

A Brief History of the Fight for School Desegregation in Sarasota

Content Warning: This document contains quotations from period sources that use racist language.

This account consists entirely of excerpts from Newtown Historic District Final Report by Vickie Oldham, et al.

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School Desegregation

For three years after the Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954, schools remained segregated in Sarasota. The NAACP asked the Sarasota County School Board to voluntarily desegregate in 1957. After the Board's persistent refusal to do so over the next few years, the NAACP filed a desegregation lawsuit in Federal Court in 1961. In the 1962-63 school year, the first African-American students were enrolled in previously all white Sarasota Schools.

Part of the objection to school desegregation had nothing to do with the quality of education; it had more to do with the concern over "race-mixing."

John Rivers, President of the local chapter of the NAACP and a leader in the Civil Rights Movement stated:

...You know, when we integrated the school...that was a little more hassle, because going to school,

there are a lot of people who couldn't understand why we wanted to go, our children to go, to an all-white school. I said, "Well, why do white people want to go to an all-white school?" You know, I said, "That don't make sense." And some of the people were serious, good people, you know, but they were saying, "We don't want that to happen because your boys will be going to school there and the girls and all, mingling and all." I said, "But they're doing that anyway" ...**"They are going to be people, white girls and black boys, and black girls and white guys. People are going to be people."** I said, "As long as they are having fun together...[getting] to know each other." So, **I then organized a group that, and had a dance on Saturday night for them, white and black. All came up.** Boy, that stirred up a whole different thing...Some black people were against that, you know. But, nevertheless, we kept it up for a while.

The school desegregation order divided Newtown into four districts and closed the Newtown community's schools. The first school that became integrated was Bay Haven Elementary. Dr. Harriet Moore, who later became a school principal, attended Bay Haven and recalled her experiences there:

I think that people were not adequately prepared for integration. I think that the law came and people said, "Okay we got to integrate so we're going to draw a line, we're going to take kids from here, we're going to take kids from here, and we're going to send them to those schools." The teachers and the students who were already in those schools were not prepared to receive African American students, nor did they know the truth about African American people. They had perceptions of African Americans as not so bright, ignorant, and what they were seeing on television. And in the '60s, what were they seeing on television that's representative of African American people? It certainly wasn't the people who were leaders in our nation. It was kind of 'Steppin Fetch It,' and prostitutes and that kind of thing. That's all they knew, what they saw on television. The media was not painting us in a great light so they didn't know anything about us except what they read. So they were afraid and they had misperceptions and misconceptions of us.

So now you've got the other side: the African

American children, who were now being bussed out in these communities with people who did not want them there, who also had real experiences with Caucasian people. For example, you couldn't go to the front doors for service; they had the right to refuse service to you. And they did in this community. And so that was real for us and now you want us to go to their schools? And then you want us to teach those kids? And so this is what we were thrust into. So was there an impact? Absolutely. Those people didn't want to teach African American children and African American children [didn't want] to be in those schools and be taught by them. Not because of hatred so much, but because, I believe, of misconceptions about who people are. And so they went from a community of teachers who looked like them, who understood the importance of education, even with inferior materials to teach them, who went above and beyond to make sure that they knew not only reading, writing, and arithmetic but life struggles and stories, and how to survive in this world given the injustices that existed for us as a people.

Booker Schools Closed

In 1964, Roland Rogers, who had been Principal of Booker through twenty years of progress and change, was appointed to the administrative staff of the County schools. By 1965, the U.S. Government had tied federal dollars to compliance with the 1964 Civil



Rights Act and ordered all schools to integrate. The Sarasota County School Board came up with a plan to comply. Consistent with most school districts' approaches in the South, especially, they closed the black schools and bussed black students to previously all white schools.

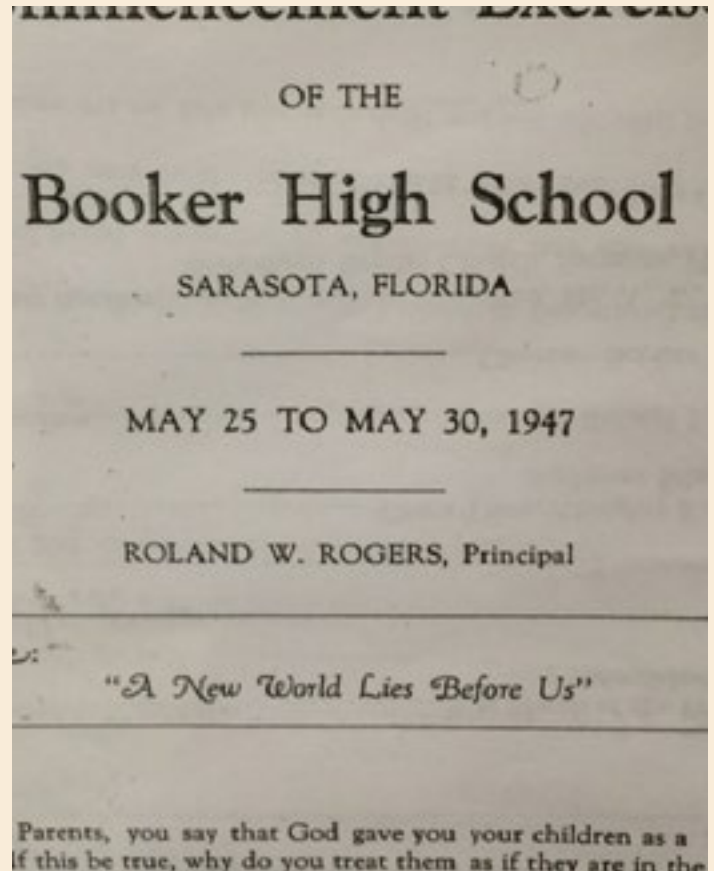
Rev. Jerome Dupree was the principal of Booker High School from 1964-1966, succeeding Roland Rogers. His position was eliminated in 1967 when the Sarasota schools became desegregated and Booker High School was closed. In 1968, Booker Junior High School's closure followed. These school closures caused a major rupture in the fabric of the Newtown community.

In this excerpt from a 2013 interview in the Herald Tribune, former principal Dupree stated that, "We felt we were being hijacked." Rev. Jerome Dupree [had been] the valedictorian of the Booker High School class of 1953. "Of all the schools in the county, and Booker being among the oldest, why would they close our school? That was a slap in the face in our community."

Rivers explained some of the problems encountered when the schools became integrated:

When they went on to integrate the schools, we had some problems right off... Because we talked about closing out the school here and then transporting the kids... So, with that we, I, decided, at that time, to call a boycott of the school system...The schools were receiving their funds based on attendance. And, therefore, they just decided that they didn't want that [the boycott] to work...So they sent the principal, assistant principal of Sarasota [High School] out here to talk to me. He said, "John, you are going to get your brain beat out, you know. You don't know what you are getting into." So, I just said, "Well, if anyone get close enough to beat my brains out, he's close enough to me to beat somebody's brains out, and that's exactly what will happen if you try to do something to me."

So, we called the boycott on a Sunday afternoon. Monday morning we had ninety-five percent of our students out of school. And we had organized the churches to open cafeterias, classrooms and everything in the churches out there. So, the kids



were going to school and happy with it. A lot of New College students...teachers and assistants... So, everything was just working in our favor, ... And it did work. It did work, you know.

School Boycott

On May 5, 1969, a total of 2,353 African-American students (85% of the County's African-American students) boycotted the Sarasota County public schools in protest over the proposed closing of Amaryllis Elementary School and the unfair way that the schools had been integrated.³⁴ Even though a child might live directly across the street from Booker campus, she or he had to be bussed to an all-white school across town, a long distance from home, lifelong friends, and teachers who cared about them. John Rivers and the families were concerned about the children's safety, traveling so far away from home.

...It was tough...because here's this little old six-year-old getting up four [o'clock] in the morning to get a bus and ride twenty miles away to get to school. That was tough, and disgraceful really, and rude."



During the boycott, Newtown students attended “Freedom Schools” hastily set up in local churches and taught by New College and high school students. (See “When Newtown Walked Out” by, Gabrielle Russon, <http://newtown100.heraldtribune.com/freedom-schools/>)

As Susan Burns explains in “The Boycott.” Sarasota, June 1999, “for some of the participants, the boycott was a pivotal moment, the kind of defining event that shapes one’s character and leaves a mark that lasts a lifetime. Of one fact there is no doubt: If the boycott of 1969 hadn’t happened, Sarasota’s Booker schools – Booker Elementary, Booker Middle and Booker High School – would not exist today. It was believed that the reestablishment of the schools within the community was a critical step in reclaiming community identity. Things did not turn out the way many expected, however. The Booker High School that reopened was unrecognizable from the one that closed.

Integration: A One-Way Process

Originally, the African American community supported bussing as a step forward. Eventually,

however, many felt that closing the schools had destroyed community pride and identity. In William Allan Byrd’s “A Survey And Analysis of School Problems Associated with the Desegregation of Florida High Schools—1962-1966” he confirmed that the relocation of students was a one-way process:

One of the primary indicators of community pressure, especially pressure from the white community, was the process of achieving desegregation by transferring black students to previously all-white schools. **There did not exist a single instance in which white youngsters were transferred to an all-Negro school.**

The adjustment from a school where you knew everyone, where you knew your teachers well, where you were valued and expected to succeed, to one where you were in what seemed like a parallel universe was too much for many students.

Another principal and a student demonstrated outright racism by his response. As Byrd notes:

There was evidence of extreme racial prejudice and outright hostility expressed by students

and teachers statewide. A teacher in a north Florida school, proposing to speak for his fellow teachers, stated, “that niggers have a right to a white education but must be willing to stay in their proper place.” A student...remarked that, “we should make their life so miserable that they won’t stay here.” Evidently such an attitude had been successful since four of the nine Negro students who chose to attend the white school had returned to their all-Negro school.

Unfortunately, the Newtown students did not have the option of returning to Booker High School. It had been closed. In addition, they no longer had their supportive group of teachers to promote their learning and bolster their self-worth.

According to Dr. Louis Robison, a Booker High School alumnus, a former principal in the Sarasota Schools, and an Administrator in the Manatee County schools,

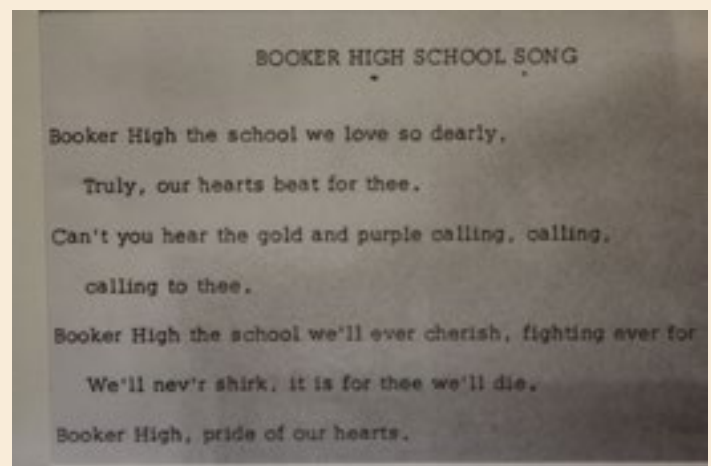
The first year of desegregation was traumatic not only for students but for the teachers as well. While I can’t remember all the teachers that ended up being transferred, I remember [several]. In many cases these teachers saw their earlier positions from Booker minimized; they were put into assistant coaching jobs from previously head coaching positions or given music teaching positions from previously-held band leader positions. Adding insult to injury was the Teacher Strike of 1968 in Florida. Making the adjustment to new teachers was difficult at best, but right on the heels of that adjustment came the strike. Some teachers walked out of Riverview and Sarasota High Schools...When this happened, they lost their jobs, adding more turmoil to the already difficult transition for Black students.

1970 - VPA

In 2003, Donald F. Rainone, a doctoral student in the College of Education at the University of South Florida (USF), published his dissertation entitled: “The Role of the Sarasota Visual Performing Arts (VPA) Magnet in Desegregation and Resegregation of Booker Neighborhood Schools.” He examined the role the VPA magnet program played in the effort to equalize educational opportunity for black students at the Booker schools and its effect on black community life in the Newtown area of Sarasota,

Florida...[and he explored] the dilemma facing black families and communities, namely, whether it is desirable, under present day circumstances, to embrace a return to all-black neighborhood schools.

Rainone was in his words an “active participant in the events under study for 20 of the 35 years in the period being researched;” he had been a teacher, head football coach, athletic director, business manager and Director of the Sarasota Visual Performing Arts magnet program at the Booker High School. His study presents a vivid outline of events and actors that were intricately involved in the process of school desegregation in Sarasota. Rainone vividly describes the effects on the Newtown community during the reopening of Booker High School as a magnet school. This new status brought both welcome changes and tough challenges to the school and to the Newtown community as well.



Paved roads brought relief to Newtown students who, before white students were bussed into Newtown to attend the magnet school, had to wait until it stopped raining to go to school in order to avoid having to wade through the mud, as Fredd Atkins told Rainone.

We would have to wait until the water receded. It was like a swamp or a moat all around the school. The buses had to wait also. Or man, they'd get stuck" (p.199) Another of his interviewees stated: "Oh, I see, the old Booker with raggedy textbooks, falling-apart buildings, muddy roads, was just fine for us black-folk. But as soon as your white folk move on, oh well, there goes the neighborhood, all right. We had to pretty-up for you guys, or else – or else we feared we would

close down again” (p.212).

The way that Jerry Strickland, principal of newly reopened Booker High School, believed that he could “save the Booker campus” (p.205) was to ensure the enrollment of many whites students who would be drawn to the magnet school to take advantage of the special curriculum and programs that the Visual and Performing Arts school offered. **While Newtown residents were happy that the school reopened in September 1970, it came with a price. The school had few African American teachers and administrators and a majority white student population.** Fearing that to protest the situation would mean that the school would once again close, one resident said that: “ We all felt like we could not let that happen. So, we sucked it up and went along to get along – right or wrong. Why is it that it is always we, the black folk, who compromise, give in? We only want a small piece. Just a taste. It’s you folks who want to eat the whole darn pie.”

Based upon the data he collected, Rainone concluded that:

Once the black Booker neighborhood schools were closed, the white power structure comprised of administrators, School Board members, teachers, and influential citizens assumed the management of a reopened Booker Campus, created an array of special programs and

set racial quotas, at once integrating the Booker Campus and alienating, by lack of meaningful black inclusion, the Newtown community.

Though significant physical changes that included the removal of barbed wire fences, paving of dirt roads, and the release from Federal Court control were achieved, white control was institutionalized on the Booker Campus. Desegregation effects including busing and the magnet program produced a present-day fractious community, unable to coordinate a unified movement to demand and receive an alternative to the results of years of white rule on the Booker Campus.

When it reopened, Booker High School was no longer an all-black, community school; in fact it was a majority white school. Rainone confirmed this in his 2003 dissertation; “Booker High School has a white population of 62% and a black population of 25%” Principal Dr. Rachel Shelley reports that: “The school population statistics have changed significantly since that time. In 2015, under the leadership of Principal Dr. Rachel Shelley, the 1,163-student population consists of approximately 1/3 African American, 1/3 Latino, and 1/3 white students.

The Freedom Schools Detailed Account

For a detailed account of the boycott of 1969 and the Freedom Schools, make sure you read this excellent article, available online and as a PDF in the shared drive:

“When Newtown walked out,” by Gabrielle Russon, Sarasota Herald-Tribune/ Friday, April 18, 2014. <http://newtown100.heraldtribune.com/freedom-schools/>



Resources and Additional Information

Newtown Alive – <http://www.newtownalive.org/>

We provide information about the contributions of African Americans in Sarasota. Sign up to receive a free newsletter with updates, events, and announcements about Newtown's evolution and other great links about community transformation in other places.

<http://www.newtownalive.org/2353-african-american-students-protest-the-proposed-closing-of-amaryllis-elementary-school/>

Newtown Historic District Final Report

Chapter 6: Education and Schools (Pages 134-162)

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1AVKKc1fEJRTTTS3fqgY_psMf7vTePSX/view?usp=sharing

“When Newtown walked out,” by Gabrielle Russon, Sarasota Herald-Tribune/ Friday, April 18, 2014

<http://newtown100.heraldtribune.com/freedom-schools/>

Beaches, Benches, and Boycotts: The Civil Rights Movement in Sarasota

<https://tour.fhm.yourcultureconnect.com/e/beaches-benches-and-boycotts-the-civil-rights-movement-in-sarasota/school-integration-1>

Into The Storm, documentary

The film, created by the class of 2019—Carol Fauls, Lindsey Jennings, Sydney Catalfino, and Kiara Harris—depicts the little-known story of the challenges of integrating the Sarasota County Schools, through the narrative of the epic story of the 1967 Booker High School Tornadoes basketball team. The team achieved an invitation to the state finals, won the championship, and returned home to discover their school had been closed. The documentary details the subsequent student-led protests that helped keep the school alive.

<https://vimeo.com/480019855>

“The Sarasota School Boycott,” by Adam Westcotta
History Alive – <http://www.sarasotahistoryalive.com/>

<http://www.sarasotahistoryalive.com/history/articles/the-sarasota-school-boycott/#:~:text=On%20Saturday%2C%20May%203%2C%201969,set%20up%20in%20local%20churches.>

“Sarasota Students’ school boycott stops neighborhood schools from closing, Florida, United States, 1969,” Global Nonviolent Action Database

<https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/sarasota-students-school-boycott-stops-neighborhood-schools-closing-florida-united-states-1>

“At Modern New Booker Campus, a Room for History”
Gabrielle Russon, Sarasota Herald-Tribune, June 29, 2013.

<https://www.heraldtribune.com/news/20130629/at-modern-new-booker-campus-a-room-for-history>

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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