

The Private School Pivot: The Shrouded Persistence of Massive Resistance in the Black Belt and Beyond

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In 1969, four years after passage of the Voting Rights Act, African Americans in Greene County, Alabama, reclaimed control of local government, becoming the first community in the South to do so since Reconstruction. A half century later, however, Greene County remains an impoverished and largely segregated area with poor educational outcomes, especially for Black children. This essay explores the history of Greene County from 1954 to the recent past, with a particular focus on Warrior Academy, a segregated private school (“segregation academy”) founded by Whites in 1965. As a case study of “school choice” in the context of the “long civil rights movement,” it complicates scholarly definitions of “massive resistance.” Furthermore, it demonstrates the ways in which an emerging “color-blind” conservatism premised on White concerns about “educational quality” thwarted Black efforts to achieve educational equality, even in places where African Americans achieved significant political victories.

Keywords: segregation, massive resistance, private schools, segregation academies, school choice, long civil rights movement

On September 8, 1965, more than eleven years after the Supreme Court announced its decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Mattye Hutton became the first Black student to attend the previously all-White Greene County High School. The local newspaper printed her class schedule on the front page, noting that she “was quietly accepted into the tenth grade and began attending classes with other students.”¹ Throughout the tumultuous 1960s, the *Greene County Democrat* took pains to portray the rural community as forward-looking and free from racial conflict, not unlike the “progressive mystique” identified in larger southern cities. Nevertheless, the county’s past

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¹“Negro Begins Classes at GCHS,” *Greene County (AL) Democrat*, Sept. 9, 1965, n.p.

was still plainly visible, from the white-columned antebellum homes that dotted its landscape to the Black people who still worked the land.² Greene County lay in Alabama's Black Belt, which acquired its name from the fertile soil that drew slaveholding cotton planters in the early 1800s, and a century after the Civil War, Black residents outnumbered Whites more than four to one.³

Four years later, in 1969, Greene County achieved national renown when its Black community became the first in the United States to elect a Black-majority local government following passage of the Voting Rights Act. In the wake of that election, journalist Joseph Cumming sounded a cautiously optimistic note about the potential for racial cooperation and progress, pinning on Greene County (in his article's title) the "Highest Hope for the South and America." Still, he saw through the veneer of the progressive mystique and warned that "Things could almost as easily go the other way. If not enough people—white and black—expand their perspective, Greene County could be doomed to a sour, mean, and altogether typical small-town obscurity."⁴

Cumming's words seem prescient today. Over the past half century, the county's population has dropped by roughly one-third, and it remains segregated and poorly educated. As of the 2018–2019 school year, 97 percent of students in the public school system identified as Black, and more than 85 percent were eligible for free or reduced-price school lunches.⁵ On standardized tests administered statewide in 2017–2018, only 11 percent of eleventh graders in Greene County earned "proficient" ratings in math, compared with 44 percent statewide. The results in English and science were even more dire:

²Four decades ago, William Chafe identified in Greensboro, North Carolina, what he called the "progressive mystique," in which community leaders promoted Greensboro as a forward-looking "New South" city friendly to business interests. Central to this mythos was a putative racial harmony. Historians have subsequently demonstrated the existence of a similar mythos in other southern cities. A form of the "progressive mystique" clearly existed in rural Greene County as well, however. See William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 6.

³"QuickFacts: Greene County, Alabama," US Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/greencountyalabama>.

⁴Joseph Cumming, "Slumbering Greene County, a Remote Sliver of Alabama, Where Blacks and Whites May Realize the Highest Hope for the South and America," *Southern Voices* 1, no. 1 (March–April 1974), 22–24.

⁵Enrollment Characteristics for Eutaw Primary School, Robert Brown Middle School, and Greene County High School, 2018–2019 School Year, Greene County (AL), NCES District ID: 0101680, Common Core of Data, National Center for Education Statistics, https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/school_list.asp?Search=1&DistrictID=0101680.

only 7 percent of Greene County students were proficient in each (compared with 43 percent statewide for English and 42 percent for science).⁶ According to 2016 data from the US Census Bureau, only 76.9 percent of adults over the age of twenty-five held a high school diploma (compared with 87 percent nationally) and 37.9 percent of residents lived in poverty, well beyond the national rate.⁷ Clearly, things went “the other way,” but what explains this shift?

Although the *Greene County Democrat* claimed in 1965 that Hutton was “quietly accepted,” some Whites were clearly not pleased with the state of affairs. Just above the article describing her enrollment, another read, “The Warrior Academy, a private, All-White, school Incorporated [*sic*] under the laws of the State of Alabama, opened officially Monday, August 30.”⁸ When a local businessman had first proposed forming a private school in Greene County, warning that full integration loomed on the horizon, “he was considered a bit kooky or at least out of line with a tasteless joke.”⁹ In 1965, Whites remained confident in their ability to delay and obstruct, and after more than a decade of stiff-arming the implementation of *Brown*, they had reason to be. In an area still relatively unaffected by the burgeoning civil rights movement, few Whites believed that such drastic measures would ever be necessary. Although the ground had begun to shift, desegregation remained—for the moment—a matter of local control, and as such, most Whites opted to remain in the public schools. When Warrior Academy’s doors first opened, only thirty-six students made the jump to private education.¹⁰ Following the historic voting in 1969, however, integration was no longer a joke, and a private school no longer seemed “kooky.”

Warrior Academy was one of many new private schools, commonly known as “segregation academies,” organized throughout the South in response to public school desegregation. The movement in favor of private education began in 1959 when Whites in Prince Edward County, Virginia, as part of the campaign of “massive resistance” to school desegregation in that state, closed their public schools

⁶Trisha Powell Crain, “Here Are Alabama’s 2018 Test Results for K-12 Schools,” *AL.com*, Jan. 4, 2019, <https://www.al.com/news/2019/01/here-are-alabamas-2018-test-results-for-k-12-schools.html>.

⁷“2016 American Community Survey (ACS) State and County Dashboard,” US Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/acs-5year-datamap.html>.

⁸“Warrior Academy Opened Last Week, 36 Students Enrolled,” *Greene County (AL) Democrat*, Sept. 9, 1965, n.p.

⁹Cumming, “Slumbering Greene County,” 22.

¹⁰“Warrior Academy Opened Last Week.”

rather than integrate.¹¹ The tactic spread, and by 1969, more than 300,000 White students attended private segregated schools in the South. That number would nearly double in the next two years, a trend reflected in Warrior Academy's own enrollment.¹² Reflecting their widespread popularity, the South was home to approximately 3,500 such schools by 1975, and while some were short-lived, others educated multiple generations of White families.¹³ Warrior Academy remained all-White for a full half century following *Brown*, finally integrating in 2004 under financial duress.

As a case study of the private school movement, the story of Greene County thus complicates the traditional "textbook account" of the civil rights movement, which portrays Jim Crow as an "aberration of the freedom narrative" many Americans hold dear.¹⁴ It is important to acknowledge the changes wrought by the movement,

¹¹Prince Edward County offers perhaps the most dramatic example of "massive resistance" through private education. Located in Virginia's Black Belt (known locally as "Southside"), Prince Edward was the source of one of the five cases eventually consolidated into *Brown v. Board of Education*. In the late 1950s, having lost in *Brown* and facing the courtroom defeat of massive resistance laws, Whites in Prince Edward County ceased all funding for public education—White as well as Black—and opened Prince Edward Academy. As a University of Virginia report noted in the 1970s, Prince Edward became "the spiritual center" for proponents of segregated private education, and it has held almost as much appeal for scholars interested in segregation. As a start, see Bob Smith, *They Closed Their Schools: Prince Edward County, Virginia, 1951–1964* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965); Amy E. Murrell, "The 'Impossible' Prince Edward Case: The Endurance of Resistance in a Southside County, 1959–64," in *The Moderates' Dilemma: Massive Resistance to School Desegregation in Virginia*, ed. Matthew D. Lassiter and Andrew B. Lewis (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998); Kara Miles Turner, "Getting It Straight: Southern Black School Patrons and the Struggle for Equal Education in the Pre- and Post-Civil Rights Eras," *Journal of Negro Education* 72, no. 2 (Spring 2003), 217–29; and Jill O'line Titus, *Brown's Battleground: Students, Segregationists, and the Struggle for Justice in Prince Edward County, Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

¹²David Nevin and Robert E. Bills, *The Schools That Fear Built: Segregationist Academies in the South* (Washington, DC: Acropolis Books, 1976), 8–9. The book provides an early overview of the private school movement.

¹³Jeremy R. Porter, Frank M. Howell, and Lynn M. Hempel, "Old Times Are Not Forgotten: The Institutionalization of Segregationist Academies in the American South," *Social Problems* 61, no. 4 (Nov. 2014), 578.

¹⁴George W. Noblit, ed., *School Desegregation: Oral Histories toward Understanding the Effects of White Domination* (Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2015), 8–11. See also, Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 437–38; Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Landing on the Wrong Note: The Price We Paid for *Brown*," *Educational Researcher* 33, no. 7 (Oct. 2004), 3–13; and Jeanne Theoharis, *A More Beautiful and Terrible History: The Uses and Misuses of Civil Rights History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).

of course, but by suppressing discomfiting continuities, such narratives have enabled (White) Americans to turn a blind eye toward the persistence of White supremacy—in short, to forget about places like Greene County. Although it would be facile to argue that Warrior Academy alone explains Greene County's current state, the school's history, especially considered in light of the county's civil rights victories, offers a window into the lasting consequences of an important but underexamined mode of White resistance. This closer look enriches our understanding of the educational inequality that persists well into the twenty-first century.¹⁵ The study of segregated private schools makes, as Jacquelyn Dowd Hall asserts, "civil rights [history] harder. Harder to celebrate as a natural progression of American values. Harder to cast as a satisfying morality tale. Most of all, harder to simplify, appropriate, and contain."¹⁶

The history of Warrior Academy, and of the private school movement more generally, complicates scholarly debates around "massive resistance." Historians often distinguish between the "extremists" who proposed unyielding opposition to desegregation and the so-called "moderates" who advocated nominal compliance with the law even as they sought to preserve racial segregation. To draw such a line boldly, however, is a mistake—as is the view that moderates mobilized to "defeat" massive resistance.¹⁷ Such distinctions deceive us into

¹⁵The existence of "segregation academies" is well known to historians, and many have mentioned their establishment in the context of broader White conservative reaction to the civil rights movement. However, few have examined the long-term evolution of such schools or considered their contemporary implications in depth. See, for instance, Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); and Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). For more direct treatments of private schools, see Michael W. Fuquay, "Civil Rights and the Private School Movement in Mississippi, 1964–1971," *History of Education Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2002), 159–80; and Christopher Myers, "White Freedom Schools: The White Academy Movement in Eastern North Carolina, 1954–1973," *North Carolina Historical Review* 81, no. 4 (Oct. 2004), 393–425.

¹⁶Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005), 1235.

¹⁷On the distinction between extremists and "moderates," as well as massive resistance as a failure, see Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950's* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969); Lassiter and Lewis, *The Moderates' Dilemma*; James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 99, 114; Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and Racial Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 462; and Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, 40. It should be noted that a few scholars

believing that the forces of racial extremism were defeated by the more reasonable center, as when Paul Gaston writes that Virginia moderates, in 1959, prevented “a stampede to private, segregated schools, thus buying time and opening the way to more rational discussions in the future.”¹⁸ The stampede *did* materialize, though, and not just in Virginia, but across the South. Moderates did not *prevent* a stampede in 1959—they merely *delayed* it. Moreover, as the courts steadily eviscerated segregationist strategies throughout the 1960s, moderates *joined* the stampede. Thus, we must take a longer and more expansive view.

To be sure, massive resistance looks like a failure if one accepts its absolutist rhetoric at face value and accepts the narrow “lifespan” (1954–1959) scholars have traditionally assigned to it. To do so, however, fails to recognize massive resistance for what it really was: a calculated rhetorical campaign by political activists playing a long game. The standard view, unfortunately, is in keeping with a long-standing tendency to characterize Black Belt resistance as a short-lived and fundamentally backward political spasm by “dumb segregationists” (as opposed to “smarter” moderates).¹⁹ As Numan V. Bartley wrote in 1969, “The program of massive resistance flowed from the southern past,” and interposition, an “obsolete and almost forgotten doctrine, now reborn, formed the central theme binding together massive state resistance to changes that threatened other obsolete but by no means forgotten beliefs, prejudices, and practices.”²⁰ Matthew Lassiter, more recently, framed massive resistance in similarly stark terms: “In the decade after *Brown*, the Black Belt agenda . . . backfired by forcing a divided white South to choose between the past and the future.”²¹ Of course, their initial reliance on interposition theory invites the characterization of massive resisters as simplistic reactionaries, but we must be careful not to view southern resistance as static or binary. Too much scholarship relies on the trope of an unchanging, backwater Black Belt that made a defiant rearguard action in defense of an already lost cause.

have begun to challenge this consensus. See Mark Golub, “Remembering Massive Resistance to School Desegregation,” *Law and History Review* 31, no. 3 (Aug. 2013), 507; and Joseph Bagley, *The Politics of White Rights: Race, Justice, and Integrating Alabama’s Schools* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018), 7–8.

¹⁸Paul Gaston, foreword to Lassiter and Lewis, *Moderates’ Dilemma*, xi.

¹⁹Calvin Trillin wrote about a perceived divide between “dumb segregationists” and “smart segregationists.” See Calvin Trillin, “Reflections: Remembrance of Moderates Past,” *New Yorker*, March 21, 1977, 86.

²⁰Bartley, *Rise of Massive Resistance*, 126. Interposition is the dubious legal theory that claims for the state a right to “interpose” itself between the federal government and its people, thereby nullifying federal law that the state deems unconstitutional.

²¹Lassiter, *Silent Majority*, 30, 39.

Massive resistance was in fact a long-term project, highly modern and frequently evolving. It originated in the Black Belt region, but its rhetoric reverberated widely as massive resisters' propaganda—sophisticated pamphlets, syndicated radio spots, and “educational” films—reached into schools and churches, state houses and the halls of Congress.²² Among the foremost spokespeople for massive resistance was James Jackson Kilpatrick, the Richmond, Virginia, journalist who first proposed and vigorously promoted interposition on his editorial page. Kilpatrick, however, was no legal scholar; he was a writer skilled in the art of persuasion. Furthermore, even without legal training, Kilpatrick “had no illusions about interposition’s probable fate once it met with a judicial hearing.”²³ For him, it was a deliberate red herring—a rhetorical device designed to elevate the political discourse “above the sometimes sordid level of race and segregation,” as he wrote privately.²⁴ He hoped that it would distract the courts from the heart of the matter and attract moderate—and, indeed, northern—White support. When both state and federal courts struck down Virginia’s massive resistance laws in early 1959, the moment most scholars view as the “death” of massive resistance, Kilpatrick “did not mourn their passing.”²⁵ Instead, after abandoning the legal doctrine of interposition, Kilpatrick became a vocal supporter of private schools.²⁶

Unlike interposition, private education carried the weight of Supreme Court precedent in two landmark cases: *Trustees of Dartmouth College v. Woodward* (1819) and *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925). In the *Dartmouth* case, the court—led by Chief Justice John Marshall—recognized the charters of private corporations (including schools) as contracts and held that states could not interfere with said contracts.²⁷ *Pierce*, in an ironic historical twist, offered segregationists

²² Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954–64* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 303.

²³ Joseph J. Thorndike, “‘The Sometimes Sordid Level of Race and Segregation’: James J. Kilpatrick and the Virginia Campaign Against *Brown*,” in Lassiter and Lewis, *Moderates' Dilemma*, 59.

²⁴ Thorndike, “‘The Sometimes Sordid Level of Race and Segregation,’” 52.

²⁵ Thorndike, “‘The Sometimes Sordid Level of Race and Segregation,’” 70.

²⁶ My analysis in this paragraph draws heavily from Thorndike, “‘The Sometimes Sordid Level of Race and Segregation,’” 51–71. See also, William P. Hustwit, “From Caste to Color-Blindness: James J. Kilpatrick’s Segregationist Semantics,” *Journal of Southern History* 77, no. 3 (Aug. 2011), 639–70; and William P. Hustwit, *James J. Kilpatrick: Salesman for Segregation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).

²⁷ *Trustees of Dartmouth College v. Woodward*, 17 U.S. 518 (1819).

an even stronger precedent. In that case, a unanimous court struck down a 1922 Oregon law—passed with the support of the Second Ku Klux Klan—targeting Catholic parochial schools. It held that “the fundamental liberty upon which all governments in this Union repose excludes any general power of the State to standardize its children by forcing them to accept instruction from public teachers only.”²⁸ If states could not nullify federal laws via interposition, private schooling held out the possibility that individuals, organized into corporations, just might. Furthermore, for a Supreme Court chastened in the 1950s by political resistance and concerned about the optics of racial strife in the Cold War context, White flight to private schools had the advantage of avoiding ugly spectacles that might attract international media attention, as in Little Rock.²⁹

Examining the shift toward “private segregation” blurs neat lines between “extremists” and “moderates,” not only because private education accomplished the goals of massive resistance without running afoul of court orders, but because those supposedly distinctive approaches dovetailed over time. By staking out an extreme rhetorical position, massive resistance helped to “soften the ground” for moderates to build a broader base of support for White prerogatives, even as they grudgingly jettisoned Jim Crow. Furthermore, most massive resisters responded to the legal “death” of massive resistance by simply pivoting to a nominally more “moderate” solution. Finally, as the federal courts became increasingly assertive in implementing desegregation orders, some of the same “moderates” who initially ridiculed the private school movement rushed to join it. When compared to the sometimes violent rhetoric and dubious legal pleadings of the “classic” massive resistance period, the opening of segregated private schools appeared eminently more reasonable, but it is important to remember that such schools had their roots in the “extremism” of the 1950s. Moreover, when one considers the sheer number of schools

²⁸ *Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, 268 U.S. 510 (1925).

²⁹ On the Supreme Court, see Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 306–19, 333. Klarman offers an extensive analysis of the justices’ internal memoranda, revealing their concerns about resistance and their desire to embolden southern White moderates, but even those moderates who sought to remain above the fray turned the specter of violence—perpetrated by others—to their political advantage in framing the issue in terms favorable to the continuation of segregation. On the Cold War context, see also Mary L. Dudziak, “*Brown* as a Cold War Case,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (June 2004), 32–42; and Derrick A. Bell Jr., “*Brown v. Board of Education* and the Interest-Convergence Dilemma,” *Harvard Law Review* 93, no. 3 (Jan. 1980), 518–33.

founded and students enrolled, it is hard to deny that the private school movement represented White resistance on a massive scale.³⁰

In May 1954, less than a week after the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown*, students from the Greene County High School "Travelers Club" hopped a train to Washington, DC, even making a stop at the Supreme Court building.³¹ A newspaper report offers no indication that they or their parents expressed any concern about the decision. In fact, the *Greene County Democrat* made no immediate mention of the ruling.³² Not until June 10—nearly a month after the Supreme Court announced its decision—did the editor address the issue, reprinting a letter published in the *Atlanta Constitution* supposedly "written by a Georgia Negro." In it, the author had asked, "[I]s anybody thinking about the Negroes themselves? [Integration] won't happen here in the South for a very long time I am convinced, and one reason it will not is because the Negro does not want it. Not, at least, in the schools." In his opinion, integration would place his children at a relative disadvantage to Whites in the classroom. "Maybe I ought to be willing for my children to be martyrs for the sake of complete equality for a future generation," he wrote. "I'm not." He ended with a flourish: "I shall fight to the last gasp against having my children attend a white school."³³ With that, Greene County's Whites convinced themselves that they had nothing to fear; Blacks wanted integration even less than they did.

By 1963, however, such "cherished fictions" had become harder to maintain. In January, George Wallace took office as governor and in

³⁰In fact, the continuation of massive resistance in ever-changing guises benefited—and arguably *continues* to benefit—from the notion that it died at the hands of moderates in 1959. A nineteenth-century prose poem by Charles Baudelaire puts it well: "Never forget, when you wish to boast about the progress of enlightenment, that the finest of all the devil's tricks was persuading you that he doesn't exist!" See Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen and La Fanfarlo*, trans. Raymond N. McKenzie (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2008), 61.

³¹"Southern Railway System, Travelers Club-Greene County High School, Eutaw Alabama, Educational Tour of New York, N.Y., and Washington, D.C.," folder 80, box 3, Armistead I. Selden Jr. Papers, University Libraries Special Collections, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

³²Richard Martin, "Around Town: On the Square," *Greene County (AL) Democrat*, April 29, 1954, 1.

³³"Editorial Comment: What about the Negroes Themselves?" *Greene County (AL) Democrat*, June 10, 1954, 4. Such statements cannot be taken at face value, of course, and are indicative instead of subterranean White resistance. As McMillen points out, Citizens' Council publications frequently included statements from African Americans critical of the NAACP and of desegregation more generally, and councils were not above denying or obscuring authorship of their work. See McMillen, *Citizens' Council*, 247–48.

his inaugural address felt the need to assure his White constituents that they would have “segregation now . . . segregation tomorrow . . . segregation forever.”³⁴ Violent reprisals against civil rights marchers in Birmingham that spring produced some of the most vivid images of the entire movement and brought national attention to events in Alabama. Then, in June, Wallace made his infamous “Stand in the Schoolhouse Door” at the University of Alabama, a carefully orchestrated bit of political theater in which he appeared to defy the federal government before ultimately stepping aside.³⁵ Finally, on September 15, less than three weeks after Martin Luther King Jr. headlined the well-attended March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, a bomb ripped through Birmingham’s 16th Street Baptist Church, killing four young African American girls.

Less well known, though, are the events that took place in Macon County, Alabama. Just one week after Wallace’s inaugural address, civil rights attorney Fred Gray filed a lawsuit in federal court, seeking to desegregate Macon County’s all-White Tuskegee High School. On August 22, Judge Frank Johnson ordered the school to be integrated when it opened less than two weeks later. When the appointed day arrived, however, Wallace countered by postponing the opening of Macon County schools for one week. To ensure that no students entered the building, he mobilized more than two hundred state troopers. The US Department of Justice, made a party to the case by Johnson, filed a complaint and soon received a temporary restraining order preventing Wallace from interfering with school integration. Of course, Wallace—the consummate showman—turned this into more political theater, first barricading himself in his office to avoid being served with the restraining order and then summoning the National Guard, which arrived with bayonets affixed to escort him away. President John F. Kennedy responded by federalizing the guard, just as he had earlier that summer in Tuscaloosa. Only then did Wallace back down, telling reporters, “I can’t fight bayonets with my bare hands.”³⁶

³⁴George C. Wallace, Inaugural Address, Montgomery, AL, Jan. 14, 1963, <http://digital.archives.alabama.gov/digital/collection/voices/id/2952>.

³⁵Klarman argues that the “difference between white ‘moderates’ and ‘extremists’ was not in their preference for segregation, but in the sacrifices they were prepared to make to maintain it.” Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 415. But we should be skeptical about the willingness of the supposed extremists to make meaningful “sacrifices.” Wallace was only the latest arch-segregationist to cave under pressure. Like Kilpatrick and Georgia governor Ernest Vandiver before him, Wallace frequently made concessions or stood down in the face of federal authority despite rabid rhetoric to the contrary.

³⁶Jack Bass, *Taming the Storm: The Life and Times of Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr., and the South’s Fight over Civil Rights* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 207–10; and Brian

The maneuvering in Macon County was far from over, however. Much like the massive resisters of the previous decade, Wallace pivoted toward private schools. Wallace lent his support to fund-raising efforts for the new Macon Academy, and he signaled to organizers that they would receive tuition grants from the state. Early in 1964, once all the White students at Tuskegee High had departed for the private school, the state Board of Education (on which Wallace sat *ex officio*) issued orders to the Macon County board to close Tuskegee High. This was a “major tactical blunder.”³⁷ According to Gray,

Since Governor Wallace had successfully exercised his State power in closing the public schools in Tuskegee, I concluded that he should be compelled to use the same power to integrate all of the school systems in Alabama which were not already then under court order. This realization hit me like the burning bush speaking to Moses.” This realization hit me like the burning bush speaking to Moses.³⁸

On the basis of this logic, Gray filed a motion asking the court to expand its order in Macon County to cover the entire state. Although the court declined to do so in 1964, it did find that the state was still operating a dual school system and ruled Wallace’s tuition grant plan unconstitutional.³⁹

Early the following year, King returned to Alabama to bring attention to thwarted voter registration efforts in Selma. When state police attacked marchers in full view of television cameras, Alabama again became the center of national and international attention. Five months later, on August 6, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act into law. In addition to its symbolic importance, congressional legislation expanded the reach of the federal government into the Black Belt. Under the provisions of the earlier Civil Rights Act, officials in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) “began pressuring southern school districts [to desegregate] as early as December 1964” and made federal funding contingent upon compliance with more stringent standards.⁴⁰ Another piece

K. Landsberg, “*Lee v. Macon County Board of Education*: The Possibilities of Federal Enforcement of Equal Educational Opportunity,” *Duke Journal of Constitutional Law & Public Policy* 12, no. 1 (Fall 2016), 14–15. Landsberg notes that the governor’s effort to interfere spanned the state, from Mobile to Huntsville, but the Department of Justice, working through federal courts, thwarted his strategy.

³⁷Bass, *Taming the Storm*, 215.

³⁸Fred D. Gray, *Rus Ride to Justice: Changing the System by the System: The Life and Works of Fred D. Gray, Preacher, Attorney, Politician* (Montgomery, AL: Black Belt Press, 1995), 213.

³⁹Bass, *Taming the Storm*, 219.

⁴⁰Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education*, 138.

of Great Society legislation, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, strengthened this mandate by dramatically increasing federal funding for education. As part of Johnson's proposed War on Poverty, this legislation was intended to reshape the most impoverished regions of the nation, and at least by HEW's narrow measure of success, it began to do so. Over the two school years that spanned 1965, "pressure from HEW helped to increase the percentage of black students who attended majority-white schools," especially in the Deep South.⁴¹

Along these lines, Hasan Kwame Jeffries writes of nearby Lowndes County that segregation was a "grim reality" in 1965, but by the end of 1966, "Jim Crow was crumbling."⁴² Greene County complicates such an optimistic assessment. It is true that 1965 and 1966 were pivotal years, but in Greene County, they offered only harbingers of events to come. In addition to Hutton's token integration of Greene County High School and the opening of Warrior Academy, US Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach dispatched examiners to Greene County to ensure that Blacks could register to vote. Although the 1960 census had listed 11,054 "nonwhite" (primarily Black) residents of the county, only 542 were registered voters before the passage of the Voting Rights Act.⁴³ With federal examiners in place, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), under the local direction of Hosea Williams, organized marches and voter registration drives.⁴⁴

Because federal examiners arrived in Greene County only days before the 1965 election, the Democratic Party primary of May 1966 was effectively the first balloting in which newly enfranchised Black voters could make their voices heard.⁴⁵ In the race for sheriff, incumbent Bill Lee faced a young Black activist named Thomas Gilmore. When the votes were tallied, Lee had won by a margin of less than three hundred votes.⁴⁶ According to the *Greene County Democrat*, "He received approximately 750 to 800 Negro votes to make this possible."⁴⁷ The newspaper, of course, did not mention

⁴¹Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education*, 139.

⁴²Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in the Alabama Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

⁴³"Journey through Two Americas," *Time*, April 6, 1970, 30.

⁴⁴Don McKee, "After 6-Month Cessation—Demonstrations on Rights Back in Central Ala.," *Indiana (PA) Evening Gazette*, Nov. 10, 1965, 27; and Ray Jenkins, "Majority Rule in the Black Belt: Greene County, Alabama," *New South* 24 (Fall 1969), 62.

⁴⁵US Commission on Civil Rights, *The Voting Rights Act: The First Months* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1965), 48–49.

⁴⁶Jenkins, "Majority Rule in the Black Belt," 63.

⁴⁷"Sum It Up—What Happened?" *Greene County (AL) Democrat*, May 5, 1966, n.p.

the rumors of voter suppression perpetrated by the White community, including farm owners transporting their employees to work in neighboring counties for the day and poll workers closing early.⁴⁸ “After the 1966 elections,” wrote one reporter, “civil rights activity fell into the doldrums.”⁴⁹ In Greene County, Jim Crow remained—in practice, if not on paper—a “grim reality.”

In addition to the dramatic and violent events of 1963, as well as the legislative and executive branch interventions of 1964 and 1965, Judge John Minor Wisdom of the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals wrote a comprehensive opinion in *United States v. Jefferson County Board of Education*. He noted that the case “require[s] us to reexamine school desegregation standards in the light of the Civil Rights Act of 1964” and HEW guidelines, and to that end, Wisdom concluded that the “only school desegregation plan that meets constitutional standards is one that works.” Acknowledging that the “courts acting alone have failed,” Wisdom was hopeful about the prospects of cooperation among the three branches of the federal government. “After twelve years of snail’s pace progress toward school desegregation,” he wrote, “courts are entering a new era. . . . The clock has ticked the last tick for tokenism and delay in the name of ‘deliberate speed.’”⁵⁰

Following Wisdom’s lead, the judges in *Lee v. Macon* finally answered Gray’s call for statewide relief in 1967. Noting the changes in the legal landscape over the previous two years and citing evidence of continued interference by Wallace and State Superintendent of Education Austin Meadows, the court found that the “most significant action . . . designed to maintain the dual public school system based upon race” was carried out by state officials. In short, by directing education policy in Macon County (and elsewhere) from Montgomery, Wallace invited a federal challenge. On March 22, 1967, the court ordered that all employees of the state’s education system “shall be and hereby are permanently enjoined from discriminating on the basis of race in the operation or the conduct of the public schools of Alabama.”⁵¹ Governor Lurleen Wallace, who had run in her husband’s place due to term limits, appealed the order, but on December 4, the US Supreme Court, in a per curiam decision, affirmed the lower court’s judgment.⁵²

⁴⁸Martin Waldron, “Alabama Blacks Seek County Rule in Special Vote,” *New York Times*, July 27, 1969, 53; and “King Charges Bias in Alabama Voting Setup,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, May 9, 1966, 3.

⁴⁹Jenkins, “Majority Rule in the Black Belt,” 64.

⁵⁰*United States v. Jefferson County Board of Education*, 372 F.2d 836. See also, Bass, *Taming the Storm*, 219–22.

⁵¹*Lee v. Macon County Board of Education*, 267 F. Supp. 458 (M.D. Ala. 1967).

⁵²*Wallace v. United States*, 389 U.S. 215 (1967).

The ruling was a sign of things to come. Just one week later, the Supreme Court granted certiorari in *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County*, which considered the constitutionality of “freedom of choice” plans. In theory, such plans enabled parents to enroll their children at any school, but in most locales they had little impact on the segregated status quo. The court heard oral arguments in the case on April 3, 1968, one day before an assassin’s bullet felled King in Memphis. Riots broke out across the United States, including in the nation’s capital; Washington burned while the court deliberated. Late in May, the court unanimously declared New Kent County’s “freedom of choice” plan unacceptable because “it has not dismantled the dual system, but has operated simply to burden students and their parents with a responsibility which *Brown II* placed squarely on the School Board.”⁵³

As the 1960s progressed, all three branches of the federal government responded to pressure from civil rights activists, slowly but surely taking up the cause of Black equality. Now, at a moment when the tide seemed finally to be turning, King was gone. In Greene County, the mood was one of disappointment and disillusionment. King had visited several times in recent years, and many of the local leaders knew him well. Moreover, Black candidates for several county offices had been swept in the 1968 Democratic primary. Many suspected that the elections had been stolen, and they feared that their voter registration drives had been in vain. That summer, however, Greene County’s Black candidates joined forces with the new, Black-run National Democratic Party of Alabama (NDPA), which was preparing to field more than one hundred candidates for state and local offices.⁵⁴

Rather than contest the results of the 1968 Democratic primary in court, Greene County’s Black candidates decided to create a third-party ticket for the general election. The summer was marked by fierce campaigning on both sides. Among the highlights for the White community was an appearance by Wallace, who took the stage before four thousand cheering supporters to the strains of “Dixie.” It is difficult to determine from the local newspaper report exactly where Wallace’s words and those of the editor diverged, but Wallace clearly played to Whites’ frustrations. Across the nation, he said, people were “tired of the Federal Government telling them when to go to bed, when to get up, when to eat dinner, where to send their children to

⁵³ *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County*, 391 U.S. 430 (1968).

⁵⁴ John Cashin, interview by Hardy T. Frye, 1972, transcript, interview 6, box 1, Hardy T. Frye Oral History Collection, Auburn University Special Collections & Archives Department, Auburn University Libraries, Auburn, AL.

school.”⁵⁵ In his presidential campaign, Wallace stoked fears of an increasingly intrusive state without direct appeals to race, even as he presented himself as the defender of White prerogatives. Amid such rhetoric, Warrior Academy prepared to move from a vacant antebellum mansion owned by one of the school’s more affluent families to its own building, a four-room facility on two donated acres.⁵⁶

Whites won a temporary victory when Alabama’s secretary of state declared that the NDPA and its candidates had failed to meet state election law requirements, ruling them ineligible for the ballot. Following a series of appeals, the US Supreme Court ruled on October 19 that the NDPA candidates should be included, but when the candidates arrived at the polls on November 5, they were shocked to find their names missing from the ballot. Probate Judge Dennis Herndon (who also served on the County Commission) had apparently refused to obey the court’s order. Although 2,036 people in Greene County cast their ballots for a straight NDPA ticket—believing they were voting for local candidates—Whites swept the general election, just as they had the primary. The NDPA attorney immediately filed a complaint with the Supreme Court, which soon directed that another vote be held on July 29, 1969.⁵⁷

With the federal government and civil rights organizations behind them, Greene County’s NDPA candidates began campaigning for the special election. After the votes were counted, six NDPA candidates claimed victory: four county commissioners and two members of the board of education. Because the school board already had one previously elected Black member, Blacks suddenly held a majority in both

⁵⁵“West Alabamians Flock to See Wallace,” *Greene County (AL) Democrat*, June 27, 1968, 1.

⁵⁶Willis McGee, interview by author, Tuscaloosa, AL, April 7, 2007; Mary Morgan Glass, ed., *A Goodly Heritage: Memories of Greene County* (Eutaw, AL: Greene County Historical Society, 1977), 151; and “Warrior Academy’s New Building,” *Greene County (AL) Democrat*, Sept. 19, 1968, 1.

⁵⁷Jenkins, “Majority Rule in the Black Belt,” 64–65. See also, Joseph N. Boyce, “Black Power in Greene County,” *Time*, May 11, 1981, 25; and “In Greene County, Here’s the Results,” *Greene County (AL) Democrat*, Nov. 7, 1968, 1. In the 1968 presidential election, Republican Richard Nixon won the electoral vote handily despite receiving only half a million more votes than Democrat Hubert H. Humphrey. The race was complicated by Wallace’s presence, of course, and it is worth noting that Wallace earned almost ten million votes nationwide. As a product of the Black Belt himself, Wallace’s insurgency suggests that Black Belt rhetoric—an updated version of the rhetoric of massive resistance—had begun to transcend regional boundaries. Wallace carried his native state easily, but reflecting the changing political landscape, he did not win Greene County, one of only three Alabama counties to award Humphrey a majority. See Dave Leip, “1968 Presidential General Election Data—National,” *Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections*, <https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/>.

bodies of the county government.⁵⁸ As with the *Brown* decision, reactions ran the gamut. Blacks celebrated while Whites wallowed in despair. According to one White resident, “[We] really thought we could pull it out again. We had done it twice before when the colored ran for office.”⁵⁹ Two weeks after the election, the county held an inaugural ceremony attended by roughly one thousand people, including Senator Birch Bayh of Indiana and many national news correspondents. Speaking at the ceremony, Bayh said:

There are those who describe this event as a victory for the black people of Greene County. But when an election is held fairly and openly and a true majority of the voters prevail, it is a victory for justice. And when justice is served, it is a victory for men and women of all races. It is a victory for America.⁶⁰

Local Whites tried to spin the publicity in their favor. Before swearing in the new officials, Circuit Judge E. F. Hildreth took the opportunity to dispel some “myths” about Greene County. “We are not a depressed, down-trodden, poverty stricken people, as some would have you believe,” he claimed, hewing closely to the progressive mystique with national media in attendance. “The truth is that our people, black and white, are progressive, forward-looking, intelligent, and hard-working. . . . In the field of education, our schools have met all directives and requirements relating to desegregation, and are in full compliance.”⁶¹ Calls for biracial cooperation were the order of the day, but in more private moments, some Whites were skeptical. Judge Herndon—whose actions had necessitated the special election—said, “The schools are the key to the future. If they don’t press too hard for integration, we’ll get along. If they do, the whites will leave the public schools.”⁶² The subtle difference between Hildreth’s and Herndon’s statements spoke volumes. Whites would comply nominally with *desegregation*, especially on their own terms, but they were adamantly opposed to *integration* imposed upon them by a government they did not control—whether that government met in distant Washington or in their own backyard.

⁵⁸Martin Waldron, “Six Negroes Win Alabama Offices,” *New York Times*, July 30, 1969, 1; and “Six Negroes Elected to County offices in Special Election Held Tuesday,” *Greene County (AL) Democrat*, July 31, 1969, 1.

⁵⁹Martin Waldron, “Election of 6 Alabama Negroes Hailed as ‘Giant Political Step,’” *New York Times*, July 31, 1969, 21.

⁶⁰“Six Blacks Take Political Offices in Ala.,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, Aug. 12, 1969, 6.

⁶¹“Hildreth Boosts County to the World,” *Greene County (AL) Democrat*, Aug. 14, 1969, n.p.

⁶²Jenkins, “Majority Rule in the Black Belt,” 67.

With African Americans in control of local policy and the national press having departed, the progressive mystique collapsed. When Warrior Academy opened on September 2, 1969, its enrollment had more than doubled, jumping from forty students to eighty-four.⁶³ The following month, federal courts exacerbated Whites' siege mentality. On October 23, the US District Court for the Middle District of Alabama ordered thirty-six school districts in the state to submit plans to achieve full integration for the 1970–1971 school year. That same day, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in *Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education*. Within the week, the court declared the dual school system illegal, stating that “continued operation of segregated schools . . . is no longer constitutionally permissible The obligation of every school district is to terminate dual school systems at once and to operate now and hereafter only unitary schools.”⁶⁴ By finally closing the loopholes left open in *Brown*, these decisions prompted a rush to open new private schools.

All across the South, schools opened so quickly that keeping accurate statistics became difficult. Prior to the *Alexander* decision in the fall of 1969, the Southern Regional Council estimated that private schools in the South enrolled roughly 300,000 students. After the decision, it revised that estimate to 400,000. Two years later, the number had increased to 535,000. According to Alabama's Department of Education, in 1968–1969, nearly two hundred private schools educated more than 39,000 students. By 1971, however, Alabama reported that public school enrollment had dropped by an additional 21,565 students.⁶⁵

Greene County reflected this trend, but thanks to the transfer of power, Whites' concerns there were much more proximate. In February 1970, the new Black majority on the Greene County Board of Education declared its intention to obey court orders “by eliminating the two predominately [*sic*] white schools and making them predominately black schools.” Whites had reluctantly tolerated gradual desegregation, but the new plan proposed to make the public

⁶³“Enrollment Doubles at Warrior Academy School,” *Greene County (AL) Democrat*, Sept. 7, 1969, n.p.

⁶⁴*Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education*, 396 U.S. 19 (1969). See also, US Commission on Civil Rights, *Fifteen Years Ago: Rural Alabama Revisited* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1983), 4; and Tom Jory, “Brewer Says Court Orders Create School Problems,” *Anniston (AL) Star*, Oct. 29, 1969, 2.

⁶⁵Reese Cleghorn, “The Old South Tries Again,” *Saturday Review*, May 16, 1970, 76; and Southern Regional Council, *The South and Her Children: School Desegregation 1970–1971* (Atlanta: Southern Regional Council, 1971), 16, 70–79; and Nevin and Bills, *Schools That Fear Built*, 8–9.

schools roughly two-thirds Black with integrated faculties.⁶⁶ Warrior Academy suddenly became much more popular. Almost overnight, Warrior's enrollment for the 1970–71 school year increased by more than 400 percent, rendering the school's two-year-old facilities obsolete. The school embarked on a "crash building program" to accommodate the new students, acquiring additional land and making plans for ten new classrooms and additional restroom facilities. For the first time in Warrior's short history, the school also made plans for a high school program, but despite the recent additions to the building, space was still limited. Classes for grades nine through twelve would be held in a community center in Boligee, roughly ten miles from the main campus. New headmaster Joe Morris, hired to oversee the expansion, announced that the school's theme for 1970–71 would be "Come Grow With Us," and the local newspaper published donation pleas, informing readers that all contributions were tax-deductible.⁶⁷

For John J. Synon, the growth of private schools represented the validation of a vision he had been spreading for years. Synon was something of a drifter, but influential in segregationist circles. Following the defeat of Virginia's massive resistance laws, Synon had advocated for closing *all* of Virginia's public schools and constructing a private school system. Having thus established his segregationist bona fides, Synon eventually found the ear of Wallace, who hired Synon for his 1964 presidential campaign staff.⁶⁸

Synon's support for private schools was unwavering, but as his political profile rose, his rhetoric evolved. Shortly after the *Alexander* decision, the *Greene County Democrat* published an article by Synon entitled "Why Our Schools Are Going Under!" Conspicuously, Synon did not mention integration. Instead, after blaming "socialistic" education policy for society's ills, Synon concluded, "I say thank the Good Lord in Heaven [for] those dedicated people—principally Southern people—who will not swallow the hypocritical, malign claptrap these 'educators' spew. Thank God for those among us who are establishing school[s] that are independent of State and Federal control." The "color-blind" nature of Synon's religious, antigovernment rhetoric is noteworthy. For conservatives who felt attacked by a culture and a government they perceived as hostile to their values, private

⁶⁶"Plans for Mix Established: Greene County's 1970–71 School Plan Accepted by Court," *Greene County (AL) Democrat*, Feb. 19, 1970, 1.

⁶⁷"Enrollment Soars at Warrior Academy," *Greene County (AL) Democrat*, March 26, 1970, 1; and "With Enrollment Up Over 400 percent [at] Warrior Academy, New Building Contract Awarded Henderson Construction Company," *Greene County (AL) Democrat*, April 2, 1970, 1.

⁶⁸Hustwit, *James J. Kilpatrick*, 125–26.

schools offered a vessel in which to place their hopes for the future. “If this nation is to live to the destiny promised in our great charter, the Constitution of the United States,” Synon prophesied, “it will be because of the leaders now being reared within these private structures.” Like Kilpatrick, Synon stood as a link between the era of massive resistance and the era of massive abandonment.⁶⁹

In Greene County, as elsewhere, the historical record reveals a clear linkage between Black political and legal gains and the exponential growth of private schools. However, as Joseph Crespino warns, historians must resist the temptation to “attribute to white racism a mystical, ahistorical quality that explains everything and, thus, explains nothing very well.”⁷⁰ Private schools often embraced a cultural ethos and an educational philosophy that diverged from that of the nation’s public schools. White supremacy was an important part of that ethos, but it was increasingly interwoven with religious, social, and economic views.⁷¹

Warrior Academy and its brethren reflected the broader concerns as well as the rhetorical strategies of the emerging New Right, a fact that did not go unnoticed among their left-wing critics. As *Ramparts* magazine reported in the early 1970s, “The rebel yell academies are riding on a wave of huzzahs and sacrifice for God, country, and white supremacy. The money that used to go to Wallace is going to protect our children from sex education and atheistic communism.”⁷² Warrior Academy reflected similar concerns. It was, like many of the new schools, “White, authoritarian, with strong emphasis on the 3 R’s, and . . . with healthy doses of religion and the pledge of allegiance thrown in.”⁷³ Corporal punishment was typical. One former student recalled that for those boys who misbehaved, “It was pretty much a good swift paddling and back to class.” Reflecting traditional gender norms, however, disobedient female students were made to run laps instead of being paddled.⁷⁴ Christian influence also pervaded the

⁶⁹John J. Synon, “Why Our Schools Are Going Under!” *Greene County (AL) Democrat*, Nov. 6, 1969, n.p. For more on John J. Synon, see Hank Burchard, “John J. Synon, Fought for Conservative Causes,” *Washington Post*, April 8, 1972, B10.

⁷⁰Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 8.

⁷¹Indeed, as Fuquay concludes, Synon’s support for private education “succeeded in wedding the southern planter class’s historic antipathy to the expense of public education with the anticommunist, free-market ideology which was becoming prominent in the right wing of the national Republican Party.” In that sense, private schools were integral to southern party realignment—and not only in the Sunbelt suburbs. See Fuquay, “Civil Rights and the Private School Movement,” 178–79.

⁷²Elizabeth Tornquist, “Rebel Yell Academies,” *Ramparts*, Sept. 1971, 12.

⁷³Nevin and Bills, *Schools That Fear Built*, vi.

⁷⁴Anonymous former student, telephone interview by author, Tuscaloosa, AL, March 7, 2007. In the course of my research, I spoke to several former students and

school. Although the school had no official church affiliation in the beginning, another alumnus remembered a weekly assembly at which a local Protestant minister would preach a short sermon.⁷⁵

This is evident even today in the language schools use to describe their histories and missions. For the most part, they employ coded rhetoric to “mask” the racial motivations inherent in their origins, even as they are quite explicit about their religious and cultural priorities.⁷⁶ In Selma, for example, “Meadowview Christian School began when a group of concerned parents met with the congregation of Meadowview Christian Church in February of 1970.”⁷⁷ Similarly, “Concerned parents in Crenshaw County founded Crenshaw Christian Academy as they had a vision to establish a school with a traditional, Christian education for their children.”⁷⁸

Such institutional histories are generally devoid of the historical context that would explain just what “concerned” so many parents in Alabama a half century ago, but Fort Dale Academy, in Greenville, Alabama, is slightly more expansive. It was founded, according to the school’s website:

By a group of concerned parents who desired to have their children educated in an environment which was consistent with Christian morals and ethics, and which would not promote social agendas at the expense of truth. These founding parents were dismayed at the curriculum offered by the government schools, which was designed to indoctrinate rather than to educate.⁷⁹

In the increasingly color-blind rhetoric of the private school movement, “socialistic” indoctrination by “government schools” stood in stark contrast to traditional Christian values.

A rising national emphasis on educational competition—meritocracy—also provided rhetorical cover for continued resistance to desegregation.⁸⁰ As Lassiter argues, “For many metropolitan voters

employees (former and then-current) of Warrior Academy, most of whom wished to remain anonymous.

⁷⁵Marlin Barton, email message to author, Feb. 27, 2007.

⁷⁶See Bagley, *Politics of White Rights*, 6.

⁷⁷“MCS History,” Meadowview Christian School, Selma, AL, <http://mcstrojans.org/mcs-history/>.

⁷⁸“Our History,” Crenshaw Christian Academy, Luverne, AL, <http://crenshawchristianacademy.com/about/our-history/>.

⁷⁹“Our History,” Fort Dale Academy, Greenville, AL, <https://www.fortdale.com/about-us/our-history.cfm>.

⁸⁰For an overview of meritocracy, particularly in the mid-twentieth century, see Nicholas Lemann, *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2000); and Joseph F. Kett, *Merit: The*

whom historians have labeled the ‘white moderates’ of the civil rights era, the middle-class belief in individual meritocracy was eclipsing the strict subscription to biological inferiority that underlay the political culture of white supremacy.”⁸¹ However, a closer look at Greene County reveals that the dividing line between metropolitan and rural is not so stark. There, Whites expressed both views: a lingering sense that Blacks were inherently inferior as well as a growing concern that their presence in schools, as students but especially as teachers, would inhibit Whites’ own ability to “get ahead” in an increasingly competitive “knowledge economy.” One teacher at Warrior was quoted as saying, “There’s so much low intelligence among the blacks.”⁸² But alumnus Willis McGee voiced a more meritocratic concern, recalling that the prospect of Black teachers was particularly concerning to White parents: “When you’re talking about folks who were educated in the forties and fifties in the black school system,” he said, “they probably *weren’t* up to par [emphasis in original].”⁸³ Even those less forthright than McGee implicitly acknowledged through their actions that separate schools had never been equal, and they would not run the risk of having a “subpar” teacher inhibit their own children’s futures. Of course, these parents refused to acknowledge this as the double-edged sword of White supremacy. When told that the time had finally come to lie in the bed they had been making for decades—if not centuries—Black Belt Whites recycled the notion of Black intellectual inferiority, now framed in the color-blind language of “meritocratic individualism.”⁸⁴

In the minds of many Whites, their decision to flee the public schools was not motivated by a personal animus toward Black people and could not therefore be categorized as racism. It was instead motivated by their “concerns” about providing a “quality education” for their children. Indeed, looking back on this period of growth in 1982, the director of the Alabama Private School Association suggested that “so-called white flight might have been white pursuit” of higher quality education.⁸⁵ “Color-blind” rhetoric offered a convenient mask for color-conscious thinking.

History of a Founding Ideal from the American Revolution to the Twenty-First Century (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

⁸¹ Lassiter, *Silent Majority*, 28.

⁸² “Journey Through Two Americas,” 30.

⁸³ McGee, interview.

⁸⁴ Lassiter, *Silent Majority*, 1. See also, Fuquay, “Civil Rights and the Private School Movement,” 170.

⁸⁵ US Commission on Civil Rights, *Fifteen Years Ago*, 4.

Over the years, the number of Whites attending Greene County's public schools continued to dwindle, and by 1976 one count placed the number of White students in the public school system at only thirty-two out of a total student population of more than 2,500.⁸⁶ Marlin Barton, who attended Warrior Academy from 1973 to 1980, remembered that at one point there were three White boys in the public school system whose father was a transplant "from up North and had ideas about integration that were different from the locals." He added, "I can't imagine what it would have been like to have been the only white kid there," but others had no trouble imagining what it would have been like.⁸⁷ Another Warrior Academy alumnus summed up White perceptions of the county's public schools, saying, "You couldn't have gone to the public school in Greene County." He described brutal violence and "a couple of gang rapes," saying, "It just wasn't any kind of environment that I would recommend, and I don't consider myself highly racist, but this was third-world."⁸⁸ Disclaimer notwithstanding, his memories reflected long-standing White southern fears of Black criminality and especially sexual predation. They are likely exaggerated (if not altogether untrue), but they are indicative of White perceptions of the public school system—perceptions that contributed to the continued decline of the White student population.

This decline had a marked effect on the public school system. Because the state based funding on such measures as average daily attendance, a decrease in student population simultaneously increased the per-pupil cost and decreased revenue.⁸⁹ Furthermore, Whites took great pains to oppose any increase in tax assessments. Not long after the special election in 1969, the *Greene County Democrat* reprinted an editorial from the *Alabama Farmer* that warned, "The black government can't soak 'whitey' with higher taxes. Until that too is changed, tax rates are established by a Tax Equalization Board appointed by the Governor, not elected. The county could even find itself collecting fewer tax dollars."⁹⁰

⁸⁶Minutes, Oct. 30, 1976, Greene County Board of Education. Those wishing to access local records should contact the Greene County Board of Education, 220 Main Street, Eutaw, AL 35462.

⁸⁷Marlin Barton, interview by author, Tuscaloosa, AL, Feb. 16, 2007; and Marlin Barton, e-mail message to author, Feb. 26, 2007.

⁸⁸Anonymous former student, interview. The alumnus's comments, coupled with his desire to remain anonymous, speaks to the continuing sense of racial division within the community as well as the tenuousness of claims to "color-blindness."

⁸⁹Jim Leeson, "Private Schools for Whites Face Some Hurdles," *Southern Education Report* 3 (Nov. 1967), 13; and US Commission on Civil Rights, *Fifteen Years Ago*, 5.

⁹⁰"Branch Head Bill Says," *Greene County (AL) Democrat*, Oct. 23, 1969, n.p.

The editorial revealed the long relationship between race and taxation in Alabama, dating back to the 1901 constitution. In the 1970s, legislators pushed through two amendments to the state constitution—purportedly the longest and most amended constitution in the world—that further limited the power of local governments to raise revenue.⁹¹ Capping the total revenue that could be collected on any particular property, these laws—nicknamed “lid bills”—had an especially pronounced effect on the Black Belt. Indeed, a 1983 report from the US Commission on Civil Rights stated that “The tax base in the [Black Belt] counties generally is ‘nonexistent.’” As a result, virtually all funding for schools came from outside sources, chief among them the federal government, which likely only exacerbated local Whites’ antigovernment outlook.⁹²

Meanwhile, the popularity of private schools had spread beyond their Black Belt origins. Beginning in the early 1960s, Roy Pearson, administrator of the Prince Edward School Foundation in Virginia, traveled the South to spread the gospel of private education, speaking to sizable crowds in cities like Atlanta. In turn, would-be school founders flocked to rural Prince Edward, with more than “six hundred delegations from Mississippi to Maryland visit[ing] the county from 1959 to 1970 to observe the schools.”⁹³

In the latter part of the decade, as the Supreme Court began to reassert itself in school desegregation cases, suburbanites—previously confident in their reliance on segregated housing patterns and the manipulation of school district lines—suddenly faced the reality that rural Whites had already confronted. Finding their “de facto” tools under attack, metropolitan Whites borrowed from the Black Belt toolkit. After a federal judge ordered integration in Charlotte in the spring of 1969, for example, Charlotte’s White community scrambled to open three new private schools in the metro area in the following two years, and already established schools took advantage of an influx of new students. Lassiter notes that “at least two thousand white students . . . switched to private schools in order to avoid two-way busing.”⁹⁴ On the heels of President Richard Nixon’s two recent appointments to the Supreme Court, suburban “moderates” anticipated a ruling that would render private education only a stopgap measure, but they

⁹¹ Regarding the length of Alabama’s state constitution, see Campbell Robertson, “Alabama Simmers Before Vote on Its Constitution’s Racist Language,” *New York Times*, Oct. 31, 2012, A15.

⁹² US Commission on Civil Rights, *Fifteen Years Ago*, 5. For more on the lid bills, see Bagley, *Politics of White Rights*, 209, 213–15, 223–25.

⁹³ Murrell, “‘Impossible’ Prince Edward Case,” 151.

⁹⁴ Lassiter, *Silent Majority*, 169.

were sorely disappointed when, in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, the court handed down a ruling upholding busing as a remedy.⁹⁵ Fifty years later, the three schools founded amid desegregation are among the largest in the Charlotte metro area, with a combined enrollment of more than four thousand students.⁹⁶

Unfortunately, historians have been slow to recognize these similarities between the Sunbelt and Black Belt “Souths.” Lassiter argues that in the quarter century following World War II, the politics of the metropolitan South diverged from those of the Black Belt, becoming more class-based and less racially oriented. Taking the suburbs as his focus, he finds an abiding concern for “quality education,” which manifested itself in support for ostensibly color-blind “freedom of choice” plans and “neighborhood schools.”⁹⁷ To present this as an exclusively metropolitan phenomenon, however, overstates the case and ignores the extent to which metropolitan Whites relied on the groundwork laid by their rural counterparts. Moreover, rural Whites were just as concerned with “quality education” as their suburban counterparts, and as Charles T. Clotfelter’s scholarship suggests, the greater reliance on segregation academies in the rural South is not explained by a substantive difference in preference for segregation but rather by a host of structural factors (coupled with an evolving legal landscape).⁹⁸ The real divergence between rural and metropolitan in the 1960s, as it concerns school segregation, was in the ability of metropolitan Whites to adapt their resistance following the defeat of “de jure” segregation. In the early 1970s, though, the rural and metropolitan Souths converged on private schooling as a means of continued resistance.⁹⁹

⁹⁵ *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, 402 U.S. 1 (1971).

⁹⁶ The three schools founded in the immediate wake of the court order are Charlotte Latin School and Providence Day School in Charlotte proper, and Cabarrus Academy (now known as Cannon School), located in suburban Concord. See Andrew Dunn and Brianna Crane, “16 Biggest Private Schools in Charlotte, Ranked by the Cost of Tuition,” *Charlotte (NC) Agenda*, Aug. 25, 2019, <https://www.charlotteagenda.com/16698/private-schools-in-charlotte-ranked-by-the-cost-of-tuition/>.

⁹⁷ Lassiter, *Silent Majority*, 6–14.

⁹⁸ Charles T. Clotfelter, “Private Schools, Segregation, and the Southern States,” *Peabody Journal of Education* 79, no. 2 (March 2004), 91–92; and Charles T. Clotfelter, *After Brown: The Rise and Retreat of School Desegregation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 115–16.

⁹⁹ Much recent scholarship on White southern resistance has responded to Lassiter’s call for a “metropolitan framework.” See Lassiter, *Silent Majority*, 6–9; and Lassiter, “Ten Propositions for the New Political History,” in *Shaped by the State: Toward a New Political History of the Twentieth Century*, ed. Brent Cebul, Lily Geisner, and Mason B. Williams (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 364. However, in addressing one historiographical blind spot, the “metropolitan

Two months after the court issued its ruling in *Swann*, a district court took aim (albeit indirectly) at the surging private school movement. In *Green v. Connally*, three federal judges ordered the “denial and elimination of Federal tax exemptions for racially discriminatory private schools and of Federal income tax deductions for contributions to such schools.”¹⁰⁰ According to one scholar, it was this case—not *Roe v. Wade*—that truly forged the religious right.¹⁰¹ In *Runyon v. McCrary*, the Supreme Court ruled that while parents have a right to send their children to private schools, “it does not follow that the practice of excluding racial minorities from such schools is also protected by the same principle.”¹⁰² Such decisions dealt a blow to the most explicitly racist private schools, but a shift to “color-blind” rhetoric offered a work-around. In the early 1980s, Ronald Reagan’s administration announced a rollback of the policy of restricting tax exemptions. According to a 1982 IRS document, “If a school has adopted and announced a racially nondiscriminatory admissions policy and has not taken any overt action to discriminate in admissions, the Service concludes that the school has a racially nondiscriminatory admissions policy.”¹⁰³ Reagan received bipartisan criticism for the move, but it was a gift to one of his core constituencies, designed to cement the southern White Christian vote for the Republican Party.¹⁰⁴

Private school leaders drew clear lessons from these government orders. When asked about the conspicuous absence of Black students during his time at Warrior Academy, a former headmaster conveniently forgot the motivations of the school’s founders and deployed “color-blind” rhetoric, saying:

I don’t think people looked at Warrior Academy as a school that was discriminatory by any means. . . . Yes, it was a private school. But we didn’t

turn” has created another and risks (to borrow a phrase from Lassiter) reducing rural communities to a mere “appendage” of the ascendant Sunbelt. As such, this essay calls for more careful attention to the reciprocal relationship between the rural South and the metropolitan South.

¹⁰⁰ *Green v. Connally*, 330 F. Supp. 1150 (D.D.C. 1971).

¹⁰¹ Randall Balmer, “The Real Origins of the Religious Right,” *Politico*, May 27, 2014, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/05/religious-right-real-origins-107133>.

¹⁰² *Runyon v. McCrary*, 427 U.S. 160 (1976). See also, Lesley Oelsner, “High Court Curbs Private Schools on Racial Barrier,” *New York Times*, June 26, 1976, 52.

¹⁰³ Internal Revenue Service, “Update on Private Schools” (Exempt Organizations—Continuing Professional Education, 1982), <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-tege/eotopic82.pdf>.

¹⁰⁴ Stuart Taylor Jr., “Ex-Tax Officials Assail Shift on School Exemption Status,” *New York Times*, Jan. 12, 1982, D23.

function like a private school. We were as open as we could be and provided the best education that we could with what we had.¹⁰⁵

He emphasized that during his tenure the application process was “equal opportunity.” He added that he spoke personally with members of other races on several occasions and encouraged them to apply, but “nobody ever did.”¹⁰⁶

Framing admissions in terms of “choice” was key. The former headmaster emphasized (White) parents’ desire for “choice” but admitted that Warrior “basically followed the same instruction, course of study, everything pretty much that you would [see] in any public school today. It’s very similar. Management, instructional, teaching, the curriculum, was all mirrored basically after the public educational system.” When pressed on why parents would choose to leave the public school system and pay tuition for a private school modeled so closely on it, he said, “Obviously they had some concerns with the quality of education being delivered . . . and that’s where I have to be careful what I say to you.”¹⁰⁷ In a community that sent clear signals about where Black people were and were not welcome, a “color-blind” admissions policy was not difficult to maintain, and no one had to explain what “quality education” actually meant.

As with many segregated academies, financial burdens eventually threatened to cripple Warrior Academy. The student population at Warrior began to decline amid the farm crisis of the 1980s, and by 2004 enrollment had dropped to the point that the school was on the verge of closing.¹⁰⁸ A Birmingham philanthropist stepped in to offer his organization’s support, with one stipulation: the school would have to be open to students of all races. According to the *Demopolis Times*, “The reaction by the parents was not what one would expect of a school started in the racially electrified years of the 60s. No parent’s face looked down at the floor, no parent’s face had a scowl, and no parent flinched.” Still exhibiting a “progressive mystique,” now tinged with Christian overtones, the newspaper reported that parents saw saving the school as more important than maintaining segregation. “They knew that people in this economically distressed area had to have a good education and a strong faith or they would face life with too

¹⁰⁵ Anonymous former headmaster, interview by author, Tuscaloosa, AL, Feb. 22, 2007.

¹⁰⁶ Anonymous former headmaster, interview.

¹⁰⁷ Anonymous former headmaster, interview. This evasive response, coupled with the interviewee’s desire to remain anonymous, suggests the flimsiness of the “color-blind” fiction.

¹⁰⁸ Anonymous former student, interview.

heavy a burden. Could it be that the time of racism has passed these parents in this community?”¹⁰⁹

Fifty years after the *Brown* decision, genuine desegregation finally came to Greene County, and by 2007, Warrior Academy reported a student body that was roughly fifty percent African American. As a staff member pointed out that year, though, overcoming the school’s segregationist past was no easy feat. “It’s going to be a struggle for us, for a while,” she said.¹¹⁰ Indeed, the school’s economic woes continued, and by 2011, posts on its Facebook page evinced a certain desperation, mixing reassuring Bible verses with promotion of the school as a “safe Christian environment” and unsubtle pleas for contributions. The penultimate post, in January 2012, reminded visitors: “Remember you can donate funds to our school at any time. We need your sincere prayers and financial support.”¹¹¹ Soon thereafter, the page went dormant. Today, Warrior Academy is defunct, and most of Greene County’s White students attend schools in neighboring counties.¹¹²

Education historian James D. Anderson observes that in the latter half of the nineteenth century, Blacks in Alabama experienced relative political equality, which they used to push for a more egalitarian vision of education—at least until conservative “Bourbon Democrats” rewrote the state constitution in 1901, rolling back Black gains made during the Reconstruction era. The new document aimed to

¹⁰⁹“One Group Discourages Warrior-WAP Merger Idea,” *Demopolis (AL) Times*, June 7, 2004, <https://www.demopolistimes.com/2004/06/07/one-group-discourages-warrior-wap-merger-idea/>, para. 8–9. See also, “Warrior Academy Finds Religion,” *Demopolis (AL) Times*, June 25, 2004, <https://www.demopolistimes.com/2004/06/25/warrior-academy-finds-religion/>.

¹¹⁰ Anonymous school employee, interview by author, Eutaw, AL, March 7, 2007.

¹¹¹ Tax forms associated with the school’s income tax exemption reveal an increasingly bleak financial picture. The school’s 2016 Form 990—the last available—reports total revenue of \$61,320 and total expenses of \$66,204. “Warrior Private School Foundation,” *Nonprofit Explorer (ProPublica)*, <https://projects.propublica.org/nonprofits/organizations/636052037>; Warrior Academy, “Are you a cheerful giver? Are you looking for good ground to sow?” and “Deer Hunt Fundraiser is Saturday,” Facebook, Jan. 12, 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/Private-School/Warrior-Academy-127557367282610/>. Targeting, as they do, parents who might have “concerns” about the safety of public schools, such posts offer further evidence of the “color-blind” rhetoric by which private schools have promoted themselves.

¹¹² Details about Warrior Academy’s closing are hard to come by. The school’s Facebook page has seen no activity since 2012, and its phone number is disconnected. A representative from the *Greene County (AL) Independent*, a competing newspaper founded by Whites in the 1980s, confirmed that Warrior Academy closed and that most White students in the county now attend private schools in Tuscaloosa or Greensboro, or public schools in Demopolis in Marengo County, which allows non-resident enrollment. Sharon Trammell, electronic message to author, June 19, 2020.

undermine Black political power, reestablish control over the traditional labor force, and resist property taxation. Educational equality fell by the wayside. According to Anderson, “The traditional Black Belt counties of Alabama provide an excellent historical case study to illustrate the [post-Civil War] relationship between equal political power and the pursuit of educational equality.”¹¹³

The same could be said for the post-*Brown* era. If disenfranchisement was the linchpin of “separate and unequal” schooling, as Anderson argues, one might expect re-enfranchisement to have enabled integrated and equal schooling. The story of Greene County, however, makes clear the tenacious adaptability of White supremacy. Following passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, Blacks there took advantage of their majority status to assume control of local politics and promote their own educational agenda. As with their forebears, however, the White minority took deliberate steps to impede and even reverse those gains.

As a case study, Warrior Academy thus illustrates a historical paradox, conforming to a long-standing pattern while at the same time marking a significant historical change. By 1970, official power in Greene County was almost entirely in Black hands, backed—as during Reconstruction—by the federal government. This time, however, Whites responded not by aggressively reclaiming control of public institutions, but by strategically abandoning them.¹¹⁴ Mobilizing the many forms of capital they had accumulated over centuries, largely at the expense of Blacks, Whites created new private institutions beyond the reach of government “meddling.” In the midst of Black political ascendance, the legally sanctioned dual school system gave way to private segregation, and with it the overtly racist language of massive resistance gave way to “color-blind” rejection of governmental authority.

On the eve of its fortieth anniversary, journalist Jason Zengerle assessed the long-term impact of the Voting Rights Act in the South. While noting the increase in African American elected officials, he asserted that the degree of power actually held by those politicians was in drastic decline. In Alabama, especially, he observed a stark racialization of the two major political parties, concluding that “At the state

¹¹³James D. Anderson, “A Long Shadow: The American Pursuit of Political Justice and Education Equality,” *Educational Researcher* 44, no. 6 (Aug./Sept. 2015), 319–29.

¹¹⁴Crespino wrote about “strategic accommodations” by Whites. See Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 9. I argue that not only did they “accommodate” Blacks in certain respects, they largely *abandoned* civic institutions where they could not maintain control.

level, Republicans can continue to win by catering exclusively to white voters.”¹¹⁵ In short, recognizing that their days of unencumbered control of the Black Belt had passed, White conservatives did not end their resistance; they merely ceded the field to African Americans in majority-Black counties and districts and set themselves to the task of constructing a new regime on political ground where they *could* exercise control.

This long-term project culminated in the 2013 passage of the Alabama Accountability Act, which Republicans wrote in secret and “slammed through” in a surprise party-line vote over vehement Democratic protest.¹¹⁶ The bill harkened back to the Wallace era by offering “scholarships” (tax credits) to students who transfer from public to private schools, but it differed in that it followed not a racial logic but a color-blind, meritocratic one. By establishing a rubric to label certain public schools as “failing,” it promised a “way out” to students stuck in moribund “government schools.” One Democratic legislator called it the “worst thing that has ever hit public education,” but supporters of the “school choice” movement offered glowing praise. Michelle Rhee, former chancellor of the Washington, DC, public schools and nationally prominent education reformer, weighed in, commending the legislature “for taking an historic first step toward providing families with children trapped in failing schools options for the first time.” Of course, Rhee’s comment ignores the long history of private “options” for the White children of Alabama.¹¹⁷

A 2018 *Montgomery Advertiser* report found that “of the 4,132 children who received a scholarship in 2016” under the provisions of the law, only “983 were zoned to attend one of the state’s 76 failing schools, a rate of about 24 percent.” The article quoted a Department of Revenue spokesperson as saying that scholarship-granting organizations “attest to the fact” that they give scholarship preference to students from failing schools, but “how they do it and how strongly they try to do it” is not always clear. His vague language suggests that whatever the text of the law, the reality is that private schools

¹¹⁵Jason Zengerle, “The New Racism: This Is How the Civil Rights Movement Ends,” *New Republic*, Aug. 25, 2014, 12–21.

¹¹⁶Kim Chandler, “Republicans in Bombshell Move Push Through Bill Giving Tax Credits for Kids at ‘Failing’ Schools to Go to Private Schools,” *AL.com*, Feb. 28, 2013, https://www.al.com/wire/2013/02/republicans_push_through_bill.html, para. 1.

¹¹⁷Kim Chandler, “From ‘Historic’ to ‘Sleaziness’: Reaction to the School Choice Bill and How It Was Approved,” *AL.com*, March 1, 2013, https://www.al.com/wire/2013/02/from_historic_to_sleaziness_re.html, para. 3 and 6. See also Ansley T. Erickson, “The Rhetoric of Choice: Segregation, Desegregation, and Charter Schools,” *Dissent* 58, no. 4 (Fall 2011), 41–46.

retain significant leeway in their admissions.¹¹⁸ In November 2019, Alabama released its annual list of failing schools, which included Greene County's public high school and middle school as well as at least one school from most Black Belt counties. In tandem with the lid bills, which deprive rural counties of much-needed tax revenue, the Alabama Accountability Act labels their schools as failing. This law, in turn, offers partial state subsidies to many affluent families *already* enrolled in private schools, many of which were founded in direct response to desegregation and remained segregated until very recently. And it does this all while rhetorically championing "color-blind" meritocracy and equal educational opportunity.¹¹⁹

Considering Alabama's deep and historic wellspring of support for "school choice," it is perplexing that the state has only a handful of charter schools, although charter activity appears to be on the rise.¹²⁰ In 2018, Sumter County attracted national media attention when it opened University Charter School. Hailed as the "first integrated school in Sumter County," University Charter undoubtedly benefited from the 2017 closure of Sumter Academy. Indeed, the Sumter Academy administration had viewed the possibility of a charter school as a mortal threat and had unsuccessfully lobbied against it. Although it falls beyond the scope of this essay, the relationship between Alabama's private schools and its relative dearth of charters deserves further exploration. At first glance, it appears that charters offer a new mechanism for Whites to retain at least partial control of education policy—including the racial makeup of student populations—even in communities where they are in the minority. On its opening day, University Charter's student body was "just under half" White in a county where Blacks make up 76 percent of

¹¹⁸Krista Johnson, "Reality vs. Intent: Alabama Accountability Act Serves Mostly Students from Nonfailing Schools," *Montgomery Advertiser*, Aug. 3, 2018, <https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/education/2018/08/03/reality-vs-intent-alabama-accountability-act-serves-mostly-students-non-failing-schools/727038002/>, para. 6 and 10. See also, Matthew D. Lassiter, "De Jure/De Facto Segregation: The Long Shadow of a National Myth," in *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, ed. Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 25–48.

¹¹⁹Trisha Powell Crain, "Here's the New List of 'Failing' Schools in Alabama," *AL.com*, Nov. 1, 2019, <https://www.al.com/news/2019/11/heres-the-new-list-of-failing-schools-in-alabama.html>. See also, Challen Stephens, "Four Decades Later, Alabama Poised to Subsidize Private Schools Built to Resist Desegregation," *AL.com*, April 1, 2013, https://www.al.com/wire/2013/04/in_the_black_belt_nowhere_to_r.html; and Bagley, *Politics of White Rights*, 7, 219–23.

¹²⁰The Alabama Education Association has long opposed charter schools in the state but has seen its influence wane since the historic sweep of state government by Republicans in 2010.

the population. Furthermore, judging from the photographs on the school's website—an admittedly problematic approach—Whites appear to hold a five-to-three majority on the school's eight-person board. With segregation academies struggling to stay afloat, especially in impoverished rural communities, charter schools appear poised to rise in their place when they fold. Although no charter school has opened in Greene County as of this writing, Greene is one of only five school districts in the state authorized to approve charters.¹²¹

This turn of events suggests that Greene County may have still more to teach us about the racial politics of education in Alabama and beyond. Contemporary debates over education reform seem to take for granted that public schools are failing. The premise is debatable, but depending on the metrics one chooses, that argument is not a difficult one to make. However, it is important to step back and reflect critically: Who has defined the terms of this debate? If public schools are in fact failing, then who is to blame for this state of affairs? How did we get here? If one considers the aforementioned statistics as measures of school success, it would be difficult to argue that Greene County's public schools have significantly benefited the community over the last four decades. This may explain why almost no White families—those most likely to have other options—choose to enroll in them. And if White people have little to no hand in the public schools, then by implication, the blame for their failure must rest squarely on the people of color who inhabit them: the students, teachers, administrators, and school board members. After all, if the civil rights movement was a success (as it appeared to be in Greene County), who else *could* be to blame? But this line of thinking ignores the fact that Whites deliberately hollowed out public institutions and further fractured civic life. The simplistic progress narrative enables those who chose to abandon now-struggling schools to avoid accepting responsibility for their own actions.

The most familiar images of school desegregation include young Ruby Bridges and Elizabeth Eckford stoically confronting hostile White mobs in New Orleans and Little Rock, respectively, but the

¹²¹ Trisha Powell Crain, "Alabama Charter School Commission Remade, Here's Their Track Record So Far," *AL.com*, Nov. 1, 2019, <https://www.al.com/news/2019/08/alabama-charter-school-commission-remade-heres-their-track-record-so-far.html>; Sherrel Wheeler Stewart, "In a Segregated County, a New Charter School Offers an Alternative," NPR, Aug. 23, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/08/21/640437944/charter-school-aims-to-diversify-sumter-county-alabama>; Trisha Powell Crain, "Rural Alabama Charter Opens as First Integrated School in Sumter County," *AL.com*, Aug. 13, 2018, https://www.al.com/news/2018/08/charter_school_opens_doors_as.html; and "Our Board," University Charter School, Livingston, AL, <http://www.universitycharterschool.org/#section-1208>.

most *enduring* aspects of school desegregation—the ones that remain with us today—are those supposedly “moderate” solutions that preserved White supremacy in education for decades after *Brown*. Although correlation does not necessarily prove causation, it is striking that the national push for education reform—which has done much to label some schools as “failing” and wrest control of education policy from the hands of those local officials most accountable to families—followed closely on the heels of significant Black political gains. Because of their demographics, Black Belt communities like Greene County were at the vanguard of this seismic shift, and the stories of such communities reveal much about the resilience of White supremacy in the post-Jim Crow era. As the site of hard-won victories in the late 1960s, a long view of Greene County should lead us not to celebrate but to ask why a half century of civil rights progress has produced so little change.