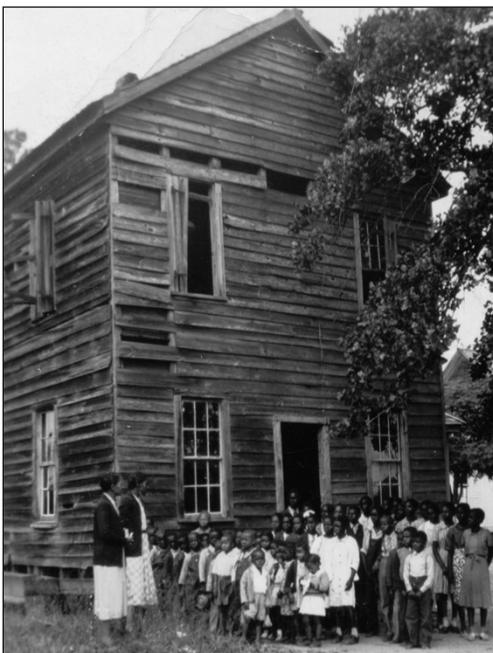


“If They’d Given Us A Bus ...”

By Tom Hanchett, Levine Museum of the New South

May 17, 2014 marked the 60th anniversary of the landmark Supreme Court decision that banned racial segregation in America’s public schools.



Spring Hill School in Clarendon County, about 1940. Courtesy of Levine Museum of the New South

Sixty years ago on May 17, 1954 the landmark case *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, started when a brave group of farmers in Clarendon County, South Carolina asked for a school bus so their children would not have to walk.

Clarendon County located between Columbia and the coast was very rural and very poor. Blacks outnumbered whites 22,830 to 9,385, but the whites held the power. Most black families were tenant farmers, growing their cotton and tobacco on white-owned land. Cousins Levi and Hammett Pearson wanted something changed. White children had school buses, 30 of them. But the county provided not one single bus for black children. To Hammett

this was especially galling because he had just returned from fighting in World War II to save Europe for democracy. When he mustered out, he had vowed to do whatever he could to bring democracy to his native South. In 1947, Hammett, Levi and a group of neighbors decided to tackle the bus situation, swearing to persist until justice was won.

Levi Pearson filed a lawsuit. His neighbors already regarded him as a remarkable man, someone with no formal education who nonetheless had escaped the trap of tenant farming and owned his own farm. Pearson was determined that his children get the education he had been denied. His house stood nine miles from the nearest black high school, and young Daisy, James and Eloise Pearson had to walk that distance unless a horse could be spared from farm work. The Pearsons and neighbors had tried pooling their own dollars to buy a used bus, but it had broken down beyond repair. So now in 1947, with the help of local minister Rev. J.A. De Laine and NAACP lawyer Harold Boulware from Columbia, SC, “Mr. Levi” filed suit against Clarendon County demanding school bus transportation for his children and those of his neighbors.

It was a courageous request. And it failed utterly. Pearson’s house stood close to the school district line; the court declared he had filed suit in the wrong district and threw the case out.

Whites also made sure Levi Pearson paid a stiff price. “When he went for a loan to buy fertilizer for spring planting, he found his credit cut off at every white-owned store and bank in the county,” Rev. De Laine’s daughter Ophelia recalls. “When he cut timber to sell for cash to buy fertilizer, the truck driver refused to carry the logs away.”

That should have squashed the rebellion. But it did not. “[P]eople were beginning to dream of schools where their children were provided with transportation, books, equipment and buildings like those enjoyed by the white children,” Ophelia De Laine says. “As their dreams expanded, so did their determination.”

Another neighbor put it more simply: “There was a fire here that no water gonna put out.”

Rev. De Laine and his neighbors worked with attorney Boulware to bring in famed NAACP lawyer Thurgood Marshall. In 1949 Marshall drew up a petition, signed by 107 Clarendon County residents, seeking complete equality in the county’s schools. Marshall added four more lawsuits. In 1951, the cases bundled together and named *Brown v. Board of Education* began to move toward the Supreme Court.

On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled on *Brown*, outlawing racial segregation in American public education.

“It all started over a bus,” one Clarendon County resident mused years later. “If the white folk had given us a bus, we’d probably still be in segregation.”

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Based on the traveling exhibition *Courage: The Vision to End Segregation, the Guts to Fight for It*, created by Levine Museum of the New South, Charlotte, N.C. www.museumofthenewsouth.org

Provided by the NC Press Foundation, Newspapers in Education

Draw conclusions: The failure to provide a school bus sparked the Clarendon County lawsuit, *Briggs v Elliott*, one of five cases that

were bundled together into *Brown v Board of Education*.

In the print or digital edition of a newspaper, identify key events, their causes and effects. Identify the most significant. What will be its lasting impact?



Harry and Eliza Briggs, shown in this photo, were the first names on the lawsuit; Elliott was a local businessman and the school board chairman. The full name of the case was *Harry Briggs, Jr. et al. v. R.W. Elliott, chairman, et al.* Courtesy of Levine Museum of the New South

CHARLESTON—A statue of Judge Julius Waties Waring was unveiled in a park behind the federal courthouse in Charleston on April 11, 2014. Judge Waring served on a three-judge panel that heard the *Briggs v Elliott* case brought by the Clarendon County residents, calling for equal educational opportunity. In a dissenting opinion, offered in 1951 Waring held, “Segregation is per se inequality.” www.watieswaring.org