Broadmoor Park in Louisville and Walker Homes in Memphis.⁵¹ Built by white developer Nathan J. Forb, Randolph Ridge was a fifty-unit development located in a predominately black area along Mountain Road just off Route 1, and advertisements in the Richmond Afro-American urged blacks to buy "A Suburban House of Your Own." and asked if they wanted to "enjoy city living in the suburbs."⁵² The six-

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid., August 28, 1954.

⁵²Ibid., July 17, 1954.

room frame bungalows offered three bedrooms, kitchen, tile bath, forced hot-air oil heat, oak floors, full insulation, carpeting, a utility room and a picture window all for \$8,000 with monthly payments of \$48.⁵³ Randolph Ridge was praised by Reuben Clay, the Federal Housing Administration executive, as a "new and wholesome community." Clay suggested that while the housing problem was serious for many blacks in Richmond, there were signs that a growing number at least had the means to rise above the problem:

Perhaps the most unjust myth of all is the oft-repeated assertion that minority groups create slums. Such a charge ignores the ugly fact that in most instances only slum dwellings in their last stages of usefulness and in extreme disrepair are made available to minority groups. The real truth is that there are colored families, and their number is legion, who want, need, and will pay for decent housing.⁵⁴

Health Care

Like housing, securing adequate health care was also a pressing concern for blacks in Richmond during the 1950s. African Americans had shared in the population's improved health during the postwar years which was attributed to the development of new drugs, advances in the treatment of diseases, an overall improvement in living conditions, and more attention to the health needs of children.⁵⁵ But it was also true

⁵³Ibid.; July 24, 1954.

⁵⁴Ibid., July 24, 1954.

⁵⁵Oscar R. Ewing, "Facing the Facts on Negro Health," The Crisis, April 1952, 218.

that blacks were generally less healthy and died earlier than whites and for every thousand live black births, forty-seven babies died compared to twenty-nine deaths for whites. This generally poorer health was blamed on several things: (1) the concentration of African Americans in the most hazardous jobs (2) their lower incomes (3) their being more likely to live in crowded, unsanitary housing (4) their being unaware of proper health habits (5) their being often unable to get satisfactory hospital care (6) a lack of doctors to treat them and (7) their inability to pay for medical care.⁵⁶ As one observer noted:

The plain truth is that the average Negro has less than a fair chance for health care because he is not a lucrative patient. He is less likely to be able to afford his doctor's bills. He is less likely to be able to afford his hospital bills. He is less likely to be able to pay for the specialist, the expensive new drugs, the miraculous new methods of therapy.⁵⁷

Blacks in Richmond had historically had worse health care than whites. "It has long been evident in Richmond that the Negroes are dying more readily than the whites," a 1929 report said.⁵⁸ In 1907, the black death rate in Richmond was 31.71 per 1,000 of the population compared to a white rate of 18.30. In 1929, the black rate was 20.43 compared to a white rate of 11.54.⁵⁹ There had been little improvement by the 1950s

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸The Negro in Richmond, Virginia: The Report of the Negro Welfare Survey Committee (Richmond: Richmond Council of Social agencies, 1929), 62.

⁵⁹Ibid.

as shown in the following table:

Table 5--Death Rates in Richmond 1952-1956

<u>Year</u>	<u>White</u>	<u>Black</u>
1952	29.5	46.3
1953	28.9	31.9
1954	31.1	44.1
1955	27.6	37.1
1956	26.4	41.6

Source: Compiled from the Statistical Annual Reports of the Virginia State Department of Health for the Fiscal Years 1953 to 1956.

Figures are death rates per 1,000 population.

During the early 1950s, heart disease was the big killer of both black and whites in Richmond as was the case in 1952, for example. Arteriosclerosis was the next highest killer that year, followed by cancer for whites and vascular lesions affecting the central nervous system for blacks.⁶⁰ Polio was still a dread disease until the Salk vaccine became widely used in 1955. Blacks in Virginia usually had a lower rate of infection than whites. In 1953, for example, there were fourteen white cases of polio in Richmond and four black cases. In 1954, there were thirty-one white cases and three black and in 1955, there were seven white cases and two black.⁶¹

For many years the Medical College of Virginia and Retreat for the Sick were the two major white hospitals in Richmond that would accept black patients. Retreat had opened in 1877 with a policy of treating all

⁶⁰Virginia. State Department of Health. Statistical Annual Report for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30th 1953, 57.

⁶¹Virginia. State Department of Health. Statistical Annual Report for the Fiscal Years Ending June 30th 1953-1956.

in need of care regardless of financial status, race or creed.⁶² Black patients were segregated and treated in the basements of Retreat and Memorial Hospital at the Medical College of Virginia until the construction of St. Philip Hospital at MCV as an all-black hospital, which also included a school of nursing. Opened in 1920 at Thirteenth and Marshall streets with 176 beds, St. Philip had a low reputation in the black community. Black Richmonders commenting in the 1920s on the quality of care described the hospital as being overcrowded and neglectful of patients at night. As one black woman put it, "If I have to be carried to St. Philip, let me die where I am."⁶³ In 1941, black pediatric cases were moved to MCV's Dooley Hospital, which had sixty beds in 1953.⁶⁴

St. Philip was still plagued with serious overcrowding during the early 1950s when the number of beds had risen to only two hundred from the original 176. In 1951, in a report to MCV's board of directors, Dr. W. T. Sanger, the president of MCV, admitted that the emergency room at St. Philip "on frequent occasions has twelve to fifteen patients requiring hospital care who cannot be moved to regular beds." There were even instances where black cancer patients in need of treatment were turned away because no beds were available. Sanger urged the

⁶²Charles M. Caravati, Medicine in Richmond 1902-1965 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1967), 32, 59-60.

⁶³The Report of the Negro Welfare Survey Committee, 62.

⁶⁴Bulletin Medical College of Virginia: Annual Report Hospital Director, 1951-1952.

"erection of additional facilities to meet the medical needs of the colored population."⁶⁵ Other medical facilities for blacks were overcrowded as well. The City Home, the only available nursing home for black patients, was described as "crowded to capacity" in 1953.⁶⁶ The situation at St. Philip was so bad that it could no longer be overlooked and plans were announced in December 1952 for a new hospital to serve blacks.⁶⁷ The Ennion G. Williams Hospital opened in 1956, but it offered only a tuberculosis sanitorium for blacks operated in conjunction with the State Department of Health. Gradually during the rest of the decade, the facilities at this hospital, which was named for Virginia's health commissioner between 1908 and 1931, were expanded until eventually it offered additional beds for black patients. Although Ennion G. Williams Hospital represented "the first substantial increase in hospital beds for blacks" since the opening of St. Philip, an MCV report in 1959 still concluded that "hospital facilities for Negro patients are not yet adequate."⁶⁸

Richmond Community Hospital was the city's only black owned and operated hospital. It had its beginnings in 1902 when Dr. A. B. W. Bowser Sr. and Dr. H. L. Harris Sr. opened The Richmond Hospital. It was

⁶⁵Richmond Afro-American, March 17, 1951.

⁶⁶Richmond Department of Public Health. Annual Report 1953-1954, 20.

⁶⁷Richmond Afro-American, December 27, 1952.

⁶⁸Virginius Dabney, Virginia Commonwealth University: A Sesquicentennial History (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987), 122; Bulletin, Medical College of Virginia Annual Report Issue 1958-59, 21.

chartered in 1922 as the Sarah G. Jones Memorial Hospital at Third and Baker streets and in 1932 moved to 1219 Overbrook Road to a twenty-five bed facility. The name was changed to Richmond Community Hospital in 1945.⁶⁹ The hospital's financial health was never very strong and its efforts to stay afloat continued to be a constant struggle throughout the 1950s mainly because its chief sources of income were public donations and patients' fees.⁷⁰ Each year the hospital held fund-raising events often with disappointing results. In 1953 Richmond Community raised only about \$4,000 of a \$100,000 goal. "The dismal failure of the drive is a sad indictment of Richmond's 70,000 colored citizens," the Richmond Afro-American said in an editorial. The editorial noted that there was an urgent need for 300 additional beds at the hospital.⁷¹ But Richmond Community managed to scrape by every year and even make improvements. In 1952, a new nursery was built, semi-private maternity wards were set up, a library for doctors was created and the X-ray room, delivery room, labs and business office were redecorated. Many of these improvements resulted from either donations of money and or work time. Despite its shortcomings, Richmond Community played a significant role in the health care of African Americans in Richmond. In the fiscal year ending in 1953, for example, the hospital had thirty-two beds and there were 1,091 admissions, 304 babies were

⁶⁹Richmond Community Hospital Fact Sheet, June 17, 1950; Richmond Afro-American, November 17, 1951.

⁷⁰Richmond Afro-American, November 17, 1956.

⁷¹Ibid., December 19, 1953.

delivered and 630 operations were performed. The hospital also managed to show a net income of \$1,613.83 compared with a net loss of \$861.19 for 1952 and \$2,006.28 in 1950. In 1954 the hospital was recognized as a provider of quality health care by the Joint Commission on Accreditation of Hospitals. Richmond Community Hospital would continue to serve the black community in Richmond in future decades even after the integration of hospital facilities. In 1980 it moved to a new 104-bed facility at 1500 North Twenty-eighth Street.⁷²

Richmond Community was the only city hospital where black doctors were allowed as part of the staff, and many of the city's top black physicians worked there. They included Dr. Isiah A. Jackson, chief of surgery; Dr. William C. Calloway, chief of obstetrics; Dr. George W. White, chief of staff; Dr. E. Sheridan Roane; Dr. Gregory W. Shaed; Dr. Felix J. Brown and Dr. M. M. Gordon.⁷³ Jackson was not only a prominent physician but the founding father of a family of black doctors in Richmond. He practiced in Richmond from 1911 until his death in 1958 and was a major force behind the construction of Richmond Community's Overbrook Road building. As a physician he "did everything from urology to gynecology to abdominal surgery." His two sons, Isiah A. Jackson Jr. and Reginald Jackson were also doctors with practices in Richmond as was a grandson, Richard A. Jackson. The Jackson family was known for encouraging other blacks as they sought to set up practices in the

⁷²Ibid., August 22, 1953; Richmond News Leader, September 10, 1954; The Richmond Free Press, February 3-5, 1994.

⁷³Richmond Afro-American, November 17, 1951.

city.⁷⁴ Another staff member at Richmond Community was Dr. Barrington H. Bowser Sr., who in 1948 had become the city's first black pediatrician in private practice when he opened his office at 513 North Adams Street. He was also the first black pediatrician to serve as assistant to the medical director of the Richmond public schools from 1948 until 1966.⁷⁵

One doctor who would become a key player in the political life of the black community starting in the mid-1950s as a founder of the Crusade for Voters was Dr. William S. Thornton. A podiatrist, he opened his office at 415 North Second Street in October 1950 after graduating from the Ohio College of Chiropody.⁷⁶ Dr. Francis M. Foster Sr., a dentist and longtime observer of the black Richmond scene, recalled that these doctors often had a special relationship with their patients:

There was always a desire for us to have more physicians, but you could always get care from them and you could get house calls. These men would actually get out and go to you. You didn't have any health plans then and people didn't have as much insurance and they weren't just calling the doctor or going to see the doctor because they could get it for free like today. For them to want to get medical service, something really had to be hurting because it would be a double hurt, a physical hurt and a financial hurt.⁷⁷

⁷⁴Richmond News Leader, November 7, 1986.

⁷⁵Richmond Times-Dispatch, June 5, 1993.

⁷⁶Richmond Afro-American, October 14, 1950.

⁷⁷Dr. Francis M. Foster, Sr., interview by author, Richmond, Virginia, July 28, 1993.

Crime

During the 1980s and 1990s, Richmond anguished over a homicide rate which sometimes topped one hundred with blacks the majority of the victims. While most blacks, then and now, were law-abiding citizens, concern over violence was evident during the 1950s and in earlier decades as well. In 1943, for example, a citizens' committee was appointed to investigate the city's record of violent crimes after Richmond posted forty-three homicides in 1942.⁷⁸ A headline in the Richmond Afro-American during Christmas week 1950 read, "Richmond Has Safe, Sane Christmas: No Slayings."⁷⁹ At the beginning of 1950, the black weekly began running a feature, "Our Murder Record," which listed the number of slayings in a given month and the total for the year at that point. At the end of January, there had been no killings and the paper issued a plea to the community: "The record is clean so far this year, so let's see how long we can keep it that way."⁸⁰ In 1952, there were four homicides committed by whites in Richmond and thirty by blacks; in 1953 there were eight by whites and twenty-six by blacks; in 1954, there were eight by whites and twenty-nine by blacks and in 1955 there were six by whites and twenty by blacks.⁸¹ In 1952, the Richmond

⁷⁸Richmond News Leader May 2, 1953.

⁷⁹Richmond Afro-American, December 30, 1950.

⁸⁰Ibid., January 28, 1950.

⁸¹Compiled from the Statistical Annual Reports of the Virginia State Department of Health for the Fiscal Years 1953 to 1956.

Afro-American surmised that "emotional flareups frequently caused by the eternal [love] triangle often bring violence, blood and death." Crime news was often sensationalized in the black weekly as this excerpt from the Easter holiday in 1952 shows: "Blazing guns snuffed out four lives and a butcher knife wielded by a terrified housewife accounted for a fifth death in Richmond as an unprecedented wave of violence marred the Easter holiday."⁸²

The early 1950s also saw several highly publicized crimes. In 1952 Jackson Ward was terrorized by a series of assaults and robberies of women, and the assailant was dubbed the "Creeper" because he would "creep up behind his victims and slip his arm around their necks."⁸³ A twenty-year old bus boy was arrested in 1953 and sentenced to a thirty-year prison term. The investigation and arrest were handled by Detective Sergeant Frank S. Randolph and his partner, Detective John W. Vann, who were among the first black police officers hired in 1946.⁸⁴ Also in 1952, Dorothy Lee "Tee Baby" Parrish was convicted of second degree murder in the slaying of another women. The case attracted special attention because the victim was a white women in what was a love triangle.⁸⁵

⁸²Richmond Afro-American, April 19, 1952.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Ibid., April 18, 1953.

⁸⁵Ibid., December 27, 1952.

Poor economic conditions in the black community have often been cited as the reason for the popularity of illegal numbers rackets, which were still flourishing in Richmond at mid-century. The authors of The Negro in Virginia explained that blacks in most big Virginia cities, "caught in the last-hired, first-fired trap" were willing participants in the various rackets that operated in the cities.⁸⁶ During Prohibition, bootleg liquor or "bath-tub gin" was an active enterprise, but with the return of legal liquor in 1933, the bootleggers switched to the numbers. Like the state lottery today, this betting game had a strong hold on many:

For those who play, there are dream books, spirit numbers, hot tips that are guaranteed to bring a hit. For others automobile license numbers, gas bills, tax receipts, letter postmarkings, laundry bills, calendar dates etc... are thought to furnish tips to fortune.⁸⁷

Richmond was part of a numbers syndicate which stretched from Maine to Florida. Numbers writers and bookmakers "plied their trade daily" especially in the area of Second and Clay streets, despite the efforts against them by federal and local authorities. The "gambling gentry" in Richmond suffered a setback in November 1951 after the passage of a federal law which required gamblers to pay \$50 for a license and taxes on 10 percent of their gross take. As the Richmond Afro-American reported, "The effect in Richmond was immediate. Numbers men advised

⁸⁶Works Projects Administration in Virginia, The Negro in Virginia, 341.

⁸⁷Ibid.

players that they were through until further notice."⁸⁸ Between November 1951 and January 1952 "rumors persisted that the digit game was dead forever in Richmond," but in January it was reported that "dream books are being dusted off and put back into service."⁸⁹ In March 1953 Richmond police staged one of their periodic assaults against the numbers and seized over 5,000 numbers slips.⁹⁰ The gambling gentry also produced its share of colorful characters. One was Travis Glasgow, who had operated a smoke shop known as a favorite after-hours spot and gathering place for bookmakers during World War II and afterward. Glasgow, who died in February 1952, "was known as a fast talker who knew all the ins and outs of what there is of Richmond's underworld."⁹¹

Drugs were also a concern in the black community, although the problem was not as serious as today. Heroin was a popular narcotic in the 1950s with any estimate of the number of addicts in Richmond described as "guesswork."⁹² The Richmond Afro-American reported in 1952 that a drug operation in the city was selling marijuana to black teenagers. "It is easy to pick the stuff up in Richmond, and the little packet goes for about \$2," the newspaper said.⁹³ Even then it was

⁸⁸Richmond Afro-American, November 10, 1951.

⁸⁹Ibid., January 12, 1952.

⁹⁰Ibid., March 21, 1953.

⁹¹Ibid., March 1, 1952.

⁹²Ibid., March 19, 1955.

⁹³Ibid., April 5, 1952.

recognized that drug addiction was often behind other crimes. As the Richmond Afro-American noted in 1955:

Ordinarily, an addict might be harmless enough. When he can get what he wants, he's a normal person. When he can't he'll find a way--steal, beg, borrow. Shoplifting is closely allied with the narcotics craving. Murder is too, at times. A recent killing at Second and Leigh was the outgrowth not only of robbery but of narcotics.⁹⁴

Sometimes police efforts against crime produced tensions in black neighborhoods. In January 1953, Richmond police conducted a general roundup of "known vagrants and night prowlers" after a rash of pocketbook snatches and attacks on women. More than fifty men, all black, were arrested and charged with having "no visible means of support." In explaining the crackdown, Police Chief O. D. Garton said, "They can go to work or go to jail. This hanging around the streets all day and half the night has to stop." But the arrests were roundly criticized by many African Americans who termed the operation "police persecution" of blacks.⁹⁵

The crime rate in Richmond was the subject of several strongly worded editorials in the Richmond News Leader during the early and mid 1950s and an equally strong response in the Richmond Afro-American. The white newspaper sought to use crime among blacks as a justification for segregation. The newspaper noted that Richmond's murder rate in 1952 was 2.54 per 100,000 population for whites and 39.72 for blacks. It also

⁹⁴Ibid., March 19, 1955.

⁹⁵Ibid., January 31, 1953; February 7, 1953.

cited the "disproportionately high rate of crime among the Negro people" in other classifications of crime and concluded:

The level of morality, and of respect for law, indicated by these figures constitutes one of the principal reasons advanced by the South in defense of its historic public policy of racial segregation, through for some reason it is difficult to get our critics to recognize the facts.⁹⁶

But while using black crime as a justification for segregation, the editorials also alluded to the 1943 Christian Committee report which suggested that the poor living conditions of many Richmond blacks was a major factor in the crime problem. After surveying the poor, black neighborhoods where many of the forty-three homicides had occurred in 1942, committee members were said to have been "shocked and appalled at the overcrowding, unsanitary and unsafe conditions under which most of these people live."⁹⁷ The committee criticized the lack of recreational facilities in black neighborhoods and urged that the punishments imposed in slayings involving blacks be stiff enough to act as a deterrent. The police were also urged to keep a closer watch on "trouble points" in the city. But looking back from the early 1950s, the News Leader acknowledged that "many of the sound recommendations of this citizens' groups never were acted upon."⁹⁸

The News Leader editorials drew a stinging rebuke from John M. Ellison, the president of Virginia Union University, in a reply printed

⁹⁶Richmond News Leader, May 1, 1953.

⁹⁷Ibid., May 2, 1953.

⁹⁸Ibid.

in the Afro-American. Ellison said that the editorials used statistics to imply that the "colored person is criminal in his tendencies," while ignoring sociological factors.⁹⁹ Ellison said that while statistics are "significant sociological data," they are not enough in themselves in interpreting "group behavior and ills of society." He rejected the use of crime as a justification for segregation, calling the segregation law "so unjust, untenable and varied in its application and interpretation that it breaks down and fails of its own weight." Ellison also wrote.

Now the colored American is easily a lawbreaker under our system of discrimination, and that is the bitter factor in segregation. Daily and at every turn of the corner he is likely to break some law because of the whole system. Our editor seems not to take these factors into account, but to think of them as unimportant if not negligible. It is easy for him who looks from his "Ivory Tower" to say these poor devils in the slums whose skin is black are criminals.¹⁰⁰

The hardships imposed by segregation can be seen clearly in the areas of housing and medical care. Decades of strict residential segregation meant that blacks, many of them poor, were trapped in much of the dilapidated housing in the city. Segregation in medical facilities produced conditions like those at St. Philip Hospital where the Medical College of Virginia's own reports described serious overcrowding and seriously ill patients sometimes being turned away. Thus, although mounting attacks on Jim Crow indicated that change was under way, it was not occurring with equal force in all areas of black

⁹⁹Richmond Afro-American, June 30, 1953.

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

life. Discriminatory policies were still a stark reality for blacks in Richmond during the early 1950s. The effects of past policies were not the only problem, however. Racially-biased policies were still being effected as seen, for example, in the displacement of a large number of blacks by the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike, which cut through Jackson Ward, sapping the life of this historic black community. This caused the loss of more black housing units in an already tight market, and was alleviated only slightly by public housing. It would be presumptuous to argue that white neighborhoods were never affected by such projects, but the evidence suggests that black areas bore the brunt of such construction, possibly because the city fathers knew that the African American community did not have the political muscle needed to stop it. The early 1950s were a time of change and progress for blacks in Richmond, but in areas such housing and medical care, the years 1950 to 1956 seemed to have offered only more of the same. Meanwhile, black crime was as touchy and volatile an issue during the 1950s as it is today. It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions here except to stress that while crime was a problem, most African Americans in Richmond were law abiding.

Chapter Five

The African American Business Community

Black business in Richmond is made up of layers of success and failure, of hope and despair, of triumph and tribulation¹

Although written in the late 1980s, this statement could have also described the black business community during the 1950s. A strong entrepreneurial tradition had made the city a mecca for black businesses by the early twentieth century, and a black retail district north of Broad Street in downtown Richmond survived well into the 1950s. Most black-owned businesses were small, and many of them were family-owned. A good example was the Eggleston Hotel at Second and Clay streets which was owned by the Eggleston family.² With the attack on segregation and the subsequent breaking down of racial barriers during the 1950s and 1960s, however, African Americans could more easily spend their money elsewhere, and according to some black businessmen, the downtown black business district began to decline. In a 1988 interview with the Richmond News Leader, Neverett A. Eggleston Jr., the son of the founder of the Eggleston Hotel, discussed how black business in Richmond had fared since the 1950s: "When integration set in there were advantages and disadvantages during the transition. Some black businesses didn't do as well when blacks started going to white establishments. A lot of

¹Richmond News Leader, September 5, 1988.

²Ibid.

blacks went into business with white guys."³ In a 1993 interview, Eggleston elaborated on this statement and suggested that a less supportive attitude among blacks toward black-owned businesses had made the black businessmen's lot more difficult since the 1950s:

During the 1950s black business was still thriving. It was much easier to run the Eggleston Hotel in those days than it is today. I think that's because back then we as a race of people had far more racial pride than we do today. And today we've become more complacent because we don't have the pressures that we had on us in those days.⁴

Even before the heyday of black business in Richmond during the early years of this century, African Americans here had started and nurtured business enterprises. On the eve of the Civil War, for example, Richmond was said to have had "seven grocery stores, three confectionery stores, two fruiterers' shops, fifteen barber shops and an excellent livery stable owned and operated by Negroes."⁵ The mulatto barbers in Richmond were described as constituting "a free Negro aristocracy" during the 1850s which dominated the barbering trade in the city.⁶ Before emancipation, blacks in Richmond had developed secret societies and later set up beneficial societies both of which were their own variations of insurance companies. The secret societies served as a

³Ibid.

⁴Neverett A. Eggleston, Jr., interview by author, Richmond, Virginia, August 25, 1993.

⁵Julia Pollard, Richmond's Story (Richmond: Richmond Public Schools, 1954), 108.

⁶Luther Porter Jackson, Free Negro Labor and Property Holding (New York: Appleton Century Co., 1942), 98.

framework for "collective self improvement and mutual assistance."

Called "secret" because membership was kept confidential, these groups provided a means for blacks to help each other beyond the usual church and family structure. A major function was to care for those who were sick and destitute and to give the poor a decent burial. The beneficial societies charged dues and provided a specified benefit such as paying out death benefits to a child or widow.⁷ One of the most famous beneficial societies in Richmond and in the nation was the Great Fountain of the United Order of True Reformers, which was chartered in 1883 under the leadership of William Washington Browne and Giles B. Jackson. By 1889 the society had opened a bank at 105 West Jackson Street, and it later established a mercantile and industrial association; a weekly newspaper, The Reformer; a hotel; a home for the elderly; a building and loan association and a real estate company. By 1907 the True Reformers Bank had become "the largest black-controlled financial institution in the United States."⁸ The True Reformers collapsed and disbanded in 1910 after experiencing financial difficulties. In a 1955 article the Richmond Afro-American reflected on the True Reformers' legacy: "The colored business structure in the Old Dominion city today owes their inspiration, ideas or organization and concepts of mass effort to the remarkable vision, energy and

⁷Peter J. Rachleff, Black Labor in Richmond, 1865-1890 (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989.), 25, 27.

⁸Richmond, Va. Department of Planning and Community Development. The Jackson Ward Historic District. (1978), 16.

⁹The Richmond Afro-American, October 15, 1955.

undertakings of William Washington Browne."⁹

The example and success of the True Reformers spurred others to form business and fraternal entities in Richmond and by the turn of the century many were flourishing. These included the Independent Order of St. Luke, the Virginia State Grand Lodge of Samaritans, the National Ideal Benefit Society and the Imperial Order of King David. Following the establishment of the True Reformers Bank, there was the Nickel Savings Bank, the Mechanics Savings Bank, the St. Luke Penny Savings Bank, the Commercial Bank and Trust Company and the Second Street Savings Bank. During the early 1890s, many full-fledged black insurance companies were organized including the United Aid and the Sheltering Arms.¹⁰

Richmond was home to so much black entrepreneurial activity that the city was described in The Negro In Virginia as "the most important center of Negro business activity in the world" between 1890 and 1920.¹¹ Most of this activity was centered in the Jackson Ward-Second Street area where by the 1920s there were a wide variety of businesses including funeral homes, beauty parlors, hotels, building and loan and real estate companies, grocery stores, repair shops, and drugstores.¹²

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Writers Program of the Works Progress Administration in Virginia, The Negro in Virginia (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1940), 298.

¹²Department of Planning and Community Development. The Jackson Ward Historic District. 21.

Ironically, segregation contributed to the creation of this thriving business community as one observer noted:

Although Jim Crow laws increased in number and severity as the twentieth century wore on and caused frustration, anger and despair, black entrepreneurs in Jackson Ward were seemingly undaunted. Isolation from whites which was enforced by law maintained a captive audience of customers and for decades prevented a dispersal of the African American community in the Ward.¹³

Not all these businesses catered solely to blacks. Some shoe stores, haberdasheries, barber shops, restaurants and livery stables were said to have competed successfully with white businesses in drawing white patrons.¹⁴ By the 1950s, however, many of these "strongholds of Negro business" had been weakened as whites began to realize that these were lucrative fields ripe with opportunities for them, causing the blacks' monopoly to disappear.¹⁵

Black entrepreneurs saw grocery stores as lucrative and safe ventures because "people always must eat."¹⁶ A 1951 study by Oliver Wendell Johnson at Virginia State College [now Virginia State University] focused on the grocery store in Richmond. He examined the

¹³Quotation contained in an exhibit on Jackson Ward at the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia, Richmond, Va., May 1993.

¹⁴Works Progress Administration, The Negro in Virginia, 298.

¹⁵Joseph A. Pierce, Negro Business and Business Education: Their Present and Prospective Development (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1947), 33-34.

¹⁶Ibid.

operations of twenty-three grocery stores and two seafood dealers.¹⁷ Besides regarding grocery stores as lucrative ventures, most owners said they went into business because of "the need of a store in the community." The average educational attainment of the owners was the fifth grade. Only two of the twenty-five had completed the eleventh grade. Three had less than one year of formal schooling and none had any college training. Twenty were male and five were females. The median age at which the storekeeper started the business was forty-one and more than half had no previous experience in running a grocery store.¹⁸ Twenty-one of the stores were proprietorships and four were partnerships. Most of the grocery stores were located on corners, which Johnson concluded aided the operations because such locations "have access to greater traffic, [are] susceptible to better window displays and render more natural light." Seventeen of the stores had a customer base that was almost totally black, while the others had a mixture of black and white. Johnson found that most of the stores had good standings in the areas they served. Customers appreciated the storekeepers' fairness, their friendliness to children and the "homely atmosphere" of the stores.¹⁹

¹⁷Oliver Wendell Johnson, "A Study of Twenty-five Closed Negro Businesses in Richmond 1940-1950." (Master's thesis, Virginia State College, 1951), 4.

¹⁸Ibid., 16-20.

¹⁹Ibid., 27, 30, 45.

City directory listings show the variety of black-owned businesses in Richmond in 1950. There were 104 black barber shops, 107 beauty salons, fifty-three grocery stores, three hotels, seven gasoline stations, five druggists, two dry good stores, one cigar and tobacco shop, fifty-eight restaurants, thirty-one dry cleaners, nineteen shoe repair shops, twenty-three shoe shine parlors, eleven tailors, one taxicab service, nine produce dealers, one furniture store, nine ice dealers, and two jewelers.²⁰

Barber and beauty shops were among the most profitable black businesses, and the beauty parlors were especially important for providing black women with a major skilled occupation.²¹ Rutherford B. Sampson, the owner of Peerless Beauty Products, opened his first barber shop in the city at the age of eighteen in 1906 at 523 North Second Street. In a 1955 article, the Richmond Afro-American, noted that "he has been doing business in that block ever since."²² Sampson opened a beauty parlor in 1925 and a beauty products supply business in 1936, which by the 1950s was offering everything from beauty shop equipment to hairpins, hairdryers and its own brand of beauty products. Like other successful entrepreneurs, Sampson was influential and active in the African American community. He was described in 1956 as a being "a leader in civic, social and religious affairs, president of the local

²⁰Hill Directory Co. Inc., Hill's Richmond Virginia City Directory, 1950, 991-1044.

²¹Works Progress Administration, The Negro in Virginia, 302-303.

²²Richmond Afro-American, October 15, 1955.

cosmetology association and an active member of the Leigh Street Baptist Church."²³

Funeral homes were a mainstay of the black business community since white morticians rarely handled black funerals. Many had long records of service in Richmond and among the best known during the early 1950s were Walter J. Manning Funeral Home at 1120 North Twenty-Seventh Street, Mimms Funeral Home at 1827 Hull Street, A. D. Price Jr. Funeral Home at 208 East Leigh Street, Carter Brothers Funeral at 1705 West Leigh Street and Robert C. Scott Funeral Homes with a main office at 2223 East Main Street and chapels at 711 North Twenty-Ninth Street, 1401 Idlewood Avenue and Nineteen West Clay Street.²⁴ In October 1950 Robert Scott proclaimed in a newspaper ad that he did not wish to be regarded as "a high-priced funeral director." He noted that of the last 2,296 families he had served, more than 66 percent spent less than \$300 for funeral costs and a little less than 50 percent spent less than \$200. By 1950, Scott had been operating as a funeral director in Richmond for more than forty years.²⁵ The A. D. Price Funeral Home was established around 1881 and within ten years "owned six horses, two hearses, two carriages and one buggy." In 1916, it moved from Broad Street to the Leigh Street location and by then there were seventy-six horses, and thirty-two carriages and buggies. The funeral home's black horses with white

²³Ibid., March 3, 1956.

²⁴Richmond City Directory, 1950, 1008-1009.

²⁵Richmond Afro-American, October 21, 1950.

collars were said to be "a nationally known trademark of the Price firm."²⁶ The Richmond Funeral Directors' Association, the funeral directors' professional group, was organized in 1928, and in 1955 ten of the eighteen black morticians in the city were members.²⁷ The morticians within the association were described as "vital components of every worthwhile civil, fraternal and benevolent effort the community undertakes and [they] support them morally and financially."²⁸ The association sponsored an educational program with a student aid fund, which during the early 1950s assisted four students each year. The group's political activities included efforts to secure black representation on the State Board of Funeral Directors and Embalmers.²⁹

Blacks also operated fuel businesses such as the R. E. Brown Coal Company, which was founded in 1912. It grew "from a small concern to be the largest [coal company] in the South operated by colored." By the early 1950s the firm had gone from one pushcart to eight trucks and it handled wood and oil as well as coal. R. E. Brown retired as owner-manager in 1952 and turned the operation of the business over to his daughter.³⁰

²⁶Ibid., April 4, 1953.

²⁷Ibid., October 15, 1955.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., March 3, 1956.

One of the most successful black dry cleaning establishments was the Miles Cleaning Company at 109 West Main Street. In 1952, the company did an annual business of \$75,000, employed twenty-nine full-time workers and had about \$60,000 invested in property and rolling stock. Ever "Bonnie" Miles, the founder and president, personified the entrepreneurial hustle that existed in the black business community. He came to Richmond in 1910 and worked as a presser for \$6 a week. After learning the dry-cleaning trade and saving his money, he went into business for himself around 1915. For the first fifteen years most of the firm's work was done at the Main Street plant, but by 1930 Miles was doing so well that he was able to establish branch offices. By the early 1950s, there were six such offices located at 1117 West Leigh Street, 100 West Clay Street, 917 East Clay Street, 916 Chamberlayne Avenue, 817 North Sixth Street and 1503 West Cary Street. During the first twenty-five years of operation, his customers were 70 percent white, but by 1952 that had changed to about 40 percent white and 60 percent black. Like other black-owned firms, the Miles Cleaning company was a family affair, according to an article in the Richmond Afro-American, which noted that "the Miles family works together closely and faithfully and each member is willing to make a sacrifice when necessary for the good of the concern."³¹

Not all black-owned businesses were run by men. Bertha Ward, a former teacher, owned a shoe repair shop at 318 North Second Street,

³¹Ibid., February 9, 1952.

which she had taken over from her husband after his death during the mid-1930s. She did not regret abandoning a teaching career because she found running a business more challenging. "You meet such remarkable people and you have to treat each one of them in a different manner," she said. Mrs. Ward was believed to be the only woman in Richmond running a shoe repair shop. Another black female entrepreneur was Mabel Johnson, owner of Johnson's Florist located at 412 North Second Street. By 1954, Johnson had been in the florist business for fifteen years having started out in Keesport, Pennsylvania.³² A study done in the late 1940s estimated that black women operated one-third of all black businesses.³³

By the 1990s, three generations of Egglestons had done business in the city. Neverett A. Eggleston Sr. opened the Eggleston Hotel at Second and Leigh streets in 1939, and for many years it was one of the few hotels in Richmond which permitted black guests. It also served as an anchor for the Second Street business district. Eggleston was the epitome of the hardworking, self-made black businessman. In the 1988 interview with the Richmond News Leader, Neverett A. Eggleston Jr., recalled the dedication his father showed to his work. "I remember during the war, Dad would go into the kitchen at the hotel on Friday night, and he wouldn't come out until Monday morning. He worked straight through."³⁴ Eggleston's business was still growing during the early

³²Ibid., October 10, 1953; April 10, 1954.

³³Pierce, Negro Business and Business Education, 78.

³⁴Richmond News Leader, September 5, 1988.

1950s and like any far-sighted businessman he saw the need for improvements at the Eggleston Hotel and Dining Room as it was known then. In 1953 the premises were remodeled, enlarged and air-conditioned, and in 1955 a new lobby and private dining room were opened.³⁵ It was no surprise that Neverett Eggleston Jr. was also drawn to the business world. In the early 1960s he became the first black member of Richmond's Jaycees and later in the decade was a co-founder of the Richmond Metropolitan Business League, which has been described as a "sort of black chamber of commerce that helps black business survive and thrive."³⁶ Besides the Eggleston establishment two other black hotels listed in the 1950 city directory were the Apollo Hotel at 514A North Second Street and Slaughter's Hotel and Dining Room at 527-529 North Second Street.³⁷

One of the best known black real estate operations was R. V. Dorsey, Inc. Dorsey was a paint contractor when he came to Richmond in 1910, but a manpower shortage during World War I made it hard to get painters and he decided to go into the real estate business.³⁸ He started out with three employees including his brother, George Dorsey, but by the mid-1950s, the firm had grown to thirteen full-time employees, and that year it also moved from its original North Adams Street location to North

³⁵Richmond Afro-American, October 10, 1953; March 3, 1956.

³⁶Richmond News Leader, September 5, 1988.

³⁷Richmond City Directory, 1950, 1014.

³⁸Richmond Afro-American, January 7, 1956.

Third Street. Dorsey was active in political and civic circles. He was the first black to be appointed an election judge in the city and was even said to have been friend of Harry F. Byrd.³⁹

There were several black-owned pharmacies in Richmond by the early 1950s. Roosevelt T. Harrington opened Harrington's Pharmacy at Twenty-Six and Q streets in 1941. As part of the black migration to Barton Heights, he moved the business to North Avenue and Overbrook Road in 1950.⁴⁰ Other black-owned pharmacies were Leigh Street Drug Store at 1200 West Leigh Street, Northside Pharmacy at 901 North Fifth Street, Robinson Drug at 2900 Q Street and West Side Drug at 1801 Idlewood Avenue.⁴¹

In 1951 five of the city's top black contractors decided to merge and form Associated Contractors. The five were John E. Boyd, building and contracting; L. J. Chargois, painting, roofing and guttering; W. M. Jones, floor refinishing and M. A. Motley, plumbing and heating. The Richmond Afro-American noted that "civic and business leaders hailed the association as a definite step forward in the business life of Richmond."⁴²

The Richmond Afro-American and The Richmond Planet, the complete name of the city's black weekly newspaper reflected the fact that in

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid., October 15, 1955.

⁴¹Richmond City Directory, 1950, 1005.

⁴²Richmond Afro-American, July 14, 1951.

1938 the old Richmond Planet was purchased by the Afro-American newspaper chain headquartered in Baltimore. The Richmond Planet was founded in 1882 by a group of prominent black Richmonders. It became influential during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century under the editorship of John Mitchell Jr., who guided the paper until his death in 1929. During the early 1950s Rufus Wells served as the paper's editor-manager. While black businesses such as beauty salons and funeral homes were frequent advertisers in the Afro-American, white-owned businesses such as Siegel's Super Market, Lewis Furniture Store, Emrick Chevrolet, Troy's Department Store and Biswanger and Company Glass also advertised.⁴³

As noted earlier, Second Street and the surrounding area were the hub of the black business community. This area was still bustling during the 1950s, although not to the degree of previous decades. Even so, Neverett A. Eggleston Jr. recalled that on busy evenings during the 1950s, "Second Street would be like a carnival from Broad Street all the way to Duvall with people filling both sides of the street."⁴⁴ A review of the city directory shows that the Second Street business district was concentrated between the 300 and 700 blocks. Broad Street seemed to be a racial dividing line with no black-owned business listed on Second Street north of Broad.⁴⁵ A listing of some of the businesses provides

⁴³Ibid., October 15, 1955.

⁴⁴Eggleston interview.

⁴⁵Richmond City Directory, 1950, 147.

further evidence of the variety of enterprises. In the 300 block just below Broad Street there were the law offices of the Roland D. Ealey and F. C. Carter; Rosalyn Beauty Salon; Ward's Shoe Repairing; a barber shop; and the Modern Beauty Academy and Salon. In the 400 block just below Marshall Street there was Clarence O. Dean's Jeweler; the office of Dr. Jesse M. Tinsley, a dentist; the offices of the Richmond chapter of the NAACP and the Virginia State Conference of the NAACP; the law offices of Edinboro A. Norrell; the office of the Richmond Civic Council; and the Green Shoe Shine Parlor. In the 500 block just below Clay there was Julian A. Pittman, a sign painter; Cora's Beauty Shop; the Globe Theater; Scotty's Barber Shop; the Globe Hat Shoppe Restaurant; the Apollo Hotel and Restaurant; Buck's Grill; the Deluxe Pool Parlor; Charley's Pool Parlor; Leake's Sandwich Bar; Manhattan Cab Company; Sampson's Barber and Beauty Salon and two other barber shops; the Capital City Lodge; Slaughter's Hotel and Dining Room; the Hippodrome Theater; B.A. Cehpas, a real estate agent, a shoe shine shop; and the Eggleston Hotel.⁴⁶

Not all black businesses in Richmond were like the small mom-and-pop operations which filled Second Street. There were major enterprises such as Consolidated Bank and Trust, Southern Aid Life Insurance Company and Virginia Mutual Benefit Life Insurance Company. The saga of Consolidated Bank and Trust is associated with Maggie L. Walker, one of the most beloved figures in the history of black Richmond. Born in the

⁴⁶Ibid, 148.

city on July 17, 1872, she began working with the Independent Order of St. Luke in 1886. The order had been founded in Baltimore in 1867 and was a fraternal insurance company for blacks, who during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century found it nearly impossible to buy insurance from white companies.⁴⁷ When Mrs. Walker joined the order it was in serious financial difficulty, but through her efforts, the order began to thrive with increased membership and improved fiscal policies. She was named grand secretary of St. Luke in 1899 and having turned the order around she set her sights on founding a bank. In 1903 the St. Luke Penny Savings Bank opened in Richmond with Mrs. Walker as its president, a post she would hold for twenty-eight years. She was the first African American woman to serve as president of a bank.⁴⁸ In 1930 with the Great Depression taking its toll on banks, she instigated the merger of the St. Luke Savings Bank and another black Richmond bank, The Second Street Savings Bank to form Consolidated Bank and Trust. In 1931 The Commercial Bank and Trust Company, another black Richmond bank, also merged with Consolidated. Mrs. Walker retired as president in 1931 and became chairman. She died on December 15, 1934, and as the Richmond Times-Dispatch noted in her obituary, she was regarded by many as "the greatest Negro race leader since Booker T. Washington." The newspaper also reported that Consolidated had assets of more than \$500,000 and

⁴⁷Consolidated Bank and Trust Co. Consolidated Bank Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow. (n.p., 1991)

⁴⁸Ibid.

that the bank stood as "a monument to Negro business ability."⁴⁹ Consolidated continued to make progress after Mrs. Walker's death. In 1935 the bank was given permission to make Federal Housing Administration loans and in 1943 to receive federal government tax deposits. In 1944 it became a redemption center for war bonds.⁵⁰ The 1950s would bring more changes to Consolidated. In June 1950 Emmett C. Burke, Mrs. Walker's successor as president, resigned. He was succeeded by Walter S. Banks who served until 1958.⁵¹ Banks' philosophy was: "Success is like a woman; it has to be courted long and hard before it is won."⁵² Born in Goochland County in 1885, he began his career in the early years of the twentieth century as an agent at Richmond Beneficial Life Insurance Company.⁵³ In September 1951 during Banks' tenure Consolidated served as host for the convention of the National Bankers Association, the black bankers' group. The representatives from fourteen black-owned banks were welcomed to the city by Mayor Nelson T. Parker and attended business sessions where they heard speeches by such pillars of Richmond's white banking community as W. Harry Schwarzchild Jr., the president of the Central National Bank. The list of banks attending showed that Consolidated had many black-owned counterparts around the

⁴⁹Richmond Times-Dispatch, December 16, 1934.

⁵⁰Consolidated Bank Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Richmond Afro-American, May 23, 1953.

⁵³Ibid.

nation: Carver Savings Bank of Savannah; Citizens Savings Banks and Trust of Nashville; Citizens and Southern Bank and Trust of Philadelphia; Citizens Trust Co. of Atlanta; Crown Savings Bank of Newport News; Danville Savings Banks and Trust of Danville; Douglass State Bank of Kansas City; Farmers State Bank of Boley, Oklahoma; Fraternal Banks and Trust of Forth Worth; Industrial Bank of Washington, D.C.; Mechanics Farmers Bank of Durham; Tri-State Bank of Memphis and Victory Savings Bank of Columbia, South Carolina. The Richmond Afro-American reported that the fourteen banks together represented assets of about thirty-three million dollars.⁵⁴

Consolidated increased its financial strength during the 1950s moving from "a safety-vault bank to a modern full-service operation" and continuing its role as a major lender of funds to black-owned businesses in Richmond.⁵⁵ At the end of 1950, Consolidated's resources exceeded three million dollars. By the end of 1959, the figure had risen to over five million dollars.⁵⁶

Like Consolidated Bank and Trust both Southern Aid Life Insurance Company and Virginia Mutual Benefit Life Insurance Company prospered during the 1950s. Southern Aid, founded in 1892, is the nation's oldest black-owned and operated insurance company.⁵⁷ In 1952 the Richmond Afro-

⁵⁴Ibid., September 15, 1951; October 6, 1951.

⁵⁵Consolidated Bank and Trust Company. Let Us Have A Bank, (n.p., 1991).

⁵⁶Richmond News Leader, January 17, 1951; Richmond Times-Dispatch, January 20, 1960.

⁵⁷Richmond Afro-American, March 22, 1952.

American reported that the company was attempting to build up its capital and surplus. At the end of 1951, Southern Aid, whose office was located at Third and Clay streets, had assets of \$2,839,979.65.⁵⁸ Virginia Mutual had been formed in 1933 from the ashes of the National Benefit Life Insurance Company, which went into receivership during the Great Depression. By the early 1950s, Virginia Mutual was experiencing steady growth having, for example, assets of \$1,237.034 in 1951 compared with \$153,460 in 1941.⁵⁹ The firm's office was located at 501 North Third Street and it had district offices in Norfolk, Roanoke, Danville, Lynchburg, Petersburg, Portsmouth and Newport News and sub-offices in Alexandria, Bristol, Charlottesville and Martinsville. For one family, the Ruffins, working for Southern Aid and Virginia Mutual was a family affair. In August 1950, Moses C. Ruffin retired as an insurance agent with Southern Aid after fifty-two years of service. Alvin J. Ruffin, his son, was vice president of Virginia Mutual.⁶⁰

By the 1950s the golden age of black business in Richmond had passed. There was still a thriving black business district in downtown Richmond, but it was no longer the major center of African American commerce that existed between 1890 to 1920. The slow breaking down of racial barriers and the moving of an increasing number of blacks from the central city allowed African Americans to spend their money

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ibid., March 3, 1952.

⁶⁰Ibid., September 2, 1950.

elsewhere, making them less dependent on the Second Street business hub. Thus, the 1950s may have been the beginning of the end for the black business district in central Richmond. Looking back from the 1990s, one need only travel down Second Street today to see that the once proud and bustling retail district is now only a memory, although this is true of the larger downtown area as well. Although there are a sizable number of successful African American entrepreneurs in Richmond today, the black business community in the city generally does not seem to have the cohesiveness or the strength that it did during the 1950s and earlier. Perhaps, this was one of those unintended consequences that came as a result of the fight for equal rights.

Chapter Six

The Black Church

For African Americans the church is more than just buildings, creeds, rituals and doctrines, Benjamin Mays and Joseph W. Nicholson wrote in a study during the 1930s. They spoke of its "genius" and "soul," which made it perhaps the most important institution in the African American community.¹ The authors' thesis is a credible one, with Richmond a good example of a city where the church has always been a powerful influence. In describing black Richmond during the late nineteenth century, one historian commented on the grandness of the churches. Many blacks, he said, may have lived in slums but they worshiped in "church palaces." "The Richmond Negro not only loved the church with his heart, he loved and supported it with his purse."² This statement still had a ring of truth during the 1950s, as did many of the attributes of the church that Mays and Nicholson described. What was the genius or the soul of the church and why was it such a powerful institution? Mays and Nicholson said it was among the few self-supporting public or community institutions that large numbers of African Americans could own and completely control. Segregated and scorned, blacks took special pride in their churches because they gave

¹Benjamin A. Mays and Joseph W. Nicholson. "The Genius of the Negro Church" in Afro-American Religious History, ed Milton C. Sernett (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985) 338.

²Thomas E. Walton. "The Negro in Richmond 1880-1890" (Master's thesis, Howard University, 1950), 87.

them "a sense of ownership that can hardly exist with respect to any other institution in the community." With opportunities for them limited and many working on jobs where they received little or no recognition, blacks found that the church was a "training school" where they could develop their talents, or as Mays and Nicholson put it, be recognized as "somebody." The truck driver could become chairman of the deacon board or the hotel bellhop could become superintendent of the Sunday school. The often emotional services with the spirited singing and clapping provided blacks with a release from the pressures and disappointments they faced in their daily struggle with racism. Mays and Nicholson also saw the church as a great motivator with ministers often providing the needed push to get blacks to take advantage of educational opportunities. The church was also a place of fellowship where the black teacher and dentist met and worshiped with the black maid and cook.³ In the decades after Mays and Nicholson wrote, the church would also serve another important function: it would be a major force in the black struggle for equal rights. The genius of the church, then, may have been in its uncanny ability to fill so many of the needs of black people.

In antebellum Richmond blacks and whites often worshiped together in the same churches, although the blacks were usually segregated in the balcony. As sectional tensions increased, however, growing racial hostility caused whites to bar blacks from their churches. Blacks sought permission to set up their own churches and by 1856 there were four in

³Mays and Nicholson. "The Genius of the Negro Church," 338, 339, 340, 342, 343, 344.

Richmond. These churches, such as First and Second African Baptist, developed into powerful institutions in the African American community, a role they continued to play after the Civil War.⁴ In his book, Black Labor in Richmond, 1865-1890, Peter Rachleff called the black church "the most important extrafamilial institution in black Richmond." Rachleff said that the church promoted family values, provided skills in self government and served as a place for non-religious meetings, day schools and night classes.⁵

A long string of outstanding, high-profile ministers was another feature of Richmond black churches, especially the Baptist ones. One of the greatest ministers from the late nineteenth century was John Jacob Jasper, the organizer of Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church in 1867, who preached there until his death in 1901. Born a slave in Fluvanna County in 1812, he had established his reputation as a magnificent preacher in the Richmond area before the Civil War. Jasper was perhaps best known for his famous sermon, "The Sun Do Move," which he is said to have preached 250 times and for which blacks and whites from all walks of life came to hear at Sixth Mount Zion. The black ministers preaching in Richmond during the 1950s could thus draw from a proud tradition. Like Jasper many of them served long pastorates, such as the Reverend Augustus Walter Brown, one of Jasper's successors at Sixth Mount Zion,

⁴Michael B. Chesson, Richmond After the War: 1865-1890 (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1981), 17.

⁵Peter Rachleff, Black Labor in Richmond, 1865-1890 (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 23.

who preached there from 1924 to 1967. Many of the black ministers were unlike Jasper, however, in that they were highly educated. The Reverend Robert L. Taylor, who was ordained a minister in Richmond in 1938 and later served as pastor at Second Baptist and Fourth Baptist, said that the stress on having educated black pastors sprang from the values of the community:

There were things that were characteristic of Richmond blacks. They went to church, they sent their children to school, they tried to buy property. These were some of the things that were emphasized in Richmond. And so, given this, many of the old line churches had educated pastors.⁶

Taylor said that many of these pastors who preached in Richmond during the first half of the century provided leadership in the classroom as well as the pulpit, with several serving on the faculty at Virginia Union University and others teaching in high schools. Revered in the church and in the community, many preached at the same church for decades, Taylor said.

Many of these pastors were educated men and also giving leadership in the school and in the community and if their health held up, most of these churches just kept them on. Few if any of them retired. At that time black pastors in Richmond just didn't think in terms of retirement. They just stayed on until they got too old to serve or died. And most of them had long pastorates. The churches then didn't have retirement programs.⁷

⁶The Reverend Robert L. Taylor, interview by author, Richmond, Virginia, June 15, 1993.

⁷Ibid.

Taylor, who served as pastor at Fourth Baptist from 1952 until he stepped down in 1986 and was given the title pastor emeritus, said, "I think I was one of the first to retire." Other than Taylor, three pastors stand out as examples of the high caliber black minister common in Richmond: the Reverend William L. Ransome, the Reverend Gordon B. Hancock and the Reverend Cary S. McCall. All were active during the 1950s and for years beyond.

Ransome, who served as pastor of First Baptist Church, South Richmond from 1920 to 1971, had a special talent for leadership. "In just about anything that he was associated with, he came to the top and became a leader," Taylor said. In 1923 he was asked to join the Theology Department at Virginia Union University, a position he held for twenty-two years. Ransome earned six degrees covering theology, education and law and also write several books, including Stewardship and Negro Baptists, An Old Sorry for This New Day and History of First Baptist Church, South Richmond. In a 1951 profile, the Richmond Afro-American alluded to his accomplishments: "His wide study and training have beyond question fitted him for high service. Dr. Ransome loves his people and believes in equality in the nth degree."⁸ Ransome was a founder of the Richmond Civic Council, which brought most of the nearly 100 black groups in the city under one organization to press for change. In a 1970 interview, he recalled why the council was formed: "'The powers that be in Richmond thought we in the NAACP were foreigners, so

⁸Richmond Afro-American, May 19, 1951.

in 1942 we formed the Richmond Civic Council and got things done."⁹ Later during the 1940s, Ransome played a key role in bargaining with the white power structure to help secure the election of Oliver W. Hill to City Council in 1948 and he was an unsuccessful candidate for council himself in 1952, when he was one of two blacks running. In dealing with the race issue, Ransome, like many black pastors, often stressed the need for conciliation between blacks and whites. Still, he could be very candid in explaining the problems that blacks faced. In a 1950 speech before the Charlottesville Interracial Commission, Ransome said he believed that whites found it hard to accept blacks because of their color and the fact that they had once been slaves. "Segregation tends to intensify the problem," Ransome said. "Education alone will not solve the race problem. America has to become democratic. Democracy is not practiced in the field of race relations," he said.¹⁰ Twenty years later Ransome, then ninety-one and still in the pulpit, said he had seen "great improvement" in race relations in Richmond since 1950. "Things have not come as fully or as fast as we have wanted, but things are more civil, racially speaking," he said.¹¹

Like Ransome, the Reverend Gordon B. Hancock contributed to the betterment of African Americans in ways that went beyond the pulpit. Taylor recalled Hancock this way: "He was most active in interracial

⁹Richmond Times-Dispatch, May 2, 1970.

¹⁰Ibid., October 14, 1950.

¹¹Ibid., May 2, 1970.

circles. He was probably better known among whites as well as blacks than any of the black pastors in Richmond. He was a brilliant teacher, good preacher and an effective pastor. He was my teacher at Virginia Union."¹² Hancock's academic achievements during the first half of the century were stunning at a time when most African Americans could only dream of attending college. A native of Greenwood County, South Carolina, he served as pastor of Moore Street Baptist Church from 1925 until 1963. He earned degrees in the ministry at Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina, and went on to receive a master's degree in anthropology from Harvard University. During the summers of 1937 and 1938 he studied at Oxford and Cambridge universities in Great Britain. He began teaching at Virginia Union during the early 1920s and organized the departments of economics and sociology and the Torrance School of Race Relations at the university, which was believed to be the first of its kind in the nation.¹³ Although Hancock was still a force in religious and political circles during the 1950s, he seemed to have reached the pinnacle of his influence during the 1940s. His development of the race relations course at Virginia Union was one example of his being a great authority and thinker in this area. Throughout his career he presented thoughtful speeches on the subject before white and black audiences. These speeches suggest that Hancock was the eternal optimist, who believed strongly that cooperation between blacks and whites was the

¹²Taylor interview.

¹³Richmond Times-Dispatch, January 2, 1944; July 26, 1970.

best way to solve America's racial dilemma. "The American Negro is trying to help himself but he needs the assistance of the white man if his efforts are to be successful," Hancock told a group of white students at Randolph-Macon College in February 1938.¹⁴ Hancock's biggest achievement, however, was the convening of the Durham Conference at North Carolina College on October 20, 1942. The conference was attended by fifty-nine black leaders from the South and it produced the Durham Manifesto, which called for among other things the abolition of the poll tax and the white primary, an end to discrimination in voting and a jury service, a federal anti-lynching law, assistance to black farmers, racial integration of the military and low-cost housing for blacks. As Hancock's biographer noted, "Never before in Southern history had black people made such a comprehensive and lucid declaration of what they expected from white people." In response to the manifesto, white liberals in the South formed the Southern Regional Council in 1944 as the successor to the old Commission on Interracial Cooperation as a means of working for improved race relations. The 1950s have been described as "probably a time of disillusionment" for Hancock. The tactics of black leaders became more confrontational as they took the struggle of equal rights "to the streets" and Hancock's emphasis on cooperation and relying on the good will of whites became almost passe.¹⁵

¹⁴Ibid., February 18, 1938.

¹⁵Raymond Gavins, The Perils and Prospects of Southern Black Leadership: Gordon Blaine Hancock, 1884-1970. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1972.), 122-146.

The Rev. Cary S. McCall's fifty-four year tenure at Mount Tabor Baptist Church between 1933 and 1987 has to be among the longest for any pastor in Richmond. As McCall said in a 1983 interview with the Richmond Times-Dispatch, "'I have a habit of staying at a thing for a long time.'"¹⁶ McCall was an expert in the art of preaching and his style was described as one that "combines the intellect of the Scriptures and the inspiration that comes with black preaching." Taylor said McCall was more low-key than Ransome or Hancock and wasn't "out in front" on controversial civil rights issues. Rather, McCall was a pioneer among black Richmond ministers in efforts to bring white and black churches together and for this he was dubbed the "Bridge-Builder." "I worked hard to bring white groups into this church [and] to get this church to understand there is no difference between this and white churches." he said in the Times-Dispatch interview.¹⁷ Like Hancock and Ransome he taught at Virginia Union, in his case, from 1945 to 1967. In a 1951 article the Richmond Afro-American summed up McCall this way: "Mr. McCall is kind, true to his word, argumentative, big-hearted, a friend, a preacher in his own right, thoughtful, considerate and a splendid teacher."¹⁸

With giants like Ransome, Hancock and McCall, the black Baptist community in Richmond was an active one. In 1950 roughly sixty-one of

¹⁶Richmond Times-Dispatch, March 19, 1983.

¹⁷Ibid; Taylor interview.

¹⁸Richmond Afro-American, September 29, 1951.

the 107 Baptist churches in the city were black. Most had long, colorful histories and they continued to grow and change during the 1950s. Taylor recalled that in 1952 when he became pastor of Fourth Baptist Church, which is located at 2800 P Street, the black population of the East End was growing, and the church recruited members from the Creighton Court, Mosby Court and Whitcomb Court public housing projects:

One of the things we did was to go into the housing projects. We sent letters into Creighton Court, for example, and also got the names and addresses of all the people who were coming and in many cases we made personal visits into their homes. Many of the people from public housing came into our church and our membership grew and many of them are still right there today.¹⁹

The new members gave Fourth Baptist a needed boost because membership during the early 1950s was down from previous years, Taylor said. Older members told him then that they longed to see a return to the days when the galleries were full on Sundays. Taylor said when he was approached about becoming pastor, church officials boasted that Fourth Baptist had two thousand members. "I never found the two thousand", he said, adding that membership eventually stabilized at about one thousand.²⁰

Population shifts of another kind affected First African Baptist Church. Its roots were in the white First Baptist Church which was organized in 1789. Blacks and whites worshipped together at First Baptist until 1841 when the whites built a new church and sold the old building at Broad and College streets to the black members. The first

¹⁹Taylor interview.

²⁰Ibid.

pastor was a white man, the Reverend Robert Ryland, the president of Richmond College, and the church started with 940 members and grew to over 3,000 by 1856.²¹ First African served as a model for black churches and by 1859 there was a Second African Baptist and a Third African Baptist. The first black pastor at First African was the Reverend James Henry Holmes who served from 1867 to 1901. If by the 1950s, Fourth Baptist was drawing upon an influx of residents to boost the church rolls, First African found that a growing part of its membership was dispersing to other sections of the city and that the construction of offices for the Medical College of Virginia and the state of Virginia was almost encircling the College and Broad sanctuary. First African decided to abandon the downtown location and relocate to North Side. Often, as with First African, whites sold their church building to blacks as more and more African Americans moved into the neighborhood surrounding the church. In Old Richmond Neighborhoods, published in 1950, Mary Wingfield Scott alluded to this variation of white flight in noting that Union Methodist Church was planning to move to Patterson Avenue from its longtime Twenty-fourth and N street location because "the neighborhood is rapidly becoming a Negro section."²² The First African congregation purchased the old Barton Heights Baptist Church at Norwood and Hanes avenues in May 1956 for

²¹John T. O'Brien, "Factory, Church and Community: Blacks in Antebellum Richmond." The Journal of Southern History (November 1978), 526-527.

²²Mary Wingfield Scott, Old Richmond Neighborhoods (Richmond, Va.: William Byrd Press, 1950, reprint 1975), 52.

\$77,500 and sold its old building to the Medical College of Virginia. The Reverend Y. B. Williams, who was called to First African on April 25, 1948, presided over the relocation and enacted other changes at the church, which in 1953 had nine hundred members. First African expanded its educational and missionary work, organized its membership into geographical districts, strengthened its finances and bought a parsonage at 411 Lamb Avenue for \$12,000. In a 1951 article, the Richmond Afro-American described Williams as "a tall dignified-looking man who knows where he is going."²³

Equal to First African in prestige was Ebenezer Baptist Church at Leigh and Judah streets. Organized in 1858, some sources say it was the site of one of the first public schools for blacks in the city and that the first black YMCA was organized there. Many prominent African Americans were Ebenezer members such as Mrs. Sarah E. Walker Jackson, the widow of Giles B. Jackson. When she died in February 1951 at the age of 94, she was the oldest living member of the church.²⁴ Records from Ebenezer's history on file at the Virginia State Library span more than a century and offer a glimpse of the workings of a black Baptist church. The administration of Ebenezer consisted of the pastor, the secretary, the treasurer, the chairman of the board of deacons, a board of trustees, a board of Christian education, a finance committee and a committee on worship. The duties of the pastor were spelled out this

²³Richmond Afro-American, February 14, 1953; February 28, 1953; February 17, 1951; June 2, 1956.

²⁴Ibid., February 17, 1951; Richmond Times-Dispatch, March 8, 1951;

way:

One writer has said, "A local church which consists of a body of believers is in the very best sense a Christian fellowship. Techniques are used to weld the individual believers into such a body so that they not only will attend the services of worship but actively participate in the various programs which promote Christian growth." The Pastor as shepherd of the flock is its spiritual overseer dedicated to the strengthening of the faith of his people and through his pulpit ministry and pastoral program leading them into the Christian way of life.²⁵

The deacons at Ebenezer were charged with serving as a "council of advice and conference" with the pastor, and working with him they were to "formulate plans for constant effort and progress of the church." They were also expected to know "the physical needs and the moral and spiritual struggles of all the members" and to aid those in need. By the early 1960s Ebenezer had thirty deacons who were elected to five-year terms. The church secretary was responsible for all church records and for overseeing the financial program of the church, particularly the paying of church dues. The secretary also was responsible for the printing of the Sunday worship programs and weekly calendars and for serving as the "public relations agent" for the church. The board of Christian education was responsible for the education program of the church. It coordinated the operation of the church school, all missionary groups, all youth and adult fellowships, girl scout and boy scout programs, the scholarship committee and the women's senate.²⁶

²⁵Ebenezer Baptist Church, Richmond City, Records, 1858-1980 (microfilm reels 1088 and 1089 at the Virginia State Library, Richmond, Virginia).

²⁶Ibid.

During the early 1950s Ebenezer found itself at the center of the battle over construction of the Richmond expressway. In the spring of 1950 plans called for an expressway route which would have "passed straight through the church's property." This caused such a furor in the African American community that city planners changed the route plan to west of Judah Street to spare the church building.²⁷

There were two black churches named Second Baptist, and between 1950 and 1956 new pastors were called to both churches, one located in the West End at Idlewood Avenue and Randolph Street and the other in South Richmond at 105 Pilkington Avenue. The West End Second Baptist dated to 1846 when it was sometimes referred to as the Oregon Hill African Mission. Twice during the late nineteenth century splits in the membership led to the formation of new black Baptist churches. Moore Street Baptist was formed in 1875 and Sharon Baptist in 1887. In November 1950, the Reverend Joseph Tyler Hill died after having served as Second Baptist's pastor since 1928. He was succeeded in 1952 by the Reverend Odie D. Brown, who at twenty-nine was the youngest pastor in the church's history.²⁸ In a 1982 interview with the Richmond Times-Dispatch, Brown said he believed in a hands-off leadership style in which he relied heavily on the deacons. "'I'm no good as an administrator. All I want to do is to preach, counsel and visit the sick folks,'" Brown said. Brown's skills as a preacher were said to be such

²⁷Richmond Times-Dispatch, March 8, 1951.

²⁸Richmond Afro-American, November 3, 1956.

²⁹Richmond Times-Dispatch, October 23, 1982.

that he could "preach the fur off a dog."²⁹

Second Baptist, South Richmond was founded in 1879 and among its early pastors was the Reverend D. Webster Davis, an outstanding lecturer and teacher in the Richmond Public Schools. The Reverend Robert L. Taylor served as pastor from 1943 until he was called to Fourth Baptist in 1952. Taylor was succeeded in 1953 by the Reverend Charles Henry Spurgeon Watkins.³⁰

At Cedar Street Baptist Church, the pastor during the early 1950s was the Reverend John W. Kemp, the son of the church's founder, the Reverend C. M. Kemp, who organized the church in 1885. When John W. Kemp died in September 1954 at age sixty-five, his funeral was one of the biggest in the African American community that year, according to the Richmond Afro-American. An estimated four thousand people attended the four-hour service, including forty-four of Kemp's fellow pastors. After the funeral, where the Reverend William L. Ransome delivered the eulogy, a 162-car funeral cortege wound its way to St. John Cemetery. Besides his duties as pastor, Kemp was known as an early resident and community leader of Washington Park, the middle-class black enclave adjacent to Northside.³¹

Although the Baptists were the largest denomination, African Americans in Richmond belonged to others such as Methodist,

³⁰Richmond Afro-American, October 13, 1956.

³¹Ibid., April 12, 1952; September 23, 1954.

Episcopalian, Roman Catholic and Presbyterian as well as a host of other smaller church groups.

Leigh Street Methodist, 500 East Leigh Street, was formed when some members of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal broke away in 1881. During the 1940s Leigh Street was put on a firm financial footing by the Reverend D. M. Pleasants, who developed a tithing program which enabled the church to pay off its mortgage. Leigh Street was led during the early 1950s by the Reverend Hilton A. Parker. Other black Methodist churches were Asbury Methodist at 2700 Q Street and Grant's Chapel, 1725 Winder Street.³²

The African Methodist Episcopal and African Methodist Episcopal Zion denominations were also represented in Richmond. Third Street Bethel A.M.E. Church traced its origins to 1850 when black members of Trinity Methodist Episcopal Church formed their own church. In 1867 they affiliated with the Virginia Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. During the early 1950s Third Street Bethel was led by the Reverend P. B. Walker, who was described as a "forceful, dynamic preacher [whose] personality is felt throughout the community." The church itself was said to enjoy "splendid relations with many organizations and churches in the city." Unlike First African Baptist, Third Street Bethel remained at its longtime downtown location, celebrating one hundred years at the Third and Jackson streets site in

³²Ibid., April 26, 1952; Hill Directory Co. Inc., Hill's Richmond Virginia City Directory, 1950, 996-997.

1956. The A.M.E. Zion churches were Hood Temple A.M.E. Zion at 20 West Clay St and Madison Temple A.M.E. Zion at 503 Denny Street.³³

The three black Episcopal churches in Richmond were St. Peter's at Twenty-second and Venable streets, Osgood Memorial at 329 South Lombardy Street and St. Philip's at One West Leigh Street. St. Philip's, the largest, had been established in 1861. It was not until 1866, however, that the church was formally admitted to the Episcopal Diocese. The rector at St. Philip's from 1944 until his death in May 1955 was the Reverend Doctor Aston Hamilton, who was known for quiet, behind-the-scenes efforts to improve relations between the races and churches through his work with the Interdenominational Ministers Alliance of Richmond and Vicinity. After his death within a year of the Brown school desegregation decision, the Richmond Afro-American paid him tribute saying, "In these trying days of desegregation, leaders possessing his experience and equanimity are solely needed." St. Philip's, like First African Baptist, relocated to North Side from downtown. In 1959, the church purchased the structure at Hanes Avenue and Essex Street, just several blocks north of First African, which formally belonged to a white congregation, the Church of the Epiphany.³⁴ Willis J. Pettis Jr., a retired teacher in the Richmond Public Schools and longtime observer of the African American community in Richmond, recalled that St. Philip's and Ebenezer Baptist had reputations as being churches for the

³³Richmond Afro-American, March 24, 1956.

³⁴Ibid., May 7, 1955; St. Philip's Protestant Episcopal Church Centennial Booklet, 1961, 11-12.

elite of the black community:

People didn't like to really admit it, but there were two churches, St. Philip's and Ebenezer, where the people were viewed as being sort of prejudiced. There was the attitude that, 'You can't sit in this pew because that's my seat.' Also, many believed that the people who gave the most money or who were the best dressed were the ones who had seats in the church where they could be seen from all sides. Going to Ebenezer during the 1950s was sometimes like going to a fashion show.³⁵

The first significant group of African American Roman Catholics in Richmond came together during the 1870s and soon began a determined effort to build a church by selling personal property, pieces of farmland and even bricks for a penny apiece. On Easter Sunday 1885, Bishop John Keane laid the cornerstone for St. Joseph's Church for Colored Catholics at 701 North First Street. St. Joseph's was the first church in Virginia for blacks who were Catholics of the Latin rite, and in 1906 it opened the first kindergarten program for black children in Richmond. In 1910 Van de Vyver School opened next door to St. Joseph's as a parochial school for black Catholic children. By 1920 the school's enrollment was one thousand.³⁶ Black membership in the Catholic Church increased 68 percent nationally between 1947 and 1957, and in 1948 there were an estimated one thousand black Catholics in Richmond.³⁷ Anyone

³⁵Willis J. Pettis Jr., interview by author, Richmond, Virginia, May 6, 1993.

³⁶Nessa Johnson, A Special Pilgrimage: A History of Black Catholics in Richmond (Diocese of Richmond. Richmond: Whittet and Shepperson, 1978), 1-45.

³⁷Ibid.; Joe R. Feagin, "Black Catholics in the United States: an Exploratory Analysis" in The Black Church in America, ed. Hart M. Nelson, Raytha L. Yokley and Anne K. Nelson (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1971), 250.

driving up First Street during the 1950s was certain to notice the shrine dedicated in 1952 to Our Lady of Fatima in the yard next to St. Joseph's. There were also by then three other black Catholic churches in Richmond, St. Augustine's, which opened in 1938 at Fulton and State streets and Holy Rosary and St. Gerard's both of which opened in 1953. St. Gerard's, located on Clopton Street, was the site of first Catholic-run home for unwed black mothers in the nation. Unlike the black Baptists, black Catholics and Episcopalians operated their churches separately within a white church structure. This remained the case during the 1950s, and it wasn't until 1969 that the diocese closed both St. Joseph's in an effort to bring about "further integration of the parishes in the Richmond area."³⁸ One black Catholic who had taken business classes at Van de Vyver's high school was Theophil W. Brown, although he eventually graduated from Armstrong High School. Brown is noteworthy because in May 1956, he became the first black Richmond native to be ordained as a priest in the Catholic Church. The ordination took place at St. John's Abbey Church in Collegeville, Minnesota.³⁹

The 1950 city directory lists First Presbyterian Church at 514 North Monroe Street as the sole black Presbyterian church in the city.⁴⁰ Organized in 1890 it was described in the Richmond Afro-American in 1952 as "that staid little church," which had a "dynamic, amiable pastor" in

³⁸The Richmond Times-Dispatch, August 1, 1969.

³⁹Richmond News Leader, May 19, 1956.

⁴⁰Hill's Richmond Virginia City Directory, 1950, 996-997.

the Reverend Herman V. Wiggins. The article also said:

A modest church of 150 members, First Presbyterian has only four scheduled programs each week. They are Sunday church school, Sunday morning worship, choir rehearsal on Wednesday and fellowship activities on Thursday evenings. The church has a small but well organized chapel.⁴¹

A second black Presbyterian church, All Souls Presbyterian Church, was organized in December 1952 with the active assistance of Elinor Curry, a white member of the East Hanover Presbytery's Negro Work committee, who was "an ardent believer in the elimination of racial segregation." The church held services under the leadership of the Reverend Irvin Elligan at the Albert V. Norrell School in North Side until January 1956 when it moved into a building formally occupied by a white congregation, Overbrook Presbyterian Church, at Nineteen Overbrook Road.⁴² Shortly after its first service in the new building, All Souls ran an advertisement in the Richmond Afro-American which gave a history of the church's founding. One section of the advertisement makes a telling allusion to the changing racial makeup of North Side in describing how the Overbrook Road church was bought by blacks:

In Barton Heights where sweeping changes began taking place in housing, Negroes replacing whites, one of the churches affected was Overbrook Presbyterian. Since the members of this congregation were fast moving away from the community, the fate of the church became quite uncertain. It was at this point that Elinor Curry moved friends of hers and members of East Hanover Presbytery to think in terms of securing the building for a continuing

⁴¹Richmond Afro-American, September 6, 1952.

⁴²Ibid., January 14, 1956.

Presbyterian church among the new residents, making whoever would come welcome.⁴³

The black religious experience in Richmond was indeed a varied one with the 1950 city directory listing nearly thirty black churches under the classification "Other Denominations." There was, for example, Seventh-Day Adventists of Richmond Number Two Church, which in March 1952 was planning a door-to-door campaign to solicit new members, according to the Richmond Afro-American.⁴⁴ In 1956 Richmond became home to a congregation of the Black Muslims. Muhammad's Temple of Islam was located at 2116 North Avenue and by 1959 about seventy blacks were said to worship there at services each Wednesday, Friday and Sunday.⁴⁵ Examples of other independent churches include Moorish Science Temple of America at 602 East Clay Street; Mount Sinai Holy Mission at 1522-A Idlewood Avenue; High Holiness Church at 825 North Thirtieth Street; Universal Ancient Ethiopian Spiritual Church of Christ at 2629 East Clay Street; Solomon Temple Church at 203 South Second Street; Refuge Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ at 901 North Thirty-Second Street and Trinity Mission of the Pentecostal Faith at 1114 North First Street. Richmond would not get a black Lutheran congregation until 1963 with the founding of Resurrection Lutheran Church at 2500 Seminary Avenue.

The leadership of black churches in Richmond was almost totally male-dominated, but there were exceptions. One was Jerusalem Holy

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid., March 14, 1952.

⁴⁵Richmond Times-Dispatch, December 14, 1959.

Church, where during the early 1950s Elder Annie Chamblin served as pastor. Chamblin had begun evangelical work in 1930 traveling from Boston to Florida. She organized Jerusalem Church in 1937 at One West Marshall Street with the assistance of her husband, the Reverend Randolph Chamblin. Church membership grew so much that in 1953 the church purchased the Stockton Baptist Church at Twelfth and Stockton streets for \$64,000.⁴⁶

While black churches in Richmond were generally strong, stable institutions, occasionally some were rocked by serious internal disputes often between the minister and the congregation or the deacons. For example, in February 1953 the Reverend Issac James was ousted as pastor at Fountain Baptist Church after "disputes involving, among other things, questions about the church's finances." James questioned the validity of the vote to terminate him and continued to serve as pastor. The church's trustees in March obtained a court injunction barring James from entering the church and as the Richmond Afro-American noted, "the injunction was backed up by a bright new lock placed on the church door." Tempers then apparently cooled because Jones, who had served as pastor since August 1951, was restored to the pastorate in April after another church vote supervised by a moderator appointed by a Richmond court.⁴⁷ In 1955 a similar controversy climaxed in May when members of the Morning Star Baptist Church decided in another court-supervised vote

⁴⁶Richmond Afro-American, July 25, 1952.

⁴⁷Ibid., March 21, 1953; April 4, 1953.

to oust the Reverend Albertis Mason. Mason's critics charged that he "failed to devote proper time to business of the church" while Mason argued that his troubles were caused by a "disgruntled group." ⁴⁸

Although disputes such as these were perhaps inevitable, they were the exception rather than the rule. The black church was a solid institution and it would prove its staying power in the burgeoning civil rights struggle. In 1952, W. Lester Banks, the executive secretary of the Virginia State NAACP and a major figure in the struggle for equality in the state for decades, set down what he believed to be the church's role in the struggle:

The colored church has a peculiar duty to encourage its members and all others whom it can influence to arm themselves with the ballot so they may fight on the Lord's side in the battle between racial segregation and the brotherhood of man. Not until this evil is overcome in every phase of our national and local life will the minds of men become free to accept God as being no respecter of persons. ⁴⁹

Although the church seemed to be a place where blacks could temporarily find refuge from the slings and arrows of segregation, even it sometimes felt racism's sting. A good example was in September 1956 when about five thousand members of the National Baptist Convention of America descended on Richmond for their annual meeting. "A large number" had no place to stay because the two black hotels, Slaughter's and Eggleston's, were booked solid and they were barred from the white hotels. As noted earlier, pastors like William L. Ransome and Gordon B. Hancock were

⁴⁸Ibid., May 21, 1955.

⁴⁹Ibid., August 30, 1952.

often in the forefront of efforts to end such discrimination. Mrs. Adelle Moss McCall, the widow of the Reverend Cary S. McCall, said that black pastors had an advantage over rank-and-file blacks in standing up to bigotry because they were more immune from retaliation:

The black pastor had a real freedom to say what he wanted to say because he was not employed by any company. He was a free man and he could say what he thought was right because he wasn't obligated to anyone else. It was different for the person who had a job with Reynolds Metal, for example. He would have to be careful what he said.⁵⁰

The Reverend Robert L. Taylor echoed Mrs. McCall's views, saying, "We could stand up because we didn't have anything particularly on the line. We were paid by black people, so we couldn't be fired by the boss downtown." Taylor said that he and his fellow ministers often believed that they had a duty to be leaders in the civil rights struggle. "We not only had a religious responsibility, but we were indebted to the church people who had sustained us," he said. Taylor said that many times during the 1950s, as in previous and subsequent decades, the black pastor served as the intermediary between blacks and the white power structure. If there was a problem in the black community that needed attention, blacks who feared the loss of a job or some other retaliation if they spoke out would gather all the necessary information and present it to the black ministers and they in turn would go before the City Council or the School Board, Taylor said.⁵¹ Willis J. Pettis Jr. said

⁵⁰Mrs. Adelle Moss McCall, interview by author, Richmond, Virginia, June 1, 1993.

⁵¹Taylor interview.

that this was often crucial in building grass-roots support among African Americans in Richmond in pushing for change. "If the congregations saw the pastors out taking a stand on something, this then was usually enough to bring the people out," Pettis said.⁵²

Taylor and Pettis noted that black ministers such as William L. Ransome were often among the most influential members as well as the leaders of civil rights groups, especially the NAACP. The Baptist Ministers' Conference of Richmond and Vicinity, however, was the pastors' own group for effecting change. During the early 1950s, it consisted of more than one hundred black Baptist ministers in the Richmond metropolitan area. Taylor said that the group was in full swing when he came to Richmond during the early 1930s. "I remember when I was ordained in 1938, joining the Baptist Ministers' Conference was one of the first things I did," said Taylor, who also served as president of the group during the 1950s.⁵³ One role the conference played was in issuing public statements on pressing issues associated with the attack on segregation. To protest segregation at The Mosque, the popular city auditorium, the ministers voted in October 1950 to urge their congregations not to attend public religious services planned there.⁵⁴ In other instances, the ministers met with white officials to discuss the concerns of the African American community. In 1951 discussions were

⁵²Pettis interview.

⁵³Taylor and Pettis interviews.

⁵⁴Richmond Afro-American, October 7, 1950.

held with the director of public safety after the widely publicized police beating of a black man, William E. Crockett. The Richmond Afro-American reported that the meeting resulted from the ministers' conclusion that "the colored population [had to] stand up and demand respect and courteous treatment at the hands of law enforcement officers."⁵⁵ In 1954 after the Supreme Court's school desegregation ruling, the ministers' group issued a long statement in support of the decision, which said in part:

As to the decision of the Supreme Court with reference to integration in public schools, the Conference holds that it is not a question of who thinks what is best or of who wants this or that. Segregation in public schools, says the Court, is unconstitutional.⁵⁶

Mrs. McCall said she believed that the Baptist Ministers' Conference of the 1950s functioned during a time when the black church was stronger than in succeeding decades. "The ministers tried to do things to keep Richmond as calm as possible, and yet they wanted to get their ideas over and get things done," she said. She said she regretted that black ministers today don't seem to want to work together like her husband and others did in the ministers' conference. "I don't think that the younger ministers are taking the stands that the older ones did," she said.⁵⁷

The church continued as a major force and as perhaps the strongest institution in the African American community of Richmond during the

⁵⁵Ibid., March 3, 1951.

⁵⁶Ibid., November 20, 1954.

⁵⁷McCall interview.

1950s. Churches were the great gathering place for blacks from all walks of life and they encouraged fellowship. They also helped set the moral tenor in the community, which was important for a group of people as put upon as blacks. The lessons of faith and righteousness helped blacks deal with the sting of racism, gave hope that there would be a better tomorrow and encouraged them to keep to the straight and narrow. Churchgoers could look to pastors such as William L. Ransome, Gordon B. Hancock, Cary S. McCall and many others as splendid role models. Men like these debunked the belief that blacks could not be great thinkers. The church's influence, however, went beyond religion and morals. Ministers played key roles in the black struggle for equality and were in the top ranks of the civil rights leadership in Richmond. Many of the activities designed to fight Jim Crow policies were coordinated through churches. If blacks were pushing harder to beat back Jim Crow during the early 1950s, the church deserves credit for playing a major role. Today, many African Americans worry that the influence of the church is waning, but during the 1950s the church's standing in Richmond as among the most powerful of black institutions seemed undiminished.

Chapter Seven

Social Life

African Americans in Richmond created their own world with their schools, businesses, and churches, but their many social activities provided relief from the cares of that world and the hostile white one. "You've always had a very active social life in black Richmond from the big groups like the fraternities down to the small ones like the card clubs," Dr. Francis M. Foster Sr., an amateur historian and longtime observer of the black Richmond scene, said in a 1993 interview¹ The authors of The Negro in Virginia , writing in the early 1940s, noted that Richmond had its own black "high society" in which middle-class women were always having teas, bridge parties and dances, and this remained the case during the 1950s. Occupation often determined one's social status with a dividing line separating the "overalls" worker from the "white collar" one.²

Second Street, besides being the core of the black retail district, was "the street" where groups of black men could be seen during the 1950s congregating on the sidewalks, engaging in spirited discussions on any number of issues. They formed what the Richmond Afro-American light-

¹Dr. Francis M. Foster Sr., interview by author, Richmond, Virginia, July 28, 1993.

²Writers Program of the Works Projects Administration in the State of Virginia, The Negro in Virginia (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1940), 347-348.

heartedly called the "Second Street Debating Society," and the discussions could last well into the night:

When darkness falls, Second Street, the avenue of storied Richmond fame, has its usual coterie of sportsmen and men of sport who have the latest answers on some of the oldest as well as current problems of state and of just plain folks.³

During the last week of March 1952, for example, the rise in the cost of haircuts was a hot topic of conversation, and the gist of the commentary on Second Street was summarized as follows: "Now that haircuts have gone up to one dollar, tips will become a thing of the past, not that we object to tipping, but we just don't have the dough."⁴

Many of the social clubs had colorful names, especially those of the women. There were the Epicureans, the Moles, the Ritzies, We Twelve, the Gay Senoras, the Merry Moderns, the Suavettes and Les Femmes. Most had existed for decades, but some were organized during the 1950s. The Les Amies Pinochle Club and the Delverettes, a junior organization of the Delver Women's Club, were formed in 1950, and the Richmond Chapter of the Links was formed in 1952. The 1950 city directory listed nine lodges under the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows; two temples and one lodge under the Order Elks of the World; eight lodges under the Independent Order of Good Samaritans and Daughters of Samaria and the

³Ibid., 350-351; Richmond Afro-American, May 5, 1952.

⁴Ibid., March 29, 1952.

Right Worthy Grand Council under the Independent Order of St. Luke.⁵

Club activities ran the gamut from social activities to community service projects. The ball of the Theban Beneficial Club each February was one of the most anticipated annual social events in the African American community as this excerpt from an article in the Richmond Afro-American shows:

Richmond is a traditional city. We have learned to love and cherish the customs and traditions which have been handed down to us throughout the years. One of the most highly cherished of these traditions is the annual ball of the Theban Beneficial Club. Just as we celebrate the birthdays of Lincoln and Washington, we can look forward to the annual February [dance] of this old and revered Richmond club.⁶

The Theban Club had been organized in Richmond in 1902, and derived its name from Thebes, the ancient Egyptian city near the Nile River. Club members saw a link to African history in that Hailie Selassie I, emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974, supposedly traced his roots to Thebes. Members hoped that the club's name would inspire black youngsters to become historians and archaeologists who would "dig up and record much more about our ancestors and give it to posterity." The club appears to have been more influential earlier in the century when it was a leading sponsor of community picnics, dances and beach excursions. The membership was said to include people from "all walks of life" and was

⁵Hill Directory Co. Inc., Hill's Richmond Virginia City Directory, 1950, 1027; Richmond Afro-American, January 21, 1950; March 1, 1952.

⁶Richmond Afro-American, March 3, 1951.

limited to seventy-five in the belief that a small number produced a more tightly knit group. Retired teacher Willis J. Pettis Jr. recalled that the dances sponsored by the Thebans and other clubs could be classy affairs. "I can remember people going out dressed to kill in their evening dresses and tuxedos during the fifties. People took a lot more pride in their attire in going to a social affair in those days," he said.⁷

The Community Junior League was known for its efforts to help the less fortunate in the black community. It was organized in Richmond in 1934 by Ruth Taylor Jackson, and in the early 1950s consisted of "thirty-five energetic young matrons." Each year the league gave baskets of food to needy families at Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter; gave toys to children at hospitals; worked with the handicapped and awarded scholarships to students. The league also employed a social worker who instructed the unemployed blind in braille, and it once donated an X-ray machine to Richmond Community Hospital, the city's only black-run medical facility.⁸

Two of the most influential social clubs for men were the Astoria Beneficial Club and the Athenians. Astoria Beneficial was founded in 1901 with the objective of "inspiring its members to a higher Christian, moral, intellectual, civic and social standing and to relieve its distressed members." Its membership in the early 1950s was about two

⁷Ibid., March 17, 1956; Pettis interview.

⁸Richmond Afro-American, November 4, 1950.

hundred, and one prerequisite for membership was being a qualified voter and remaining so as long as one stayed in the club. The group was known for its monthly forums in which community leaders spoke, and it often took stands on political issues. In 1954 the club sent a strongly-worded letter to the General Assembly after a bill to create a race relations commission was defeated. "There is no disposition on the part of the legislature of the State of Virginia to take any action leading toward a better understanding between the races in Virginia," the letter said. In 1956 the club tried to boost black voting in Richmond by personally contacting blacks who were delinquent in paying their poll tax.⁹

The Athenians, formed in 1945, stressed "a desire to become first-class citizens," and they took their name from the residents of the ancient Greek city, where early forms of democracy had been practiced. The motto was "Conduct and Courage Lead to Honor," and by 1953 there were chapters in Washington and Philadelphia. The membership was small compared to Astoria Beneficial with only fourteen active and twelve honorary members in Richmond in 1956. Many members were World War II veterans, who were quite patriotic. The Richmond Afro-American reported in 1956 that the club considered its "most singular honor" having many of its members recalled to active duty during the early 1950s to fight in the Korean War.

One of the centers of recreational activities in the black community was the Leigh Street YMCA at 214 East Leigh Street. Since African

⁹Ibid., March 24, 1956; March 20, 1954.

Americans were barred from activities at white YMCA and YWCA facilities in the city, a black YMCA was organized in 1887 at Ebenezer Baptist Church. The Leigh Street Y operated as a separate group from the white YMCA's in the city until September 1955 when it was brought under the umbrella of the YMCA of Richmond.¹⁰

Young blacks like Arthur Ashe growing up in Richmond during the 1950s could not play on white sports fields. In Days of Grace: A Memoir, the autobiography published shortly before his death in 1993, Ashe recalled:

As a youth in Richmond I was barred from playing on most of the public tennis courts, which were reserved for whites; and the most powerful local tennis officials had tried to kill my game by shutting me out of any competition involving whites.¹¹

A top black tennis player in Richmond during the 1950s was Ron Charity, who often played at Brook Field, the eighteen-acre North Side playground managed by Ashe's father. Charity became Ashe's mentor and "his lessons and love of the game took hold" of young Ashe.¹² In 1953 the Richmond Afro-American reported that Ashe was a "rising star" as he played that summer in competitions at Armstrong High School's playground.

¹⁰Ibid., January 1, 1955, February 5, 1955; Richmond News Leader, May 27, 1955.

¹¹Arthur Ashe and Arnold Rampersad, Days of Grace: A Memoir (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 61.

¹²Ibid., 60-61.

The rising stars of the three weeks' competition were 10-year-old Arthur Ashe and 15-year-old Raymond Jackson. Arthur gained the final round in the midget singles only to lose to 12-year-old John Gordon. However, Arthur teamed with the Armstrong star, Raymond Jackson, to grab the boys' doubles with an impressive victory over Gordon and 14-year-old Harris Miller.¹³

There were seven segregated movie houses for blacks operating in Richmond by 1956. They were the Booker-T at 118 West Broad Street; the Walker at 116 West Broad Street; the Globe at 510 North Second Street; the Hippodrome at 528-30 North Second Street; the Robinson at 3901-03 Q Street, the Lincoln Theater at 1919 Hull Street and the East End Theater on Twenty-fifth Street which opened in September 1955. Willis J. Pettis Jr. said that the Booker-T and the nearby Walker were regarded as the best of the lot. "The Robinson was never properly cared for. The Globe was around, but it was playing the low-grade movies. The Booker-T and Walker were the ones you usually wanted to go to," he said. The East End, Booker-T, Walker, Robinson and Hippodrome were operated by the white-owned District Theatres.¹⁴

The Booker-T opened in 1911 as the Empire Theater, a theater for whites. The name was changed to the Strand in 1915 and it closed in 1927. It was reopened in 1934 as a movie house for blacks and renamed the Booker-T in honor of Booker T. Washington. It lasted until 1974 when it closed for "lack of business," nearly a decade after the integration

¹³Richmond Afro-American, August 22, 1953.

¹⁴Ibid., September 3, 1955; Pettis interview.

of Richmond's movie houses.¹⁵ The Hippodrome was Richmond's leading black vaudeville house from the early 1900s to the 1940s. Many of the leading black performers played there, often staying across the street at Slaughter's Hotel.¹⁶

While other black communities had abandoned the celebration of Emancipation Day as a "relic of the past," observances continued in Richmond usually under the auspices of the Richmond Civic Council. President Lincoln's issuance of the proclamation on January 1, 1863, was usually marked sometime in January and featured daylong events including a church service and a parade.¹⁷

One person whose activities were often a topic of conversation among the social set was Jesse Boland, who was known as Master X. He was a black spiritualist whose office at 507 North First Street with the words "Master X" engraved on the window in large letters was a familiar sight during the 1950s. Master X was in his late forties and weighed nearly four hundred pounds. In addition to giving advice on spiritual matters, he is said to have owned a seaplane which sank in a Maryland River just before he was to send it on a "world goodwill flight." Master X claimed that he was paid anywhere from one dollar to \$30,000 for his advice, and when asked about the wide range in price said that he charged "poor folks, poor prices and rich folks rich prices."¹⁸

¹⁵Richmond News Leader, September 13, 1974.

¹⁶Richmond Times-Dispatch, November 22, 1980; December 30, 1982.

¹⁷Richmond Afro-American, January 1, 1955; January 23, 1954.

¹⁸Ibid., April 14, 1951.

Black Richmonders frequented nightspots such as Gregory's Ballroom at Nineteenth and Hull streets and flocked to concerts at the Mosque where popular stars of the day such as Duke Ellington, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan and Nat King Cole frequently performed. By 1955, it seemed that rhythm and blues was outpacing jazz in popularity among black Richmonders. That year after a concert in February by Joe Turner of "Shake, Rattle and Roll" fame and organist Bill Doggett, the Richmond Afro-American proclaimed, "Rhythm and Blues hit Richmond Saturday night and when the sounds had faded away the city was rated a top R and B spot." In April 1951 blacks tuned in their radios to listen as WANT went on the air. The station had an interracial staff and played jazz, bebop and spirituals. Many of the announcers and disc jockeys were college students, and the station also broadcast a daily roundup of social activities and a kiddie show on Saturday morning.¹⁹

Blacks who wanted to get away from it all often vacationed at Mark-Haven, a segregated beach on the Rappahannock River. Located two miles south of Center Cross off of U.S. Route 17, Mark-Haven offered cabins, a crabbing pier, an amusement park and a miniature golf course. During the early 1950s blacks held an annual "Miss Richmond" pageant at the beach as part of the Richmond Day celebration.²⁰

Blacks in Richmond were forced to create their own social sphere because they were cut off from the mainstream of city life. Their

¹⁹Ibid., February 5, 1955; April 28, 1951.

²⁰Ibid., August 11, 1951.

colorful and varied social life suggests, however, that despite segregation and unfair treatment, blacks found diversions and ways of unwinding, so that for many life was not all work, struggle and sacrifice.

Chapter Eight

Education

The Supreme Court's outlawing of segregation in the public schools in 1954 unleashed major racial and social tensions which affected blacks in Richmond. They were heartened by the ruling and hoped for better educational opportunities, but by 1956 the state's white leadership had adopted "Massive Resistance" to thwart the court's orders. It would be years before any significant desegregation occurred in the city schools.¹

The ruling and its effect in Richmond overshadowed all other developments in education for African Americans between 1950 and 1956. The Supreme Court concluded that segregated schools deprived blacks of equal educational opportunities. Long before the decision, however, state government reports in Virginia had alluded to the inequities in the public school system. The Virginia Education Commission's report in 1944, for example, not only pointed to the inadequacy of black schools, but also suggested that maintaining dual school systems put the state at a disadvantage:

There are gross inadequacies existing with regard to the educational facilities available to the Negroes, although substantial improvement is indicated in them all along the lines. The State, which must support a dual system, is disadvantaged in comparison with states of similar wealth and income levels and

¹Robert A. Pratt, The Color of Their Skin: Education and Race in Richmond, Virginia 1954-89 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992), 1-20.

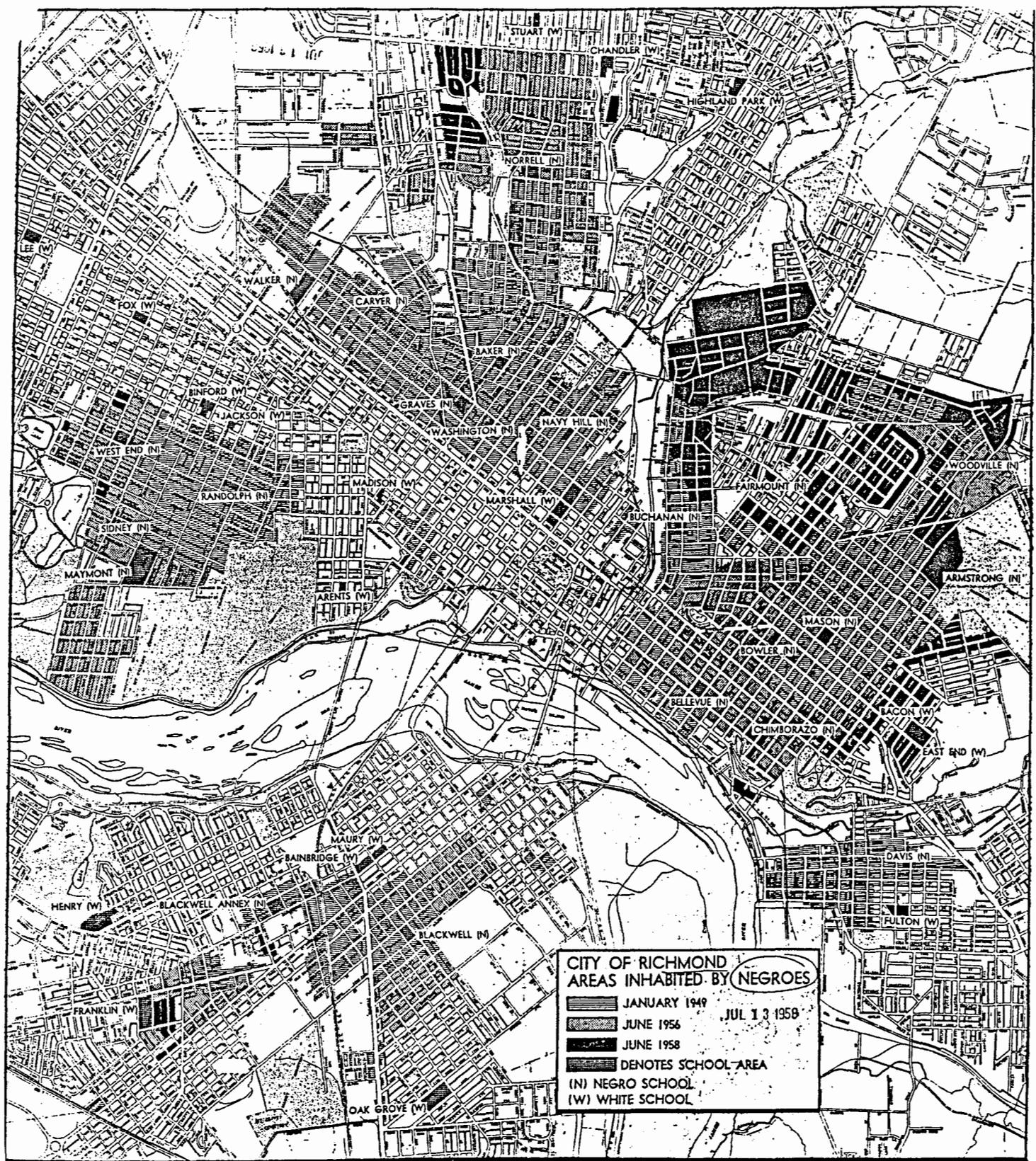
finds it very difficult, if indeed not impossible, to keep up to the standards attained by the wealthier states in the nation which have only one system of schools to maintain.²

By the early 1950s, blacks in Richmond and throughout the South were becoming less willing to accept separate but equal, which as one writer has noted, was a sham. The schools and everything else under segregation might have been separate but they were never equal. In 1951, Marvin Caplan, a member of the civil rights committee of the NAACP's Richmond branch, summed up this feeling. "Negroes have grown tired of having the worst schools in an area notorious for its bad schools. They are demanding for their children an education at least the equal of that given white children."³

Segregated schooling in Richmond also meant that even though a growing number of black children were by the mid-1950s living closer to white schools, they were still forced to attend all-black ones. This was especially true as the African American population grew and expanded in the North Side, the East End, in the Maymount-Byrd Park area of the West End and in sections of South Richmond. In the North Side, for example, as the black population spread from Broad Street north to Brookland Park Boulevard, a growing number of blacks lived closer to all-white Chandler Junior High at 201 East Brookland Park Boulevard than they did to all-

²Virginia. Virginia Education Commission. The Virginia Public School System, 1944, 228-229.

³David Halberstam, The Fifties (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 413; Marvin Caplan, "Virginia Schools: A Study of Frustration," The Crisis, 58, January 1951, 5.



Map 3. This map from 1958 shows predominantly black areas and the city schools, both black and white, that were in or near them.

black Benjamin A. Graves Junior High at Prentis and Leigh streets near downtown. And although all-white John Marshall High School at 800 East Marshall Street downtown had many more black families living nearby than white, black children were still restricted to either Armstrong High or Maggie L. Walker High, the two all-black high schools. By the late 1950s, there were thirty white schools and twenty-four black schools in Richmond, but an estimated one-third of the white schools were in or near mostly black population areas.⁴

In 1953, Henry I. Willet, the superintendent of schools in Richmond, conceded that the days of legally sanctioned school segregation might be numbered. Willet attended a meeting of parents at all-black Albert V. Norrell school in the North Side in March and was asked by an NAACP official what the school system was doing "to prepare groups such as this for the end of racial segregation, when it comes"? Willet replied that school officials had "given the matter some thought, "but had decided against holding public hearings to discuss "possibilities of the ruling." He pleaded for understanding from both blacks and whites, saying that "he would need the confidence of both groups."⁵

Developing as a backdrop to the segregation controversy was a change in the racial makeup of the school system that mirrored the trend in the city's population. Just as the number of whites in the city was

⁴Richmond Times-Dispatch, July 13, 1958.

⁵Richmond Afro-American, March 14, 1953.

declining, the percentage of whites in the Richmond schools was dropping as well and had been for decades, going from 70 percent in 1919 to 63.9 percent in 1939, 59.2 percent in 1949 and 56.5 percent in 1954-55. In 1957, a Planning Commission report noted that, "Richmond schools are on the verge of experiencing a minority in their white enrollment." A higher black birth rate and the enrollment of whites in suburban, private and parochial schools were the major causes, the report said.⁶

As the Richmond Afro-American noted in 1954, the overturning of school segregation "didn't just happen." It came about after a long legal struggle in which five cases challenging the right of the states to segregate their schools were finally laid before the Supreme Court. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* took its name from the Kansas case, but a Virginia case had also been among the five. Representing the black plaintiffs in the Virginia litigation were Oliver W. Hill, Spottswood W. Robinson III and Robert L. Carter of Richmond. Robinson and Hill were on the frontlines of the battle in Richmond and throughout the South to end segregation. Robinson was dubbed "the Brain" by reporters because of his "meticulous preparation of the cases." Hill was described as "dynamic," and a person who always carried the day "when the going was rough and a pep talk was needed to boost the lagging spirits of plaintiffs or public." Hill, Robinson and Carter were assisted by many in Richmond and around the state in preparing

⁶Carolyn Bradley et al v. The School Board of the City of Richmond, Virginia (D. Va. 1972), 230; Richmond, Va., Planning Commission. Negro and White Population Trends. December 1957, 7-8.

statistical data for the case such as Professor Robert Johnson of Virginia Union University and Thomas H. Henderson, dean of the university. "These shock troops from the Old Dominion State spearheaded the legal battle," the Richmond Afro-American noted.⁷

The Virginia case involved the high school facilities in Prince Edward County, and the trial opened before a three-judge federal court panel in Richmond on February 25, 1952. Of the five cases, four had been coordinated by the NAACP, and the Virginia case was described as the most comprehensive. Robinson, Hill and Carter called an array of expert witnesses from the fields of psychology, psychiatry, sociology, anthropology and education and offered many statistics to show the harmful effect of segregation on black schoolchildren. On March 7, 1952, Judges Armistead M. Dobie, Sterling Hutcheson and Albert V. Bryan ruled that the segregated black high school in Prince Edward was vastly inferior to the white high school, but they refused to hold that the black children could not be forced to attend the segregated school. Segregated schools were constitutional, the judges said, but they ordered that the white and black schools be equalized.⁸

The nine justices of the Supreme Court of the United States rejected such reasoning a little over two years later. "We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of separate but equal has no place," the court's unanimous opinion said. "Separate educational

⁷Richmond Afro-American, May 22, 1954.

⁸Ibid; "History of the Five School Cases," The Crisis, June-July 1954, 339-340.

facilities are inherently unequal." In Richmond African Americans hailed the overturning of school segregation as a momentous step forward. "I'm extremely glad," said Beatrice McClanahan, a student at Virginia Union University. "Integrating the schools will help break down segregation in other fields also. I feel like we're on our way finally to becoming first-class citizens." W. C. Bolding, a deliveryman, noted that he paid his taxes just like whites. "Maybe now I and my family can begin to enjoy some of the benefits of our society like other people," he said. Others saw a brighter future for young blacks. "My own son, Jackie, finishes Armstrong [High School] this year but this will mean a lot to my five-month old granddaughter," said Cora H. Falden, a housewife. "This decision definitely opens the door to first-class citizenship for her and other youngsters like her."⁹

The editorial comment on the ruling in the white and black press in the city was a study in contrasts. The Richmond Afro-American noted that attempts by blacks to end school segregation went back as far as 1844 when blacks in Boston petitioned unsuccessfully for an end to separate schools. "The most persistent argument for segregation in public schools has been 'the time is not ripe, later but not now. Monday, the Supreme Court agreed unanimously that the time is ripe, right now to settle the question.'" The Richmond Times-Dispatch said it had hoped the court would uphold the separate but equal doctrine. But in a surprisingly accurate prediction it noted that despite the ruling,

⁹Halberstam, The Fifties, 423; Richmond Afro-American, May 22, 1954.

"Segregation in the public schools of the South is not about to be eliminated. Final achievement of that objective is years, perhaps many years, in the future."¹⁰ The moderate tone of the Richmond News Leader's editorial was in stark contrast to the policy of fierce resistance to integration that would be trumpeted by James Jackson Kilpatrick Jr. on the same editorial page a few years later:

To bring the two races together in the social intimacy of a classroom will not come easily to the South. This newspaper, as its readers know, believes in segregated schools. We believe also in abiding by the law -- abiding by all the law, including laws that may be devised consistent with the law laid down by the Supreme Court yesterday.¹¹

About a month after the ruling, Oliver W. Hill warned blacks in Richmond not to become complacent because of the court victory. Speaking before a black fraternity forum, he predicted that efforts would be made to keep schools segregated, and he urged blacks to use the power of the vote to fight reactionary politicians. Most white political leaders in the state supported Section 140 of the state constitution which stated that "white and colored children shall not be taught in the same school." Whites who were amenable to ending segregation were often afraid to state such views publicly for fear of reprisal.¹²

¹⁰Richmond Afro-American, May 22, 1954; Richmond Times-Dispatch, May 18, 1954.

¹¹Richmond News Leader, May 18, 1954.

¹²Richmond Afro-American, June 19, 1954; Pratt, The Color of Their Skin, 4.

On August 23, 1954, Governor Thomas B. Stanley appointed an all-white panel, known as the Gray Commission, to devise a state policy in response to the Brown decision. Blacks in Richmond and across the state were angered that Stanley rejected any bi-racial efforts. The Supreme Court, meanwhile, handed down a follow-up ruling on May 31, 1955, which called for the elimination of segregation in the public schools "with all deliberate speed." As Robert A. Pratt noted in The Color of Their Skin: Education and Race in Richmond, Virginia 1954-89, by mid-1955, "the seeds of bitter defiance had already begun to germinate, and most Virginia politicians were now steadfastly committed to maintaining segregated schools throughout the state, even if it meant a direct confrontation with the federal courts."¹³

As the move to defiance gathered steam, the views of many blacks in Richmond were perhaps echoed in a column by Rufus Wells, editor of the Richmond Afro-American. It was probably true, Wells noted, that a majority of whites in Virginia had indicated to the governor and others that they favored segregated schools. But Wells urged the white leaders to realize that they were not "conducting a popularity contest or a public opinion poll." The issue was whether the orders of the Supreme Court would be obeyed.¹⁴

On November 11, 1955, the Gray Commission released its report which called for the creation of a state Public Placement Board to which

¹³Ibid., 4-5.

¹⁴Richmond Afro-American, July 3, 1954.

all black students wishing to attend white schools were to be referred and to also allow the use of public funds for tuition grants for students who wanted to attend a segregated private school rather than an integrated public one. Supporters of this plan hoped that it would keep integration "at token levels" and thus preserve the essentials of the dual school system.¹⁵

The Gray Plan was set to be voted on in a statewide referendum in January 1956. The plan was denounced, however, at a public hearing in December by blacks in Richmond, such as the Reverend William L. Ransome, pastor of First Baptist Church of South Richmond. "The problem is not one of state's rights but a problem of color, and that color is black. Black robes on educators and judges indicate wisdom, but black on a human being is a badge of inferiority," Ransome said.¹⁶ Henry L. Marsh III, who would later become the city's first black mayor but who was then president of the Virginia Union University student government association, said, "We are astonished to find that although we were urged to obey decisions of the Supreme Court when they enforced segregation, we are now told that we must circumvent the decision of the court when it advocates equal justice to all citizens."¹⁷

The controversy over the Gray Plan appeared to galvanize blacks in Richmond. During the last weeks of December, many rushed to pay their

¹⁵Pratt, The Color of Their Skin, 4-5

¹⁶Richmond Afro-American, December 24, 1955.

¹⁷Ibid.

poll tax because they were "eager to vote against" the plan. An estimated 1,200 people paid the tax on the December 12 deadline day and officials at the city Treasurer's Office estimated that of those paying "blacks citizens outnumbered whites eighteen to one." On January 9, 1956, about eight thousand blacks in Richmond "braved winds and rain" to cast a solid "no" vote. The plan was approved, however, by a two to one margin, prompting the Richmond Afro-American to comment that Virginia voters had adopted "a shameful plan openly aimed at evading the law."¹⁸

Although blacks in the city had expressed high hopes for progress after the Brown decision, as 1956 progressed white resistance to integration intensified and by the end of the year the General Assembly had passed a series of Massive Resistance laws. Massive Resistance, however, was doomed and would be abandoned in the late 1950s as blacks and their allies challenged its main precepts in federal courts and won. It would not be until September 1960 that "the first crack in Richmond's armor of school segregation" would come when two black children would be enrolled in formally all-white Chandler Junior High School in North Richmond. Still, as Robert A. Pratt concluded, Richmond's armor of segregation was tough, and it would continue to stave off widespread integration for years.¹⁹

¹⁸Ibid., January 14, 1956.

¹⁹Pratt, The Color of Their Skin, 7, 25.

While integration was resisted in the public school system, it was accomplished peacefully in Richmond's Roman Catholic schools. The color bar fell a few weeks before the Supreme Court's Brown ruling in May 1954 when Bishop Peter L. Ireton ordered the integration of the diocese's schools. The following September eleven blacks enrolled in previously all-white classes at Benedictine High School, St. Patrick's High and Cathedral High.²⁰

For years in Richmond and throughout the South many Catholic schools followed the segregation tradition of the public schools. In Richmond black parochial students were segregated at Van De Vyver School on North First Street. The diocese closed the high school division of Van De Vyver in 1951 and between that time and the decision to integrate in 1954, there was no high school for black parochial students in the city.²¹ The recognition by the diocese that segregation did not seem in keeping with church doctrines appears to have motivated the decision to integrate. In a speech before Catholic laymen in 1954, Ireton noted that church doctrine is the "Christ-like way." "Before God, all men are equal, whether they are red, yellow, white or black," the bishop said. After Ireton's integration order, Monsignor J. L. Flaherty, the diocese's superintendent of schools, revealed that the diocese had been preparing for integration since about 1949 by teaching equality as an ideal.²²

²⁰Richmond Afro-American, May 22, 1954; September 11, 1954.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

In 1956 after two years of integration in the Catholic schools, officials said the effort had proceeded smoothly. At St. Patrick's High where twelve black girls were among the 197 students enrolled, Sister Catherine, the principal, said, "We have some colored pupils who are very bright, some who are average and some who are slow and we have to push right along all the time -- just as we have white pupils in all three categories."

Black students, however, sometimes faced awkward situations. At Benedictine, they did not play on sports teams because "their presence would be resented by the white public schools on Benedictine's schedule," a school official said. Black girls at St. Patrick's appeared to avoid social activities after a dance where "some of the white boys danced with the colored girls," resulting in a few protests from whites, Sister Catherine said.²³

While the school segregation issue was the overriding one for African Americans in Richmond between 1950 and 1956, there were other aspects of the education scene. In 1953, Booker T. Bradshaw became the first black to be appointed to the Richmond School Board in this century. The segregated schools attended by blacks constituted almost a school system within a system and its status at the time of the Brown ruling is worth exploring. The black education community also included Virginia Union University, which continued to exert a positive influence on the community during the 1950s.

²³Ibid., September 22, 1956.

Public education for African Americans in Richmond began just after the Civil War, and one source says that Union troops opened a school for black children in their barracks in Richmond and recruited white women from the North as teachers.²⁴ One of the earliest bona fide elementary schools for blacks may have been the Navy Hill School at Sixth and Duvall streets, which opened in 1869. Other schools were subsequently opened including Valley School, Baker School, Moore Street School and a facility in 1872 in a rented building at Twenty-sixth and M streets for black youths in the East End.²⁵

High school instruction for blacks originated at the Colored Normal School which was in operation as early as 1873 with funds provided by Northern philanthropists. The city took over funding of high school instruction for blacks when the Richmond Colored Normal School at Twelve and Leigh streets became part of the public school system in June 1876. In 1909 the building was condemned, and the school was relocated to the former Leigh School at First and Leigh streets. The name was also changed to Armstrong High School in honor of General Samuel Chapman Armstrong, the founder of Hampton Institute. Armstrong had an all-white faculty until 1915 when black teachers were assigned there. In 1923 Armstrong moved to a new building at 119 West Leigh Street. The new high school building was described as "modern, sanitary and well equipped

²⁴Richmond Times-Dispatch, September 4, 1938.

²⁵Richmond Afro-American, February 27, 1982.

with 21 classrooms, three laboratories, a library, a 930-seat auditorium and the first lunch room in a colored school."²⁶

Armstrong was overcrowded almost from the time the new building opened and by 1930, the school had been operating on double shifts for five years. The need for a second black high school became clear and the School Board asked the City Council to apply for funds from the Public Works Administration, a New Deal agency, to build a new structure. The application was granted and Maggie L. Walker High School was built and opened in September 1938 at 1000 North Lombardy Street on the site of the old Hartshorn Memorial College on land donated to the city by Virginia Union University. Walker High was "overcrowded from the first session" and overcrowding continued to be a problem at Armstrong as well.²⁷

The opening of Walker High meant the beginning of a rivalry with Armstrong that would be familiar to black high school students in Richmond for decades, according to Willis J. Pettis Jr., a retired teacher at Walker. Blacks were proud of both the Walker "Dragons" and the Armstrong "Wildcats," he said. The combined enrollment of both schools hovered between 2,500 and 3,000 between 1950 and 1956.²⁸

²⁶William H. Deierhoi and others, eds., "A Mini-History of the Richmond Public Schools: 1869-1992" (Richmond: Privately printed by the Richmond Public Schools, October 1992), 13.

²⁷Richmond Times-Dispatch, September 4, 1938; Deierhoi and others, eds., "A Mini-History of the Richmond Public Schools," 13-14, 215.

²⁸Richmond, Va. Richmond Public Schools. Statistical Reports of the Fiscal Year 1953-1954, 12; Willis J. Pettis Jr., interview by author, Richmond, Virginia, May 3, 1993.

Armstrong was relocated again in 1952 when the growing black population in the East End prompted the moving of the school from its downtown location to a new building at 1611 North Thirty-first Street. The Richmond Afro-American described the school's opening day this way:

It was love at first sight as youngsters entered the new \$2 1/2 million dollar Armstrong High School last week. Their exclamations ranged from "I didn't have any idea that it would be this great" to "It's simply wonderful." The school a two-story sprawling brick building is of the latest architecture style and features the most modern classroom facilities. There are 63 classrooms, a clinic, an armory office, a nurses room and a dark room. All the equipment is brand new.²⁹

Many blacks believed that Armstrong's offering of a comprehensive curriculum made it the better of the two schools, while Walker stressed vocational training. "Before the roof was ever put on Maggie Walker, many felt it was destined to become a school for lesser-thinking black students," Pettis said. During the 1950s, however, the offerings at both schools became more alike especially after the relocation of Armstrong and the establishment of junior high schools with two operating for blacks. The old Armstrong became Benjamin A. Graves Junior High and James H. Blackwell Junior High was opened in the West End.³⁰

Teaching at the two black high schools were educators who became widely known and respected in the community. James E. Segear had become the first black principal of a Richmond high school in 1938 when Walker

²⁹Richmond Afro-American, September 13, 1952.

³⁰Pettis interview; Richmond Afro-American, September, 13, 1952.

opened. The first black principals in elementary schools had been appointed at Baker, Valley and Navy Hill schools in 1883. Segear resigned in November 1950 to accept a job in New Jersey. George W. Liverpool, Walker's second principal, served until 1955 when he was succeeded by J. Harry Williams. Williams, who served until his death in 1966, would become one of the most beloved figures in Walker's history. At Armstrong, the Richmond Afro-American noted that Principal George W. Peterson Jr.'s "reputation as an able administrator was immeasurably strengthened in 1952 when he effected an orderly move from the old to the new Armstrong." For forty-one years beginning in 1938, the Armstrong-Walker Football Classic on the Saturday after Thanksgiving was one of the most anticipated yearly events in Richmond's African American community. The game, described in 1951 as "the nation's greatest teenage grid classic," pitted the team of Armstrong head coach Maxie Robinson against that of Walker coach Arthur L. Gardner.³¹

Effective public school educators like Segear, Williams, Peterson and Robinson helped many young blacks to succeed, Pettis said. Black students and teachers often had to use hand-me down supplies from white schools, but as Pettis noted, "We had a lot of inspiring teachers who knew how to take what they had and make something out of it." As a group, black teachers had impressive credentials. In 1954, for example, 90.8 percent of the black teachers in Richmond schools held college

³¹Richmond Times-Dispatch, November 28, 1950; Richmond News Leader, January 12, 1966; Richmond Afro-American, March 7, 1952; November 24, 1951.

degrees compared to only 81.5 percent of white teachers. A little more than 64 percent of both black and white teachers had bachelor's degrees, but black teachers had a 26.4 percent to 17.1 percent edge over whites in master's degrees. None of the black teachers in the city held substandard certificates while .6 percent of white instructors did.

Although Armstrong moved to new quarters in 1952, the fact that the new building was immediately overcrowded said a lot about the problems facing black teachers. Overcrowding was a problem at white schools, but it seemed especially severe at black ones. In early 1954, for example, eight white schools had 1,643 pupils on a double shift while nine black schools had 3,115 students on such shifts. The lack of space at the new Armstrong eventually led to the use of modular classrooms and a system of staggered openings and closings. In The Color of Their Skin: Education and Race in Richmond Virginia 1954-89, Robert A. Pratt noted that overcrowding was the biggest problem facing black teachers under segregation, and he concluded that there were "enormous disparities and inadequacies that made it impossible for black children to receive an education comparable to that whites received." 32

As overcrowding increased and the racial makeup of some neighborhoods changed from white to black, the school system converted some all-white elementary schools to black ones. In September 1950 George Tharpe School at Wickham and Greenwood avenues was converted to

³²Pettis interview; Deierhoi and others, eds., "A Mini-History of the Richmond Public Schools," 14; Richmond Times-Dispatch, May 18, 1954; Pratt, The Color of Their Skin, 15.

Albert V. Norrell School and became the first school in Barton Heights for black children. By September 1951, Norrell, which had a capacity of 344 students, was serving 542. Eight classes were operating on double-shifts and one class of twenty-six pupils had two grades being taught simultaneously during the same shift. The burgeoning enrollments were part of the postwar baby boom. Between the 1940-50 and 1953-54 school years, black elementary school enrollment jumped from 9,494 to 11,120. White enrollment went from 11,517 to 13,202.³³

The African American community intensified its effort to get a black appointed to the Richmond School Board as the 1950s dawned. In 1950, the Richmond Afro-American urged Mayor T. Nelson Parker and the City Council to "search their souls in an effort to rectify a situation in which one-third of the city's population has no representation on the city school board." The plea fell on deaf ears, however, and Lewis F. Powell Jr., who later served on the Supreme Court, was appointed to fill a vacancy on the board. In April 1953 Mayor Edward E. Haddock told a dinner meeting that he had discussed with City Council the possibility of putting a black on the board. But in May another white, University of Richmond Professor Edward C. Peple, was appointed. Haddock was assailed by blacks after Peple's appointment and in response he said that no one had given him the name of a possible black candidate. The Richmond Afro-American then submitted to the mayor a list of possible candidates

³³Richmond Afro-American, May 6, 1950; September 22, 1951.; Richmond Times-Dispatch, May 18, 1954. Richmond Public Schools. Statistical Reports of the Fiscal Year 1953-1954, 12.

including Booker T. Bradshaw, an insurance executive; David Longley, another insurance executive; John M. Ellison, president of Virginia Union University, and Samuel D. Proctor, vice president of Virginia Union.³⁴

Another slot on the five-member board opened up on September 1, 1953, with the resignation of Mrs. Henry W. Decker and Bradshaw was appointed by a seven to zero vote of City Council.³⁵ The Richmond Times-Dispatch praised Bradshaw's appointment in an editorial, which also hinted at why a black had finally been named:

The appointment of qualified Negroes to school boards is not only desirable in itself, but it should serve as extremely useful purpose if and when the United States Supreme Court, late this year or early in 1954, directs every community in the land to provide equal public school facilities for the two races, as the price of continued separation of white and colored children in the schools. If competent and experienced Negroes such as Mr. Bradshaw are appointed to these boards, the sincere desire of the whites to equalize will be much more apparent and convincing.³⁶

Bradshaw, a native of St. Louis, was president and treasurer of Virginia Mutual Benefit Life Insurance Company, one of the largest black-owned businesses in the city. In a 1953 profile the Richmond Afro-American credited Bradshaw's business acumen with having steered Virginia Mutual "through the stormy years of the Depression and later the unsettling years of the war." Blacks had last served on the School

³⁴Richmond Afro-American, August 12, 1950; May 16, 1953.

³⁵Richmond Times-Dispatch, August 25, 1953.

³⁶Ibid., August 19, 1953.

Board in the late nineteenth century, and Bradshaw's wife, Emma Forrester Bradshaw, was the great granddaughter of Richard G. Forrester, who had been appointed to the board in 1882.³⁷

Bradshaw served on the board until 1965 when he retired as vice chairman. He died in 1984, and in assessing Bradshaw's tenure as the only black on the board during the 1950s and early 1960s, Robert A. Pratt called him "an accommodationist," who avoided challenging whites. Willis J. Pettis Jr. expressed a similar view. "Bradshaw was a conservative diplomat. He went about his tasks and got things done without a whole lot of fanfare," Pettis said. Pratt concluded that Bradshaw's influence during the effort to desegregate schools was "negligible." But he added that "it is doubtful whether any other black would have had greater success in trying to encourage the school board to take more immediate action to desegregate the schools."³⁸

Virginia Union University continued to exert a major influence in the black education community during the 1950s. Over one thousand Union graduates lived and worked in Richmond, and a majority of the blacks teaching in the Richmond public schools were holders of Union degrees. The school traced its roots to the Richmond Theological Institute for Freedmen which was opened in 1865 by J. C. Binney. In 1899 the institute merged with The Wayland Seminary of Washington to form Virginia Union.³⁹

³⁷Richmond Afro-American, May 9, 1953; August 22, 1953.

³⁸Richmond Times-Dispatch, January 1, 1985; Pratt, The Color of Their Skin, 33; Pettis interview.

³⁹Richmond Afro-American, February 27, 1954.

Dr. John M. Ellison, who had become president of the university in 1941, served until mid-1955. He was a respected theologian and the author of Tensions and Destiny, a 132-page collection of twelve religious essays published in 1953. The university had shown signs of growth during Ellison's tenure. Between 1941 and 1951 the budget increased from \$187,936 to \$498,150 and the endowment rose from \$855,713 to \$1,015,596. Union had eighty-eight faculty members in 1951 compared to fifty-two in 1941 and had grown from 650 students to 975. The school has been described as a "placid place" during the late 1940s and early 1950s, although students staged a protest in the fall of 1950 after Ellison refused to give them a half-day off to celebrate a football victory over longtime rival Virginia State College.⁴⁰

Among those attending Union during the early 1950s was chemistry major Lawrence Douglas Wilder, who would be elected the nation's first black governor in 1989. Recalling his days at Virginia Union, Wilder said students there were proud of the fact that more than one-tenth of all the trained ministers serving black Baptist churches in the nation and at about eighteen black college presidents then were Union graduates. Wilder said, "People knew you by your school. They'd say, 'He's a Union man.'"⁴¹

⁴⁰Ibid., June 2, 1951; The Panther, September 1953; Donald P. Baker, Wilder: Hold Fast To Dreams. A Biography of L. Douglas Wilder (Cabin John, Md.: Seven Locks Press, 1989), 36-37.

⁴¹Baker, Wilder: Hold Fast To Dreams, 34.

The university was made up of a College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, which conferred the bachelor of arts and bachelor of science degrees and a graduate School of Religion, which conferred the bachelor of divinity degree. Tuition was one hundred dollars a semester, but was reduced to fifty for those who maintained a C average. Like many universities, black and white, fraternity life was an important part of life at Union. There were no fraternity houses at Union and the four Greek letter organizations met in the basement of Kingsley Hall. For Wilder, who joined the Omegas, and many others the friendships and contacts made through the fraternity would be used long after they had graduated.⁴² Union students were also involved in noteworthy activities off campus. The university choir had a national reputation among blacks and whites and it continued to make its annual northern tour during the early 1950s. Union also had a good debating team, which in February 1950 placed third in competitions held at the University of Virginia. In December 1950 an editorial in The Panther, the student newspaper, offered a tongue-in-cheek description of the anxiety the Korean War was causing among draft-age men on campus: "It seems that the Korean war has most draft-eligible students as jittery as expectant fathers nowadays. So many of our cherished Unionites have received calls from their draft boards that there promises to be a pronounced deficiency of masculinity on the campus."⁴³

⁴²Ibid., 34-35.

⁴³The Panther, February 3, 1950; December 9, 1950.

On July 1, 1955, Ellison retired as president of the university and was succeeded by Dr. Samuel DeWitt Proctor, who had been vice president and dean of the School of Religion. Proctor, the fifth president, was inaugurated in a colorful ceremony on campus on November 4, 1955, and Union student and future mayor of Richmond Henry L. Marsh III, writing in The Panther, called the event "an unforgettable experience." "If students do not feel motivated to achieve outstanding scholarship and future success after such an inspiring event highlighted by Dr. Proctor's eloquent address, then it's doubtful they ever will become motivated," Marsh commented.⁴⁴

While most college-bound blacks went to black universities like Virginia Union, a small but growing number would for the first time enter white universities, especially in graduate programs, during the late 1940s and early 1950s. In 1949 after a long court battle that reached the Supreme Court, Ada Sipuel gained admission to the law school of the University of Oklahoma. In 1950, although the University of Texas maintained a separate law school for blacks, the Supreme Court ordered the university to admit Heman Sweatt, a black applicant, to the white law school.⁴⁵ There were similar developments in Virginia and in Richmond between 1950 and 1956. In 1950 Gregory H. Swanson of Danville became the first black admitted to the University of Virginia after an

⁴⁴Ibid., December 1955.

⁴⁵John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss Jr. From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans, 6th ed., (New York: McGraw-Hill Publishing Co., 1988), 365-366.

order from a three-judge federal court. That same year Richmond Professional Institute admitted its first black students to evening classes in the School of Social Work. In 1954 Lurline Drake of Richmond became the first black to receive a degree from RPI when she was awarded a master's degree in social work. In an interview with the Richmond Afro-American after her graduation, Miss Drake described her experience. "Some of the students looked at me with awe when I first started participating in the classroom discussions. You see, most of them still had stereotyped ideas as to the ability and mentality of colored students. But gradually they began to accept me as being on their intellectual plane."⁴⁶

Another major breakthrough came in 1950 when Jean L. Harris of Richmond became the first African American to enter the medical school at the Medical College of Virginia. After her admittance, Dr. W. T. Sanger, the president of MCV, said that although blacks had previously applied but had not been admitted to the medical school, none of those applicants had the qualifications of Miss Harris. However, The Richmond Afro-American concluded in an editorial that MCV had admitted Miss Harris to avoid a federal court order such as in the Swanson case at the University of Virginia.⁴⁷ The Crisis, the national magazine of the NAACP, commented on the significance of Miss Harris' admittance in a February 1951 editorial:

⁴⁶Richmond Afro-American, August 14, 1954.

⁴⁷Ibid., January 20, 1951.

Admission of Miss Harris to the Medical College of Virginia marks the first time a Negro has been admitted to a medical college in a southern state east of the Mississippi River. Edith Mae Irby of Hot Springs, Arkansas, was enrolled in the medical school of the University of Arkansas in 1948. The U.S. Supreme Court decisions in the Sweatt and McLaurin cases are gradually opening the doors of southern professional and graduate schools to qualified Negroes.⁴⁸

The barriers to higher education at white institutions were thus beginning to fall during the early 1950s for blacks like Jean L. Harris and Gregory H. Swanson. It had been very different, however, for Alice Jackson Stuart, a black Richmonder who tried and failed to integrate the University of Virginia in 1935. Her application to the university caused an uproar and resulted in the establishment of tuition supplement grants by the state of Virginia to compensate blacks for the difference in costs for them to attend an out-of-state school. After her rejection by the University of Virginia, Mrs. Jackson received such a grant and enrolled in Columbia University, where she completed her studies and went on to a long teaching career. In a 1989 interview with the Richmond Times-Dispatch, Mrs. Jackson, then seventy-six, said that her rejection did not make her bitter. "I guess it is true of all of us who pioneered in that direction. No, we didn't feel bitter, but we did feel a sense of having been cheated of our rights."⁴⁹

The Supreme Court's overturning of segregation in public schools in the Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka decision was a watershed in the black struggle for equality and its impact was felt in Richmond.

⁴⁸"Virginia Wakes Up," The Crisis, 58 February 1951, 102.

⁴⁹Richmond Times-Dispatch, December 31, 1989.

Black Richmond attorneys such as Oliver W. Hill and Spottswood W. Robinson III played key roles in the litigation that had placed this great issue before the justices. This was the great victory blacks had been waiting for since the Supreme Court had given its blessing to social segregation under the separate but equal doctrine in the 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson case. The Brown ruling showed blacks in Richmond and across the nation that segregation could be successfully attacked. If Jim Crow could not stand in the schools, how could it exist at lunch counters, on buses, or in train stations? However, if the ruling was a clear sign of progress, Massive Resistance, the attempt by white leaders to frustrate school desegregation in Virginia and across the South, showed the fierce resistance to change. Nevertheless, the ruling emboldened the burgeoning civil rights struggle in Richmond, and in the years after 1956 blacks challenged white resistance head-on, pressing for the ending of segregation in the Richmond schools and other areas.

Chapter Nine

Political Issues and the Battle Against Segregation

Between 1950 and 1956 African Americans in Richmond began to challenge segregation more forcefully and attempted to increase their political clout. Led by the NAACP and others, they staged boycotts and filed lawsuits to end Jim Crow practices. Buoyed by Oliver W. Hill's election to the City Council in 1948 and undeterred by his defeat two years later, blacks in increasing numbers began to run for public office and to form politically oriented groups designed to increase African American voting strength. These efforts had somewhat mixed results, but it was clear by the early 1950s that the city's white leadership was feeling the pressure from its minority citizens as never before.

The assault upon segregation in Richmond was complemented by events nationally. The Supreme Court's outlawing of school segregation in 1954 signaled a major change in race relations in the United States, but even before that, there had been other signs of progress. Efforts to integrate the armed forces were proceeding; job opportunities had broadened; more blacks were voting in the South, although the poll tax and intimidation were very much alive; and blacks were being admitted to graduate and professional schools where they had previously been barred. An editorial in the Richmond Afro-American's first issue of 1955 perhaps overstated the case, but still it suggests a feeling that blacks were moving forward. "The year 1954 in retrospect presents a picture of

progress unprecedented in Richmond's history," the editorial said.¹

Black leaders in Richmond knew that if progress was to continue African Americans had to become a more potent political force. In an editorial in 1954 the Richmond Afro-American summed up a belief that blacks in the city were not flexing their political muscle as boldly as they might. "The most disheartening local development of 1953 was the failure of minority group citizens to qualify to vote."²

There was a realization, however, among the white leadership that black political weakness might not last forever. The Richmond News Leader characterized black voting strength in 1955 as "a factor of fairly limited significance." Of 61,732 registered voters in the city, only 9,598 or 15.5 percent were black. While dismissing the view that those blacks who did vote voted as "a solid bloc," the editorial noted that "it is plain that in many issues, Richmond's colored voters do go to the polls with one voice. As the percentage of Negro adults increases, this voice will take on more prominence."³

Blacks had been practically driven out of politics in Virginia during the first half of the twentieth century after their disenfranchisement under the constitution of 1902. Between 1865 and 1896 twenty-five blacks served on Richmond City Council, but it would not be until Oliver W. Hill was elected in 1948 that blacks would be represented on that body in this century. Still, a small group of

¹Andrew Buni, The Negro in Virginia Politics 1902-1965 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1967), 174; Richmond Afro-American, January 1, 1955.

²Richmond Afro-American, January 9, 1954.

³Richmond News Leader, February 16, 1955.

ministers and professionals in Richmond tried to give blacks some voice. In 1956 the Richmond Afro-American offered this description of the black political scene in the city:

Political leadership in colored Richmond is changing hands. Slowly but surely the political power is being relinquished by the veteran politicians who made their contributions during the past three decades. The leadership is being eagerly assumed by a group of young men many of whom are World War II veterans.⁴

In retrospect, the change did not seem to have involved one generation replacing another as much as the joining of generations, with new leaders coming on the scene as blacks in Richmond began a push harder to gain public office. This was part of a national trend in which black political participation increased after World War II. Economic gains during the war years, an increase in black registrants and a belief that having fought for the nation in wartime, they were entitled to a better life were among the reasons more blacks began to seek office.⁵ In The Negro in Virginia Politics 1902-1965, Andrew Buni summed up what this meant in Virginia:

The increase in voter participation plus interest in the Negro as an aspirant for office marked the postwar years as the first real awakening of the race to Virginia politics in the twentieth century.⁶

⁴Richmond Afro-American, October 13, 1956.

⁵Buni, The Negro in Virginia Politics 1902-1965, 148-149.

⁶Ibid.

A major change in the political status quo in Richmond came in 1948 with the adoption of a new city charter, which eliminated the thirty-two member bicameral City Council and created a nine-member body. Ward lines were abolished, all nine councilmembers were elected at large and administrative power was vested in a city manager instead of a strong mayor. Blacks supported the new charter believing that it afforded them a better opportunity to elect black candidates than "the gerrymandered ward system." In Twentieth-Century Richmond Planning, Politics, and Race, Christopher Silver concluded that "the emergence of a discernible black political force in Richmond can be traced to the 1948 charter reform" which helped produce "a minor revolution" in 1948 with the election to the City Council of Oliver W. Hill.⁷

Hill is an outstanding figure in the civil rights struggle in Richmond and Virginia. He was born Oliver White in Richmond on May 1, 1907, but after his father left home, his mother married Joseph C. Hill and young Oliver took his stepfather's name. The family moved to Roanoke and then to Washington and after high school, he went to Howard University where he earned his undergraduate and law degrees. He graduated second in the law class of 1933. The top student was another African American who would one day make history: Thurgood Marshall. In a 1994 interview, Hill said, "I went to law school so I could challenge segregation. The Jim Crow system always made me angry."⁸

⁷Christopher Silver, Twentieth-Century Richmond Planning Politics, and Race. (Knoxville, Tenn: The University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 178-179.

⁸Richmond News Leader, April 11, 1991; Oliver W. Hill, interview by author, Richmond, Virginia, January 27, 1994.

He practiced law in Roanoke and Washington before returning to Richmond in 1939 to join a black law firm which became Hill, Martin and Robinson. In 1951, The Crisis, the magazine of the NAACP, noted that the law firm was the driving force behind school-equalization lawsuits in Virginia, and that "they have assisted in suits in Georgia and the Carolinas and have had more experience with school-equalization cases than any other lawyers in the South." These suits, which sought to equalize black and white teachers' pay and school facilities, were an early tactic in the legal fight against segregation and were designed to "make separate schools very equal and very expensive."⁹

Hill made his first bid for political office in 1947 when he ran unsuccessfully for the House of Delegates. "I campaigned all over including the white neighborhoods. That gave me some name recognition," he recalled in 1994. He was elected to City Council in 1948 with support from blacks, who used the "single-shot" strategy and voted for Hill as a bloc, and from those whites "who felt it only fair that Richmond's Negroes be represented in the city government."¹⁰

He was an effective lawmaker, and toward the end of his two-year term he was voted the second most valuable member in a poll of Richmond newspaper reporters. When he ran for re-election in 1950, however, he was defeated by forty-four votes. Hill's defeat was attributed by some at the time to the fact that black Richmonders did not repeat the "single-shot" strategy of the 1948 election. Hill said in the 1994

⁹Richmond News Leader, November 26, 1949; The Crisis, January 1951, 7; Richmond Times-Dispatch, November 5, 1986.

¹⁰Hill interview; "The Lily White Council," The New Republic, April 9, 1951, 7.

interview that a big factor may have been his support for a plan to build an expressway through downtown Richmond which most blacks opposed. He said the fear among some whites that he was becoming too influential too fast and that there was a need to "slow down on him" also hurt his candidacy. Hill's loss was regretted by even the conservative Richmond Times-Dispatch, which noted in an editorial that as a member of council, Hill had sought to "act in the best interests of all citizens of Richmond." "The new council would have been stronger if he had been elected," the editorial said. After Hill's defeat the council would be all-white council until 1964 when B. A. Cephas Jr. was elected. Ironically, the early 1950s would also bring the death of Edward R. Carter, the last of the blacks who served on council in the late nineteenth century. Carter died at his daughter's home on North Fifth Street in January 1953 at the age of ninety-four. He had served from 1889 to 1893, and after leaving politics had worked for the Post Office before retiring in 1930.¹¹

Throughout the rest of the 1950s Hill was unsuccessful in his repeated attempts to regain public office, and his growing visibility in the budding civil rights movement was a major reason. In the 1994 interview he said, "Up to about 1950 we had attacked segregation under the so-called separate but equal doctrine but then after the [1950] election that's when we decided to attack it head-on, and after that I couldn't get elected dog catcher." In 1951 he was suggested as a candidate for council when Councilman J. Randolph Ruffin resigned, and

¹¹The New Republic, April 9, 1951, 7; Hill interview; Richmond Times-Dispatch, June 18, 1950, June 19, 1950; Richmond Afro-American, January 31, 1953.

as The New Republic noted in an article that year "as one of Richmond's most influential Negro leaders, Hill seemed the logical choice for the vacancy." Hill's name, however, stirred opposition in the white community and on the council because of his law firm's involvement with the school-equalization lawsuits and its defense of the seven black men known as the Martinsville Seven. All seven were executed in February 1951 after being convicted of raping a white woman in Martinsville. It was the largest recorded execution for a single crime in Virginia history. The case stirred great controversy among blacks and whites because as the Richmond Times-Dispatch recalled in a review of the case in 1993, it perpetuated a Virginia tradition shared with other Southern states that "only black men died for the crime of rape, and nearly always it was for the rape of a white woman."¹²

The rejection of Hill for appointment to the council in 1951 angered black Richmonders, causing The New Republic to conclude that "unfortunately much of the political cooperation between Negro and white citizens that Hill's first and second campaigns accomplished has been damaged." Hill tried again in 1952 when he began a campaign for a City Council seat, but later dropped out because President Truman had appointed him to the eleven-member Committee on Government Contracts, which was charged with enforcing the anti-discrimination clause in federal contracts.¹³

¹² Hill interview; The New Republic, April 9, 1951, 7; Richmond Times Dispatch, June 20, 1993.

¹³ The New Republic, April 9, 1951, 7; Richmond Afro-American, February 19, 1955.

In 1955 as the controversy over the Supreme Court school desegregation ruling intensified, Hill made an unsuccessful run for the House of Delegates. In announcing his candidacy he said it was important for supporters of desegregation to have a voice at the Statehouse. "It is imperative that some of the members of the General Assembly by persons both qualified and willing to state the views and position of opponents of racial segregation." Richmond blacks, however, would not get a voice at the Statehouse until 1967 when Dr. William Ferguson Reid was elected to the House of Delegates.¹⁴

Hill's election in 1948 and his narrow defeat in 1950 spurred other blacks to seek political office in Richmond. In 1951 attorney Roland D. Ealey waged a spirited campaign for the House of Delegates in the August primary. "I am opposed to the segregation laws in Virginia and if elected I will work for their abolishment," Ealey said during the campaign. He pledged to work for the establishment of an Interracial Findings Board "to study and recommend legislative action to wipe the segregation laws from the books." Blacks launched a major effort to get Ealey elected with Hill and Dr. Jesse M. Tinsley coordinating the activities of a campaign staff and numerous volunteers. The Richmond Afro-American noted that "Mr. Ealey is backed by about all of the important local groups including church and civic organizations, fraternal orders, labors unions and institutions."¹⁵ Despite the great effort, Ealey was defeated and the Richmond Afro-American laid the blame

¹⁴Richmond Afro-American, February 19, 1955; Richmond Free Press, February 17-19, 1994.

¹⁵Richmond Afro-American, August 8, 1951.

on the apathy of some blacks. "Over 6,000 colored registered voters stayed away from the polls Tuesday enabling white Richmonders once more to put in a lily-white Democratic slate," the newspaper complained. Ealey, however, would go on to finally gain election to the House of Delegates thirty-two years later in 1983 when he was elected after the death of a black incumbent, James S. Christian.¹⁶

In 1952 the Reverend William L. Ransome and David C. Deans, an executive with the black-owned North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Co., ran for City Council after Hill dropped out. Black candidates again met defeat with Deans placing fourteenth and Ransome eighteenth in an election in which twenty-seven candidates vied for nine council seats. Again the Richmond Afro-American blamed "the lack of unity of colored citizens."¹⁷

Apathy among African Americans did hurt black candidates. In 1951 a report from the Virginia Voters League, a statewide black voters group, concluded that blacks in Virginia did not face the obstacles to voting at mid-century that they had in previous decades, such as intimidation from precinct officials. "The new situation places the Negro in a position where he can no longer complain that voting officials block his way; rather it is one where custom and dull indifference are his greatest obstacles," the league's report said. The league was based in Petersburg and was founded in 1941 by Professor Luther Porter Jackson of Virginia State College. Its purpose was to "persuade Negroes to pay

¹⁶Ibid., August 11, 1951; Richmond Times-Dispatch, January 15, 1983.

¹⁷Richmond Afro-American, April 19, 1952; June 14, 1952.

their poll tax and then follow through by registering to vote."¹⁸

However, in The Negro in Virginia Politics 1902-1965, Andrew Buni suggested some other reasons for the weakness of black candidates. One was the poll tax, which many blacks either forgot or refused to pay. In the early 1950s it was \$1.50 and had to be paid six months before an election. Another was the fact, Buni said, that black hopefuls often ran without the backing and aid of the major political parties. Oliver W. Hill's unsuccessful race in 1950 had been a notable exception in that he had run with the backing of white Richmond Citizens Association. Buni said that African American candidates usually waged their campaigns mainly in black areas where they hoped to garner enough votes to win by using the single-shot strategy.¹⁹

Although blacks were generally unsuccessful in their campaigns for political office between 1950 and 1956, voter education and registration were constantly being pushed by groups in the African American community. The Richmond Democratic League, for example, listed as its primary objective "inducing citizens to pay their poll taxes and register to vote." In 1954 the league displayed hundred of placards in black neighborhoods informing residents of the requirements for voting. The Richmond Civic Council, which had been formed by the Reverend William L. Ransome during the early 1940s, also stressed voter registration. However, the council, which consisted of between eighty and one hundred black civic groups, had lost much of its influence by

¹⁸Virginia Voters League, Tenth Annual Report: The Voting Status of Negroes in Virginia 1949-1950, April 1951, 14-15.

¹⁹Buni, The Negro in Virginia Politics 1902-1965, 168-169.

the 1950s. Efforts were made to revive it, but in the meantime, individual groups pursued the council's goals on their own or formed new umbrella groups. In April 1955, for example, representatives from forty-one black civic groups and fraternal organization met at the Leigh Street YMCA to plan a major get-out-the-vote campaign.²⁰

What results did voter registration activity have in the African American community? Figures from the reports of the Virginia Voters League and other sources suggest that black voter registration during the early 1950s fluctuated. League figures showed that the number of registered black voters in Richmond went from 9,798 in 1949 to 11,600 in 1950 but dropped to 8,703 in 1951. By 1955, the figure was 9,705 and that increased to 11,569 in 1956 or roughly 19.1 percent of the vote.²¹

By the mid-1950s, black leaders in Richmond were convinced that a stronger, more effective means of bringing out the black vote was needed, and the result was the founding of the Crusade for Voters in 1956. The Crusade had its origins in the Richmond Committee to Save Public Schools, a group which worked in late 1955 and early 1956 to bring out the black vote in opposition to the Gray Plan referendum in January 1956. Voters approved the state plan designed to frustrate the Supreme Court school desegregation order.²² The Richmond Afro-American noted after the vote that although the plan was approved the black

²⁰Richmond Afro-American, December 7, 1950, June 24, 1950, February 26, 1955, April 2, 1955.

²¹Virginia Voters League, Tenth Annual Report, 13; Eleventh Annual Report: The Voting Status of Negroes in Virginia 1950-1951, August 1953, 15; Richmond Afro-American, May 5, 1956.

²²Richmond Afro-American, January 21, 1956.

opposition effort in Richmond had a positive result:

Though the election was "lost" as far as most colored citizens are concerned, preparations for it welded the city's largest minority into a unified body working for a common cause and laid the foundation to what might well be a permanent coordinating council to increase the vote.²³

The Crusade for Voters coalesced during 1956, led by its president, Dr. William S. Thornton, John M. Brooks, its executive secretary, Dr. William Ferguson Reid and others. Many of its members were younger black professionals who wanted a group that would be more effective in mobilizing the black community than the Richmond Civic Council and other organizations had been. At a public meeting at St. Peter's Episcopal Church in May, Brooks explained that the Crusade was seeking to increase black voting strength because "there is a need for more voters to help secure better jobs for Negroes [and] improve present social and health conditions." Brooks added, "If we increase our voting numbers, we will be helping the Supreme Court in its effort to better race relations in the United States."²⁴

To stimulate political participation among blacks, the Crusade endorsed candidates, solicited voters by telephone, printed sample ballots, asked black ministers to urge blacks to go the polls, furnished transportation to the polls on Election Day, stationed Crusade members at the polling places and maintained precinct voter records. In

²³Ibid.

²⁴John V. Moeser. The Politics of Annexation: Oligarchic Power in a Southern City. (Cambridge, Mass: Scherkman Publishing Co., 1982), 34; Richmond Afro-American, May 5, 1956.

September 1956 the Crusade sponsored "Registration Tap" month in which blacks were "tapped" by Crusade workers stationed in shopping centers or busy street corners and asked if they could produce their voter registration card and poll tax receipts. Those who could show a card were awarded a prize of one dollar, and those who could show a card and receipts were given two dollars. Crusade activities were financed by special fund-raising projects, contributions from activists and even levies on candidates that the group endorsed. Precinct captains and block leaders in each predominantly black precinct formed a club with its own officers and files on voters. The precinct units, in turn, were united under the citywide Crusade.²⁵

The Crusade set a goal of having 20,000 blacks registered by the early 1960s. By 1960 there were about 16,000, and much of the increase seemed due to the efforts of the Crusade. In mid-1960, Thornton estimated that during the previous year, two hundred blacks had been added to the voter rolls and he said that gain represented "our efforts, rather than a population increase." Black voting strength in the city went from 19.1 percent in 1956 to 35.5 percent in 1965.²⁶

Blacks generally have tended to vote Democratic in presidential elections since the New Deal era. Richmond's African Americans backed the Democrats in 1952 but switched to the Republicans in 1956. In 1952 black leaders such as Oliver W. Hill urged blacks to back Democrat Adlai

²⁵Robert A. Rankin. "The Richmond Crusade for Voters: The Quest for Black Power." The University of Virginia Newsletter. 51 (September 1974): 1-2; Richmond Afro-American, September 15, 1956.

²⁶Richmond News Leader, April 25, 1960; Rankin. "The Richmond Crusade for Voters: The Quest for Black Power," 2.

Stevenson because "any conscientious appraisal will show that the Negro voter has more to gain by continuing to support the Democratic Party under which he has made great gains." However, David E. Longley, a well-known black Republican and member of the Richmond City Republican Committee, criticized President Truman calling him "an expert in political expediency, who "had succeeded in defrauding most Negroes into believing that he and the Democratic Party are true exponents of civil rights." In 1956 President Eisenhower's policies apparently appealed to blacks in Richmond and he won a "vast majority" of their votes.²⁷

The Battle Against Segregation

The 1950s have often been portrayed as a rather dull decade. But journalist David Halberstam has written that the "social ferment was beginning" just below the "placid surface."²⁸ Such ferment was evident in Richmond as blacks were increasingly unwilling to accept segregation. In a 1993 interview with the Richmond Free Press, E. L. Slade Jr., who was active in the NAACP for many years and who served as Richmond branch president from 1961 to 1970, offered this recollection of what Jim Crow in Richmond was like:

You couldn't even go Downtown without having to face those water fountains -- one with a white top for whites and one with a black top for blacks. Blacks would have a separate bathroom way back in the corner somewhere. They weren't too happy about blacks and

²⁷Richmond News Leader, August 7, 1952; Richmond Afro-American, November 10, 1956.

²⁸David Halberstam, The Fifties (New York: Villard Books, 1993), preface.

whites riding elevators together, but they couldn't build a white-only elevator.²⁹

The segregation that Slade remembered had its basis in state law. During the first decades of the twentieth century the legislature updated and expanded the scope of its Jim Crow laws. In 1900 state lawmakers passed a law requiring the segregation of the races on trains. The state constitution of 1902 was drawn up with the expressed purpose of disenfranchising blacks and provided that blacks and whites were not to be taught in the same school. Segregation on streetcars was made law in 1906 and in 1926 was extended to buses.³⁰ A 1912 law gave cities and towns the option of dividing into white and black residential districts where blacks would be prohibited from moving into the white district and vice versa. The legislature's rationale for such a law was that the "preservation of the public morals, public health and public order in cities and towns is endangered by the residence of whites and colored people in close proximity."³¹

In 1956, the Richmond branch of the NAACP published a booklet, "Behind The Segregation Curtain" which expressed some of the concerns of African Americans about the state of race relations under segregation. In the preface, David E. Longley, chairman of the branch's public relations and education committee, wrote, "It is surprising and alarming

²⁹Richmond Free Press, March 11-13, 1993.

³⁰Nancy Armstrong. The Study of an Attempt Made in 1943 to Abolish Segregation of the Richmond Common Carriers in the State of Virginia. (Phelps-Stokes Fellowship Paper No. 17. Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1950), 37-41; 42-46.

³¹Virginia. Acts and Joint Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of Virginia. 1912, 330-332.

to observe how little the average white person knows of the so-called race problem in the South," and he attributed this to three things: (1) Whites were generally complacent and satisfied with the status quo as it related to racial matters (2) They didn't understand the emotions, desires and aspirations of blacks (3) Many whites were guilty of "blind prejudice." Longley wrote that blacks were "apprehensive about the unwillingness of the leading white people to gather around the roundtable with leading colored persons to discuss frankly, honestly and without rancor our entire structure of human relations."³²

The NAACP booklet suggests that Richmond was hardly an oasis of understanding during the 1950s when it came to the two races. As noted earlier, blacks in the city became more aggressive in challenging segregation and in seeking to increase their political clout. While legal efforts had brought much progress in civil rights, Richmond seems to have fit the pattern where, as one historian noted, the prime movers for civil rights were blacks themselves "protesting unfair treatment, demanding change and threatening often dire consequences if change was not made." These efforts had borne fruit in Richmond even before the 1950s. In 1947 black protests had resulted in the integration of the city's library system. The first public library in Richmond hadn't opened until 1924 when a facility began operating in the old Lewis Ginter Mansion at 901 West Franklin Street. A year later, a small branch for blacks opened at the Phillis Wheatley YWCA for blacks at 515 North Seventh Street followed shortly thereafter by the Rosa D. Bowser branch for blacks at 00 Clay Street. By the early 1940s, blacks had become

³²Richmond Afro-American, December 29, 1956.

"increasingly concerned about the quality of library services being offered to them," and in the spring of 1947 they sought the right to use the Dooley Memorial Library, which had opened at First and Franklin streets in 1930. The Library Board consented to the request, making Richmond one of the first cities in the South to integrate its library facilities.³³

What did the whites in the city feel about this growing controversy over race? An excerpt from a Richmond Times-Dispatch editorial provides some clues and explains why some feared efforts to end segregation:

"White Southerners prefer to keep their racial identity. The white race isn't perfect and it has many faults and sins to answer for. Yet those who are white want to remain white, just as we hope those who are colored want to remain colored." The editorial said there was a fear that school integration and other such changes would led to "wholesale amalgamation of the races." However, some blacks, like Oliver W. Hill, remember that the white community was not a monolith in opposing integration. "There were white people in Richmond who half-way wanted to do right, but they were cowered into keeping quiet. Many were afraid of being ostracized," Hill said in the 1994 interview.³⁴

In a speech delivered at a Rotary Club meeting in November 1956, City Manager Horace H. Edwards said that city officials were becoming increasingly concerned about the "minority problem," and he pointed to

³³Michael Barone. Our Country: The Shaping of America From Roosevelt to Reagan. (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 272; Kathy Lynn Bozard, "A History of the Richmond Public Library From 1942 Till 1972" (master's project, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1983), 6-12.

³⁴Richmond Times-Dispatch, October 7, 1957; Hill interview.

figures showing that the city was devoting a large amount of its financial resources to blacks. About half of the annual school budget was spent on black schools and between 1946 and 1956 more money was spent on building schools for blacks, he said. He also noted that the crime rate was higher among blacks, and that blacks received more welfare assistance than whites. The city manager contended that blacks in Richmond were treated fairly and that the figures he had cited should "refute any misinformation to the contrary."³⁵

Very few blacks in Richmond would have agreed with Edwards, and especially those who were active in the Richmond branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which was at the forefront of the push for change in Richmond. The oldest and largest NAACP unit in Virginia, it was founded in 1915 under the leadership of black attorney J. Thomas Hewin Sr. In a 1955 interview, Hewin recalled the circumstances of the branch's founding. "When the first branch was started in Richmond there was no opposition from the white citizens of the city but, to the contrary, many of the colored people were adamant and fearful of the so-called radical New York group," he said. ³⁶

During the early 1950s, the NAACP in Virginia was led by two men whose names have become synonymous with the civil rights struggle in the state: Dr. Jesse M. Tinsley and W. Lester Banks. Tinsley served simultaneously as president of the Richmond branch and of the Virginia State Conference of the NAACP. A native of Martinsville, he came to Richmond in 1926 to set up a practice in dentistry. As leader of the

³⁵Richmond Times Dispatch, November 7, 1956.

³⁶Richmond Afro-American, October 15, 1955.

state conference, Tinsley was credited with turning "a few scattered and unorganized branches into a consolidated working force of some ninety-six branches." In 1947 and 1951 the Virginia NAACP was cited by the national office as the best in the nation. As one observer noted of him, Tinsley "realized the need for civic improvements and cast his lot with other leaders. A conscientious spirited man, he holds a position that fits him well."³⁷

Banks, a native of Lunenburg County, was a teacher in Halifax County and principal of a Charles City County high school before being named in 1947 as executive director of the Virginia State Conference, a position he held until his retirement in 1977. He was hired for the post after Tinsley and Oliver W. Hill, then a member of the state conference's executive committee, decided that the conference needed a full-time coordinator. In a 1976 interview with the Richmond News Leader, Banks recalled what the racial situation was like when he first assumed his post: "When I first became executive secretary, the buses in Richmond and throughout the South were very tightly segregated. Likewise, the schools were very inferior and segregated and employment for Negroes was at a very low ebb." In working to break down barriers, Banks never lost faith in the NAACP's belief in non-violent action. There were times when racism made him want to hit back, he said in a 1985 interview with the Richmond Times-Dispatch. "But I knew better than to retaliate with violence. I just let the things take [their] course and that was to the advantage of the NAACP." Richmond Attorney S. W. Tucker, like Banks a leader in the fight for equal rights, summed up

³⁷Ibid., October 13, 1951.

Banks' strengths and weaknesses this way in 1985: "Whatever the issue, Lester was there. He was not a great orator. He could speak but did not have a flashy style. But he served the conference."³⁸

The membership of the Richmond branch of the NAACP hovered somewhere between 1,500 and 3,000 during the early 1950s. Often, however, the city's blacks were taken to task by the Richmond Afro-American and others for not supporting the branch more vigorously. In an editorial headlined "Richmond's Shame," the newspaper noted in April 1953 that a membership campaign had enrolled only three hundred new members. "With a total colored population of some 70,000 persons, the enrollment figures should be close to 25,000," the newspaper complained.³⁹

Statewide, however, the NAACP is said to have "thrived" in Virginia during the 1950s with membership reaching about 27,000 by 1958, larger than any other state. During the desegregation crisis, the NAACP focused its legal efforts on Virginia with thirteen black lawyers headed by Oliver W. Hill making up its legal staff. Advising that group of lawyers were Thurgood Marshall of the national NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund and Spottswood W. Robinson III, who served as regional counsel.

The major thrust of civil rights activity by blacks in Richmond during the early 1950s often with the NAACP in the lead was in three areas: (1) attacking the Jim Crow seating patterns in places of public

³⁸Richmond Times-Dispatch, November 5, 1986, November 3, 1986, October 28, 1985; Richmond News Leader, July 15, 1976.

³⁹Richmond Afro-American, April 25, 1953.

assembly and particularly on city buses (2) combating police brutality (3) securing and equalizing employment opportunities for public employees.⁴⁰

The attack on Jim Crow seating led to an ongoing controversy during the 1950s with the NAACP's effort to desegregate the Mosque auditorium. Segregation at this city-owned facility was mandated by a 1926 state law which governed segregation in public places. Owners of "any public halls, theater, opera house, motion picture show or any place of public entertainment or public assemblage" where both races attended were required to separate them and designate certain seats for whites and blacks. Owners who violated this law could be convicted of a misdemeanor and fined. A patron who violated the law could be ejected from the public place and fined. At the Mosque, sections on all floors and in all price ranges were reserved for white and black patrons. In some instances blacks were assigned the center sections and in others the side sections depending on whether the attraction appealed most to whites or blacks.⁴¹

In early 1951 the Richmond branch of the NAACP, led by Tinsley, organized a boycott of performances at the Mosque to protest the segregation policy. Contralto Marian Anderson did not cancel her January 16 concert there despite Tinsley's request that she do so in support of the boycott. The Richmond Afro-American, noting that patrons filled only

⁴⁰Benjamin Muse, Virginia's Massive Resistance (Indiana University Press, 1961) 47-48; Richmond Afro-American, October 15, 1955; See Chapter 3 for a discussion of the employment issue.

⁴¹Virginia. Acts and Joint Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of Virginia. 1926, 945-946; Richmond Times-Dispatch, May 19, 1954.

1,100 of the 4,300 seats, termed Anderson's concert a "financial failure" because of the boycott.⁴² A Duke Ellington concert scheduled for January 28 was canceled by Ellington after he learned of the boycott. Ellington, however, was critical of the NAACP effort saying that it "hurt his feelings." At a mass meeting at Ebenezer Baptist Church on January 28, Tinsley admitted that reaction to the boycott from both blacks and whites had been mixed. The Richmond News Leader complained that such a "show of strength" by blacks could increase white resistance to efforts to bring down racial barriers.⁴³

The boycott was unsuccessful in bringing about any change in the segregation policy at the Mosque, but Oliver W. Hill maintained in the 1994 interview that it still was significant. "The boycott was effective because many Negroes didn't go to the Mosque," he said. On July 3, 1951, the NAACP filed a lawsuit in federal court asking that the Mosque and all other public places in Virginia be opened on a nonsegregated basis. NAACP officials decided to sue after city officials refused a formal request from the group to allow a mass meeting of the NAACP at the Mosque on October 14 to proceed on a nonsegregated basis. City Attorney J. Elliott Drinard noted that the city of Richmond had no rules or regulations regarding segregation at the Mosque, but that the city was bound to uphold the state laws. On September 25, 1951, a three-judge federal panel dismissed the lawsuit, saying that the matter first had to

⁴²Richmond News Leader, January 9, 1951; Richmond Afro-American, January 20, 1951.

⁴³Richmond Times-Dispatch, January 28, 1951; Richmond News Leader, January 30, 1951.

be presented before state courts.⁴⁴

The Mosque remained officially segregated although enforcement of the Jim Crow policy was sometimes uneven. When Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson spoke at the auditorium during the 1952 campaign, the segregation policy was ignored. The Richmond Afro-American speculated that city officials were "fearful that world-wide adverse publicity would embarrass the speaker and also the City of Richmond." The newspaper said the city "has a peculiar way of turning its segregation policy at the Mosque on and off like a faucet." The battle to desegregate the Mosque went on for nearly a decade until the Virginia Supreme Court ruled on September 10, 1963, that segregation at the auditorium and at Parker Field was unconstitutional.⁴⁵

There were other instances where Richmond blacks moved to challenge segregation and unfair treatment. In July 1950 Police Court Judge Carleton E. Jewett tried to establish a policy whereby black lawyers were forced to sit on the left side of the court while white ones sat on the right. There had always been rigid segregation of witnesses and spectators but not lawyers. Jewett relented, however, in the face of protests when black attorneys such as Oliver W. Hill and Lynwood E. Smith along with white attorney Howard H. Carwile tested and defied the policy. That same month the policy of the Richmond Selective Service Office of segregating blacks and whites who showed up for pre-induction exams a few weeks after the outbreak of the Korean War drew a

⁴⁴Hill interview; Richmond Times-Dispatch, July 4, 1951; September, 26, 1951.

⁴⁵Richmond Afro-American, February 28, 1953; Richmond News Leader, September 11, 1963.

stinging rebuke from the Richmond Afro-American. "It is incongruous that these officials would expect men so humiliated to have any enthusiasm toward entering the armed forces for a nation which considers them outcasts," an editorial said.⁴⁶

A 1951 case signaled a new development in the sometimes tense relations between blacks and white policemen. In February William Crockett of Ellerson, Virginia, charged that he had been beaten by J. L. Wormley, a white police officer during an incident in an alley at Fifth and Marshall streets. Crockett's allegations created a storm of protest in the black community. Wormley said that he struck Crockett because he had rushed toward him with in a threatening manner. Crockett was convicted of disorderly conduct and fined five dollars, but the conviction was later overturned in Hustings Court. Wormley, however, was found guilty of using excessive force and placed on probation for a year. The Richmond Afro-American reported that the action against a white officer in the assault of a black was "a first" in Richmond.⁴⁷

Segregation on city buses produced serious tensions in Richmond during the early 1950s. Unlike the Mosque situation, however, efforts to end bus segregation would be successful by the mid 1950s mainly because of action by the federal courts. In May 1953 five Armstrong High School students were arrested after a dispute over Jim Crow buses. A female student refused a driver's order to move from beside a white passenger and go to the back of a Virginia Transit Company bus. The driver summoned police, but the student subsequently got off and boarded a

⁴⁶Richmond Afro-American, July 12, 19 and 29, 1950.

⁴⁷Ibid., April 21, 1951.

second bus. The driver followed her onto the second bus, and when police arrived an altercation began in which the student was shoved and a policeman was struck in the face with some books. The incident provoked "a near riot." At Fifth and Broad streets, and a few days later more than one thousand people gathered for a mass meeting at Fifth Street Baptist Church where the Reverend Robert S. Anderson called on blacks to "disobey a bad law when we know it is bad," referring to the state law requiring segregated seating on public carriers.⁴⁸

The Richmond Afro-American's editorial on the incident reflected the growing black anger in the city over segregation:

Any reasonably intelligent person can see that the stage is set for a bloody incident on a transit bus in Richmond. The infamous Broad Street bus incident laid the groundwork. It showed that colored people are becoming more resentful of the humiliating laws requiring segregation on public carriers.⁴⁹

Tensions over segregation were ripe to explode on city buses because it was one public setting where blacks and whites frequently came into close contact. There had been efforts before the 1950s to end Jim Crow seating on public carriers. In November 1943, Virginius Dabney, editor of the Richmond Times-Dispatch, wrote a series of editorials calling for the General Assembly to repeal the laws requiring segregation on buses and streetcars, but he abandoned the crusade after it received lukewarm support.⁵⁰ Dabney noted even then the anger blacks

⁴⁸Ibid., May 23 and 29, 1953.

⁴⁹Ibid., May 23, 1953.

⁵⁰Nancy Armstrong. The Study of an Attempt Made in 1943 to Abolish Segregation of the Richmond Common Carriers in the State of Virginia. (Phelps-Stokes Fellowship Paper No. 17. Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1950), 62.

felt over the laws:

The purpose of these laws when they were enacted was to keep the races separate. Actually under existing conditions they have the opposite effect and they are a constant irritant. Hundreds, if not thousands, of times a day these regulations serve to throw the races into closer contact than ever and at the same time to wound the feelings of the Negroes.⁵¹

As late as early 1956 blacks in Richmond were still being arrested for refusing to obey the back of the bus rule, and there was a backlog of eighteen NAACP-sponsored test cases in Richmond Hustings Court dating back to 1950, which challenged the constitutionality of segregation laws. By 1955 and 1956, however, Jim Crow policies on buses were under attack in the federal courts, which began to declare as unconstitutional laws requiring segregation on public transportation. On July 14, 1955, the Fourth United States Circuit Court of Appeals overturned state laws requiring bus companies to segregate their passengers by race. On November 25, 1955, the Interstate Commerce Commission ruled that bus and trains passengers traveling from one state to another could not be segregated by race. This ruling reasserted the principles of a 1946 Supreme Court ruling which ended segregation on interstate buses and broadened it to interstate passengers on trains. The ICC's ruling had come after the NAACP filed complaints regarding train station segregation including one against Richmond's Broad Street Station.⁵²

⁵¹Richmond Times-Dispatch, November 13, 1943.

⁵²Ibid., July 15, 1955; November 26, 1956.

On April 24, 1956 in response to such rulings, the Virginia Transit Company formally proclaimed an end to company enforcement of racial segregation on its buses. "Seating in the buses will be left to the discretion of the passengers," Warren R. Pollard, the president of VTC said.⁵³

There were other indications between 1950 and 1956 that other Jim Crow customs were giving way to change. In early 1956 signs designating "white and colored" waiting rooms were removed at Broad Street Station in the wake of the Interstate Commerce Commission's ruling. Similar signs on the doors of restrooms at Richmond City Hall had been removed in 1953.

Blacks in Richmond seemed to be on a steady course during the early 1950s in their efforts to increase their political power and secure equal rights. The progress was often uneven, however, with a victory in one area followed by a setback in another. As the 1950s opened, a black, Oliver W. Hill, was sitting on City Council. He was defeated the same year in his bid for re-election, but his breakthrough encouraged more blacks to seek election to the City Council and the House of Delegates. None was successful, but at least by the mid-1950s the idea of blacks running for political office and possibly winning did not seem as far-fetched as it had twenty or thirty years earlier. Blacks were still not a major political force in the city, but in 1956 the founding of the Crusade for Voters signaled that African Americans were determined to organize to become one. In the battle against segregation, an effort to end segregated seating practices at the Mosque auditorium was

⁵³Ibid., April 25, 1956.

unsuccessful, despite a boycott and the filing of a lawsuit. But African Americans had better luck in the struggle against Jim Crow seating on city buses. They sued in city courts to overturn the "back of the bus" rule, but ultimately, it was a federal court which ended bus segregation in 1956. The same trend of a defeat here and victory there could be seen in education, which was discussed in Chapter Seven. The Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka ruling declared school segregation unconstitutional, but Massive Resistance delayed any meaningful school desegregation for years. In pressing their efforts, blacks in Richmond were fortunate that they had a strong lineup of leaders to lead the battle. In a 1993 interview, Dr. Francis M. Foster Sr., an amateur historian and longtime observer of black Richmond, summed it up this way:

Blacks in Richmond had hope because most of the major efforts came through people who were here. We had the NAACP, we had Oliver Hill's law firm, we had Dr. Tinsley. And so we were busy doing things. In other places blacks may not have had such hope because there wasn't anybody around to do anything. But here in Richmond we just kept plugging and plugging away.⁵⁴

African Americans in Richmond, like those across the United States, still had a long way to go in their quest for equal justice. Segregation remained a major part of their lives well into the 1960s. But during the 1950s the momentum for change, more often than not, seemed to be in their favor.

⁵⁴Dr. Francis M. Foster Sr., interview by author, Richmond, Virginia, July 28, 1993.

Conclusion

The period 1950 to 1956 was a time of both progress and stalemate for African Americans in Richmond. Ongoing local efforts to challenge segregation were given a boost by the Supreme Court's momentous decision outlawing school segregation in 1954. There was hope that if segregation could be successfully challenged in this area, it also might also be attacked in others as well. Massive Resistance, however, put a temporary brake on efforts to desegregate the schools and strained race relations. Despite the tensions created by the court's ruling, it was clear by the early 1950s that the status quo that existed in race relations in the city during the first half of the century was unlikely to continue during the second half. Change, although admittedly slow, was certainly in the air in the old capital of the Confederacy.

This change was quite significant when one considers how impenetrable the wall of segregation had been in previous decades. For much of the early twentieth century, blacks in Richmond existed within a framework of strict racial control by whites. By the 1950s, cracks in the wall were evident and the proponents of segregation were on the defensive. Blacks had become more aggressive in challenging segregation and seemed to be following the advice of Richmond civil rights leader Oliver W. Hill:

Don't be lulled into non-action by this same old doctrine which we have been hearing from time immemorial -- "the time is not ripe." Our situation is better today because of the action taken on

yesterday and it will be better tomorrow only through continued action today."¹

That segregation seemed under serious challenge by 1956 in Richmond and across the South is also confirmed by a speech made by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Petersburg in October 1956. "So in our generation, figuratively speaking, we see old man segregation on his death bed. There will be some who will mourn his death, but most of us will be proud to see him pass on. He has been a problem and burden to the whole nation," King said. A month later, King, who was rising to fame as a result of his leadership in the Montgomery bus boycott, spoke in Richmond and urged blacks to prepare for a "new day" in race relations.²

The phenomenon after World War II in which blacks across the United States became less willing to accept segregation and injustice was thus certainly seen in Richmond, and the nature of the struggle here showed that the gains made in civil rights were not just bestowed on blacks from Washington or some other force outside the community. The actions of the federal courts, the Truman administration and agencies like the Interstate Commerce Commission were crucial in breaking down barriers, but blacks in Richmond led by the likes of Hill, Dr. Jessie M. Tinsley and others plotted and waged their own battles.

One must be careful, however, not to paint too rosy a picture. Yes, there was progress and segregation was on the defensive, but it would be years before segregation ceased to be an all-powerful factor

¹Richmond Afro-American, June 18, 1955

²Ibid., October 13, 1956; November 10, 1956.

in the lives of black Richmonders. The struggles like the ones waged between 1950 and 1956 continued for years afterward. In the early 1960s, for example, the city would be the scene of tense protests against segregation at downtown eating facilities. One of the most dramatic images to come out of Richmond during the civil rights era occurred during those protests when Mrs. Ruth E. Nelson Tinsley, Dr. Tinsley's wife, was arrested during a demonstration outside Thalheimer's department store and carried bodily across Broad Street by police with police dogs yapping at her. In another area, the struggle to achieve more than just token integration of the public schools in Richmond dragged on into the 1970s.

This paper has also sought to present a portrait of the African American community itself during the early 1950s. Although hemmed in by segregation, this was an active, vibrant community not one beaten down and destroyed by oppression. Cut off from the city's mainstream, black Richmonders created their own world, distinct from that of whites with their own churches, social clubs and business district. Segregation forced them to do this, and luckily blacks were able to look back on and draw strength from their long history in Richmond and strong traditions whether in the church or business.

The African American community of Richmond was also a varied one economically with distinct professional, working and poor classes. Regardless of economic status, all blacks benefitted from the presence of a group of fine leaders. There were the ministers like the Reverend William L. Ransome and the Reverend Gordon B. Hancock, whose leadership

and influence extended far beyond the pulpit. The city was home to an active NAACP chapter that was also home base for a state NAACP conference that was recognized as one of the most effective in the nation. Men like Tinsley, W. Lester Banks and Hill played crucial roles in the local fight against segregation.

While this fight intensified in Richmond during the early 1950s, the black community was still bedeviled by conditions directly related to segregation. The rigid pattern of residential segregation prevailed and along with it the problem of substandard housing. But even here there was change if not necessarily improvement. For many years the greatest concentration of blacks had been in the downtown area north of Broad Street, but by the early 1950s increasing numbers of blacks were moving into formerly all-white areas such as Barton Heights in North Richmond. Job discrimination in both the private and public sector remained the rule, but by 1956 blacks were being employed in municipal jobs in positions that would have been unthinkable just ten years earlier. Black political power was still relatively weak, but the founding of the Crusade for Voters in 1956, one of the most important developments in the African American community of Richmond in the second half of the century, was an effective step toward attaining black political clout. The Crusade proved to be an viable vehicle for the marshaling and focusing of black political power in the city in later years.

The 1950s have often been portrayed as the calm before the storm of the 1960s, a characterization which is only partially true. It was,

however, the rumblings of protest during the 1950s in Richmond and in African American communities across the United States that laid the groundwork for the later breakthroughs in the fight for equality. Also, aspects of the Richmond we know in the 1990s were developing during the early 1950s. Blacks are now a majority of the city's population and the trend toward a growing black presence in the city while the surrounding counties became increasingly white was in full swing by the 1950s. Even with blacks a majority and holding many major political posts, Richmond today faces social and economic problems as thorny as those in the 1950s. And blacks and whites in the city seem as far apart as ever. But racially, this was a very different city forty years ago. One can say with some confidence that few if any Richmonders of either race would want to turn the clock back to the way things were then. Perhaps what is most startling about looking back at the early 1950s, is the realization of just how far both black and white in Richmond have come.

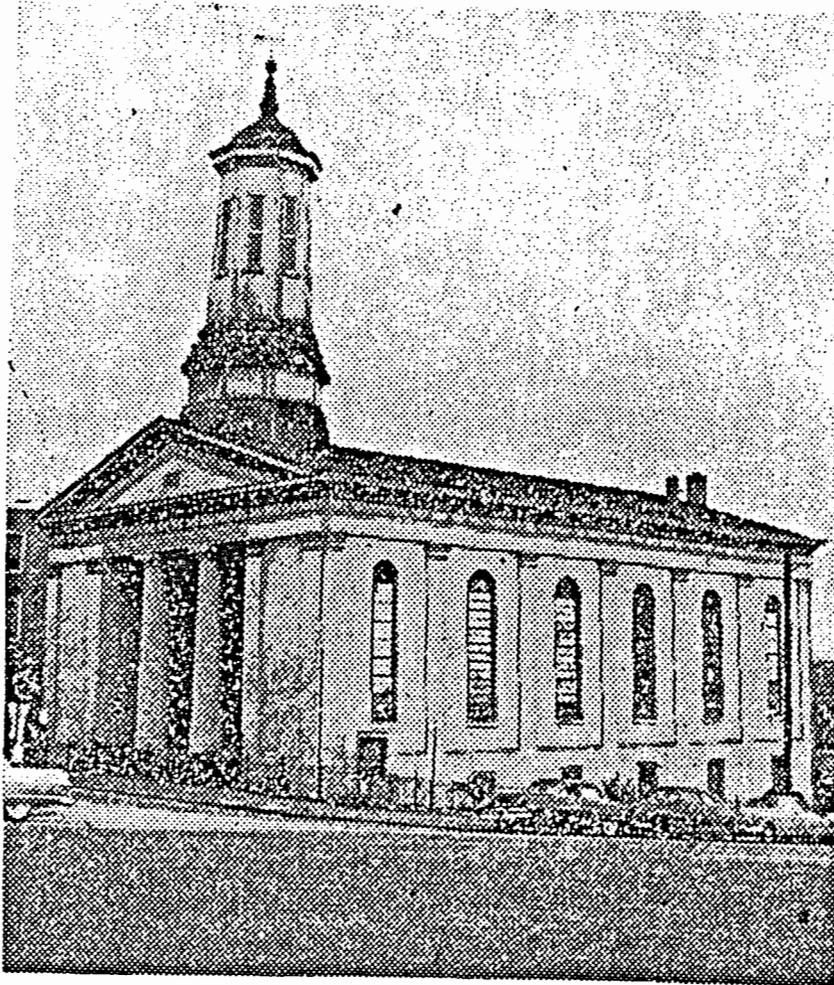


Figure 1. First African Baptist Church was one of the oldest and most influential black Baptist churches in Richmond. The congregation moved from this sanctuary at College and Broad streets downtown to a North Richmond location in 1955. (Source: Richmond News Leader, July 29, 1959).



Figure 2. The Reverend Gordon B. Hancock, pastor of Moore Street Baptist Church, was one of many influential black ministers in Richmond. (Source: Richmond Newspapers photo).



Figure 3. The Reverend William L. Ransome, pastor of First Baptist Church, South Richmond, was active in political as well as religious circles. (Source: Richmond Newspapers photo).



Figure 4. Many black Richmond ministers had long pastorates. The Reverend Cary S. McCall served as pastor of Mount Tabor Baptist Church for fifty-four years. (Source: Richmond Newspapers photo).



Figure 5. Dr. Jesse M. Tinsley was a powerful figure in the NAACP in Virginia for many years. (Source: Richmond Newspapers photo).

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Figure 6. Attorney Oliver W. Hill was a major leader in the civil rights struggle in Virginia. This is a campaign advertisement from his unsuccessful campaign for the House of Delegates in 1955. (Source: Richmond Afro-American, July 9, 1955).

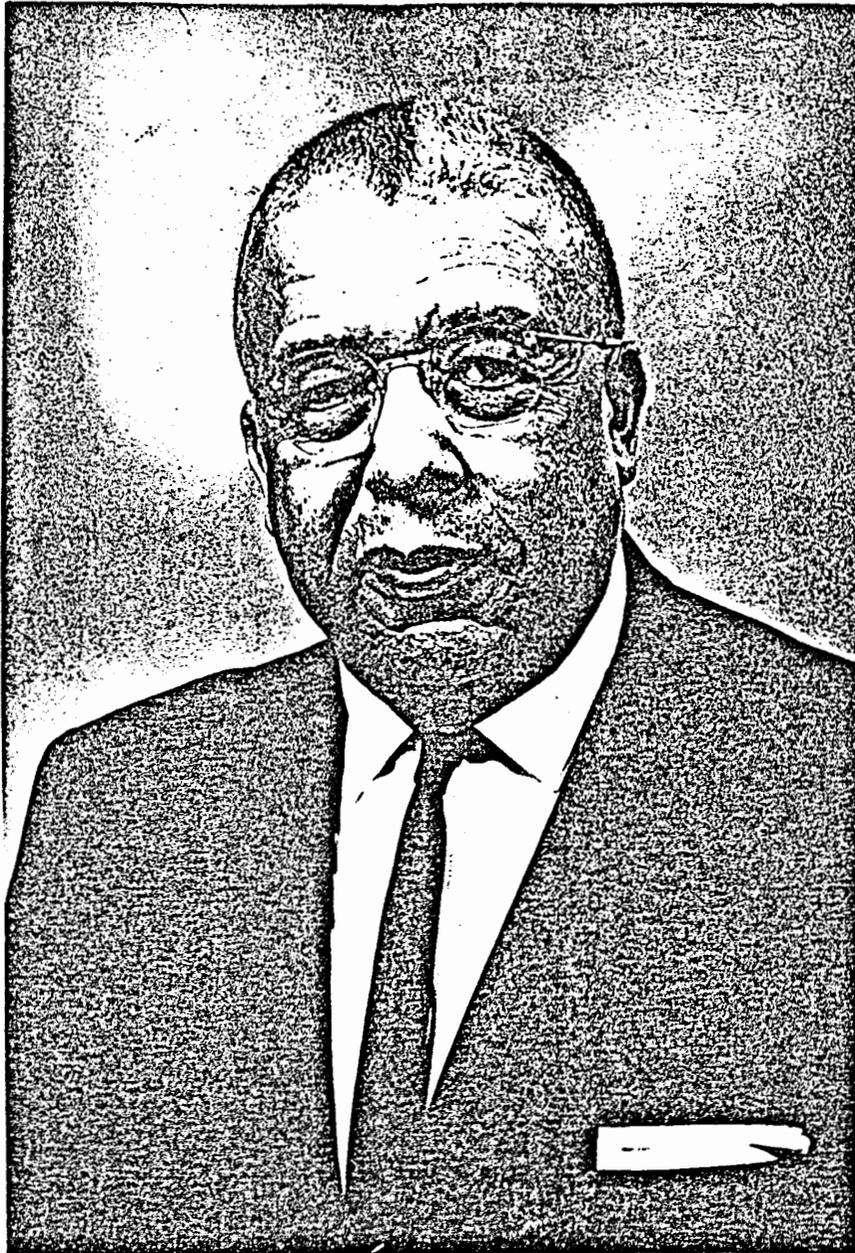


Figure 7. Booker T. Bradshaw became the first black to serve on the Richmond School Board in the twentieth century when he was appointed in 1953. (Source: Richmond Newspapers photo).



Figure 8. Armstrong High School, one of two high schools in Richmond for blacks, was housed in this building at 119 West Leigh Street from 1923 until 1952 when the school was relocated to a new building in the East End. The old Armstrong then became Benjamin A. Graves Junior High School. (Source: Richmond Newspapers photo).

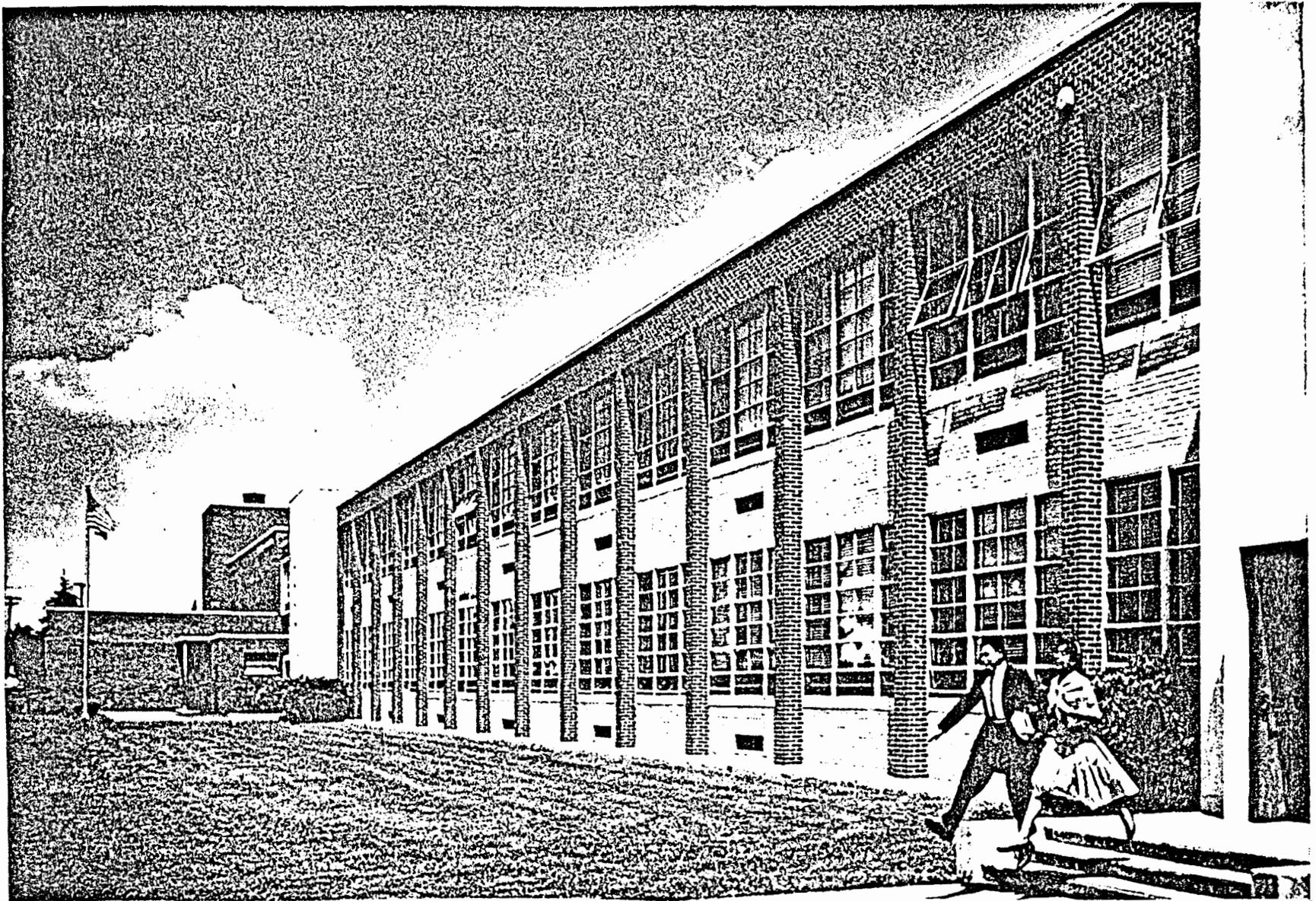


Figure 9. Armstrong High School moved from its downtown location to a new building at 1611 North Thirty-first Street in 1952. (Source: Richmond Newspapers photo).



Figure 10. James E. Segear, the first black to serve as principal of a Richmond high school, was principal at Maggie L. Walker High School from 1938, when the school opened, until he resigned in late 1950. (Source: Maggie L. Walker High School Yearbook, 1948).



Figure 11. Maggie L. Walker High School opened in September 1938. It and Armstrong High School were the only two high schools opened to blacks in Richmond. (Source: Maggie L. Walker High School Yearbook, 1948).



Figure 12. Richmond Community Hospital was the only hospital in Richmond owned and operated by blacks. (Source: Richmond Newspapers photo, 1973).

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