Book Review

Jill Ogline Titus. *Brown's Battleground: Students, Segregationists, & the Struggle for Justice in Prince Edward County, Virginia*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012. 279 pp. $34.95.

The scholarly examination of education and the civil rights movement has gained momentum over the past decade and is becoming a focal point in American educational and civil rights historiography. Jill Ogline Titus' *Brown's Battleground: Students, Segregationists, & the Struggle for Justice in Prince Edward County, Virginia* is a welcome contribution. Growing up in South Carolina during the civil rights movement and the post-civil rights era, I often heard about the civil rights battles over education in my hometown of Rock Hill; in nearby Charlotte, North Carolina; and throughout the Southern states of Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama. However, although Richmond was the capital of the Confederacy, Virginia was often viewed as a place of gentility, tranquility, and Southern civility—a place unscathed by the battles of the civil rights movement. For many non-Virginians like me, it appeared that Virginia was absent from the movement. Years later I would learn otherwise.

Titus does an excellent job of framing her study by painting a vivid picture of how civic leaders exploited Virginia's tranquil image, creating the perception of a peaceful, idyllic state in which the races coexisted harmoniously. Early in the book, she introduces us to a Machiavellian plan outlined by Virginia politicians called the "Virginia Way." The Virginia Way entailed politicians' avoidance of any appearance of racial conflict. Titus notes, for example, that newspapers rarely printed stories of black discontent and that local officials removed the Jim Crow "white" and "colored" signs when Freedom Riders came to Virginia in 1961. She also references her interview with Virginia native and sociologist Edward Harden Peeples Jr., who noted that during his lifetime Virginia had a "dignified way to be racist."

Titus offers a view of the socio-political environment of Farmville, Virginia, where the struggle for desegregation would take place. Farmville, in 1951, was controlled by white elites. According to Titus, whites "controlled the banks, the businesses, and the schools, as their fathers before them. Raised on the principle of separate and unequal, they reserved the best jobs and schools for whites, congratulating

themselves for their generosity in laying aside leftovers for blacks."[1] Despite their situation, the blacks in Farmville had a cohesive community. Titus' account of a deeply segregated Farmville builds on the description of Farmville provided by W. E. B. Du Bois in his 1898 study, "The Negroes of Farmville, Virginia." Like Titus, Du Bois also observed that although blacks lived in a segregated community, their insularity helped them build a close-knit economic and social structure that provided for a "community within a community."

Like many other Southern states during the civil rights era, Virginia had a political machine that maintained racial apartheid through subterfuge and the outright closing of schools. The legendary Harry Flood Byrd Sr., who served as governor of Virginia from 1926 to 1930 and a U.S. senator from 1933 to 1965, headed Virginia's political machine. Byrd's long tenure in the highest echelons of Virginia politics allowed him to put his imprint on the state, perhaps more than any other Virginia politician since Thomas Jefferson.

Titus argues that Byrd was able to maintain class and racial hierarchies by keeping wages and taxes low. Such an agenda, of course, played well with white elites. Hardest hit by the Byrd agenda were African Americans, who disproportionately comprised the low-wage workforce. Their second-class status was further solidified when the state maneuvered around its own compulsory education laws to avoid allocating more funds to the education of black citizens.

Titus' narrative begins with the story of the student rebellion on April 23, 1951, when students at Farmville's Robert Russa Moton High School demanded better facilities, an expanded curriculum, and greater commitment to the education of black students in Prince Edward County. The upheaval lasted two weeks and involved four hundred fifty students. The rebellion was led by Barbara Johns, niece of legendary civil rights activist Vernon Johns, who served as minister of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama before Martin Luther King, Jr. Barbara Johns, a hero in her own right for leading the protests, represents the many courageous student activists who initiated activism and encouraged the older generation to support the new youth movement.

Johns and other students eventually joined forces with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to advocate for school desegregation in Prince Edward County. The Prince Edward County case, *Davis v. County School Board*, became one

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[1]Jill Ogline Titus, *Brown's Battleground: Students, Segregationists, & Struggle for Justice in Prince Edward County, Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 1.

of the five cases comprising *Brown v. Board Education*. In an effort to forestall desegregation, the Prince Edward County School Board built a new school for blacks by 1953. Refusing to adhere to *Brown v. Board of Education*, Prince Edward County closed its school system from 1959 to 1964. The closure resulted in the establishment of Prince Edward Academy, an all-white school supported by tax credits from the county and tuition grants from the states, which became the prototype for segregated academies throughout the South. According to Titus, the Academy became a major point of contention between blacks and whites in Prince Edward County. Such academies were used as tools of "massive resistance" to prevent the desegregation of public schools.

Titus notes that in an effort to continue their children's education after the school system closed, black Farmville residents sent their children to other school districts, counties, or even states to attend school. For instance, the Emergency Placement Program sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) matched Prince Edward County students with boarding schools and host families so they could attend school in the North. Similarly, the Virginia Teachers Association (VTA) sponsored the Prince Edward County Pupil Relocation Projectthat encouraged Virginia residents to house students so they could attend school in other school districts throughout the state. These considerable efforts to relocate the children highlight the community's and parents' strong commitment to furthering their children's education.

Titus introduces us to a variety of groups and individuals whose involvement adds complexity to her story. The organizations include the Moton Parent Teachers Association (PTA), the Prince Edward Country Christian Association (PECCA), the Virginia Christian Leadership Conference (VCLC), the VTA, the Summer Educational College Project (SCEP), the AFSC, and the NAACP. While all were committed to educating black children and they shared some common strategies, each organization also had its own tactics for bringing about desegregation. Likewise, individuals such as legendary NAACP attorney Oliver Hill, Southern Christian Leadership Conference tactician Wyatt T. Walker, AFSC member and activist Jean Fairfax, and local white PECCA activist Reverend Leslie Francis Griffith comprise a fascinating cast of characters whose personalities and approaches reveal the realities of the movement. Titus' narrative masterfully weaves together the stories and activism of these varied organizations and individuals.

Throughout the book, Titus focuses not only on desegregation and its aftermath, but also on the many other issues influencing life in Prince Edward County. For instance, Titus illustrates the ongoing struggle for black education in her discussion of a student strike held at Moton in 1969. The students were protesting the firing of a popular

teacher, T. Burwell Robinson Jr.; the absence of blacks on the school board; and the actions of an unpopular superintendent, among other issues. The situation would eventually improve with the dismissal of the superintendent, the appointment of two blacks to the school board, and the school board's commitment to improve the education provided to black students.

Titus does not present a linear narrative of school desegregation in Prince Edward County. Instead, she paints a complex picture of the politics, relationships, and reality of the time to tell an intriguing and inspiring story. Yet, the story of Prince Edward County represents a critical story within the larger civil rights movement that has long needed to be told. Titus' study contributes significantly to building a solid foundation for the future study of education and civil rights in Virginia and provides a much-needed examination of the movement in the home of the former Confederacy. Thoroughly researched, well-written, and articulately argued, *Brown's Battleground* is a must-read in educational and civil rights historiography.

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