Charlottesville's African American History and Civil Rights

Although most African Americans in the area were enslaved in the 18th century, there were also some free blacks, and both slave and free joined the patriot troops. A few from the area known to have served are Shadrack Battles, Johnson Smith, David Barnett, Stephen Bowles, and Sherard Goings. Segregation did not exist in the Continental Army so these men fought alongside white soldiers and distinguished themselves well. Some earned their freedom in doing so. Shadrack Battles, half black and half Native American, worked after the war as a carpenter and landscaper around Court Square. Sherard Goings' wife Susannah was highly respected in the community.

Two of the town's earliest business owners were a woman of color named Nancy West (b. 1782) and a Jewish horse-breeder David Isaacs (b. 1763). West was a baker who was never enslaved and received an inheritance about 1803. She and Isaacs had a common-law marriage. A civil charge was brought against them in 1826 for "cohabitating together in a state of illicit commerce as man and wife" but the charge was dismissed after a five-year court battle. They owned businesses on what is now the downtown mall, which was very unusual for an African American in the era of slavery. Nancy started the *Charlottesville Chronicle* newspaper in 1832, but it ended a year later. She moved to Ohio in 1850. She and Isaacs were truly early pioneers of freedom.

In the slavery era the black community had a vibrant religious life that was expressed in secret rural locations led by local African American preachers, such as Tucker Coles and John Southern. Besides these unofficial churches, blacks attended the white majority churches as well, and were not required to use separate entrances or seating areas until the 1830s.

William Gibbons was a preacher to the enslaved black Baptist community beginning in 1844. Nicholas Richmond (or Rickmond) was a black free-born Baptist preacher as early as 1860, and the new African Baptist Church organized on March 20, 1863, when blacks at First Baptist Church were permitted to form their own congregation. This church, now called First Baptist Church Main Street, was led by a white pastor at first. Its first black leader was Gibbons in 1866. His wife Isabella became a teacher in a new private school for freedmen and then later for a public school. Another black congregation called Mt. Zion Baptist Church was started by Spotswood Jones in 1867. And the First African Baptist church purchased the Delevan building on Main Street in 1868. Each of these built their own church buildings in the 1880s and still stand as the oldest church buildings to this day. A black Methodist congregation formed as well.

The Civil War brought about the abolition of slavery and a constitutional amendment in 1865 made blacks free citizens on paper, but enjoying these rights was far more difficult. Fairfax Taylor, who had purchased his own freedom in previous years, advocated for equal rights for African Americans. His son James T. S. Taylor was one of 25 blacks, all identifying with the new Republican Party, that were elected to the Virginia state constitutional convention in 1867. James Taylor also ran for a seat in the legislature two years later, but was defeated.

In 1867, Gibbons was dismissed by his church and Fairfax Taylor and Rev. Richmond were also marginalized for not being radical enough. It was a time of difficult adjustment for the black community as racist political opposition turned their hope into disillusionment.

The Republican Party emerged in the post-Civil War period with the support of virtually every African American. It had many black leaders and George Inge served as the local chairman at the beginning of the 20th century. Other black Republican leaders were James T. S. Taylor, Noah Jackson, C. E. Coles, and S. Saunders. National black Republicans began to visit the area. Inge hosted Booker T. Washington on a visit in 1891 and Frederick Douglass spoke on April 2, 1894, at First Baptist Church on Main Street.

But due to migration of blacks to the north, by 1890 the white population outnumbered African Americans for the first time, and weakened their political influence. And with the ascendancy of the Democratic Party in the legislature once again, a law was passed in 1894 that removed 90 percent of blacks from the voting rolls due to a literacy requirement. This provision was added to the state Constitution in 1902. Furthermore, segregation in public facilities was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896.

In 1889, nine African American men chartered the Piedmont Industrial and Land Improvement Company to, among other things, buy and sell real estate and to provide "assistance, financial and otherwise, to persons of limited means in purchasing homes." The Piedmont Industrial Land Improvement Company sponsored concerts at the Town Hall to raise money to build the First Baptist Church on Main Street. And in 1900 the Virginia Conference of Colored Men met at the Odd Fellows Hall in Charlottesville to discuss methods of protest against African American disfranchisement in the upcoming Virginia Constitutional Convention. The group became known as The Virginia (or Negro) Educational and Industrial Association.

In education there was more freedom to develop. Immediately after the end of slavery the first private school for African Americans, called the Freedman's School, began in 1865. At the Delevan building Anna Gardener taught the advanced students in the Jefferson Training School and beginners were instructed near 7th Street SW by her black assistant Isabella Gibbons (wife of pastor Gibbons) and Paul Lewis until they were hired by the state several years later. Eventually the Jefferson School was established for black students in 1894. Benjamin Tonsler was its principal for whom Tonsler Park is named. Nannie Cox Jackson was one of the early African American teachers at this time. Rebecca Fuller McGinness was a teacher later in the Jefferson Elementary School for 48 years, retiring in 1960.

African Americans made contributions in other significant ways. Isaiah Mays was a native of the area who became a Buffalo Soldier who earned the Medal of Honor for his service in Arizona in 1889. An African American named Robert Scott became manager of the Town Hall on Court Square and also was notable for organizing Scott's String Band. Belle Gibbons, a black performer, gave a concert at the Levy Opera House in 1890. Blacks continued to rise in influence in other ways. George Ferguson was the first black doctor in town and John West was a prominent barber and land owner. At his death in 1927 West owned 56 properties. John A. Jackson was the first African American dentist, but who also started other businesses and recreational facilities for blacks.

But in actuality this period was the most difficult for blacks since the Civil War. Of the 2,524 African Americans who lived in the city around its 150th anniversary in 1912 very few could actually vote due to literacy restrictions and the fact that both black and white women did not yet have the vote. Then in 1912 the city's leaders adopted the first residential segregation ordinance. Mayor E. G. Haden vetoed it, but was overridden by the rest of the Council. The Democratic

Party dominated all of state and city politics and led in this segregation movement, but even white Republicans started to minimize the involvement of blacks in their party in order to appeal to more white voters. In 1922, Republicans blocked all black delegates to their state convention and declared itself a "lily-white" party in order to compete with the Democrats for white votes. The Ku Klux Klan held parades in Charlottesville in 1924 and 1925, but it was actually a sign of desperation and transition, as they were trying to pressure politicians in the Democratic party who were starting to moderate their views. When women gained the right to vote, three Charlottesville African American women were successful in registering to vote: Maggie P. Burley, Mamie J. Farwell, and Alice Grady.

More developments were made in education and popular culture. The Jefferson High School for black students opened in 1926. A popular black band, Sampson's Happy Pals, began in 1931. In 1942 the Kelley All Stars was a black baseball team that played at Wine Cellar Field. Beatrice Fowlkes was proprietor of the Carver Inn on Preston Avenue where notables such as Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong lodged. Edward Jackson opened the Bren-Wana motel and restaurant in 1958 that was the only integrated one at that time. Trinity Episcopal Church - an African American congregation, began at this time as well.

But the most defining moments of the city's modern history and culture came about in the last 65 years in the triumphant struggle to finally end segregation. In 1947 Rev. Benjamin Bunn of First Baptist Church Main Street organized the Charlottesville chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). It was this organization along with the black religious community that provided the main leadership for change. Its first president was Dr. Bernard A. Coles. A local attorney, John S. Battle, became Democratic governor of Virginia from 1950 to 1954 and supported segregation when the struggle began to emerge.

The University Law School was sued by African American Gregory Swanson in 1950 which resulted in him and other African Americans being admitted henceforth. But it was in the local public schools that segregation was most resistant to change. Jackson P. Burley High School opened for city and county black students in 1950 and the Jefferson School then switched to elementary grades. But the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1954 in *Brown v. Board of Education* that the system of segregated schools and public services violated the Constitution.

A new black-owned newspaper begun in 1954 by Randolph White was called *The Tribune (*later the *Charlottesville-Albemarle Tribune).* It provided reports of these pivotal events that gave a more complete picture than that of the white-owned newspapers. There were courageous white citizens who spoke out for change but at a cost. Sarah Patton Boyle who took a bold stand against segregation and racism in 1955 found a cross burned on her lawn. Later in 1962 she wrote a book entitled *The Desegregated Heart*. Due to rulings of the courts, the city on January 10, 1956 removed all segregation signs from public drinking fountains, waiting rooms, and bathroom facilities, however many private businesses did not necessarily follow suit.

Although the courts ordered the end of segregated schools, the political leaders of the state, led by Democrat Senator Harry F. Byrd, Sr., adopted a policy of "massive resistance." In accordance with their strategy, the Charlottesville School Board surrendered authority of Lane High School and Venable Elementary School to the Governor of Virginia, J. Lindsay Almond, who then closed them in 1958, rather than let them be integrated. New private schools such as Rock Hill

Academy opened in 1958 for whites only, and some churches gave space for classes in support of the misguided resistance.

Pastors active in civil rights in the 1950s were Benjamin Bunn of First Baptist Main Street, Theodore Evans of St. Paul's Episcopal, Herman Watts and Emmett Green of Mt Zion Baptist, and in the 1960s they were joined by new pastors James Hamilton of Mt Zion, and Henry Mitchell of Trinity Episcopal. Otelia Love Jackson, wife of dentist John Jackson, was an African American woman prominent in the civil rights movement. She served on the state board of the Council of Human Relations and as president of the "Crusade for Voters," which was organized in 1959 in order to launch a statewide effort to register blacks to vote. In 1959 Eugene Williams of the NAACP and high school students led protests at a segregated lunch counter. These efforts ultimately defeated massive resistance and the first 12 black students entered white public schools in the city on September 8, 1959. The school desegregation process was begun. The University also admitted the first African American undergraduate student in 1961.

Ironically, as the battle to integrate the schools was won, another travesty was in the works. In 1959 a referendum on "renewal" of Vinegar Hill and Gospel Hill, was passed by City Council. The Charlottesville Redevelopment and Housing Authority began plans to level these hubs of the black community. Vinegar Hill was fully demolished by 1965, removing 29 black-owned businesses (grocery stores, restaurants, furniture stores, barbershops, antique shops, an insurance agency, a drug store, a shoe repair shop, and a hat cleaning establishment). With urban renewal came the birth of the public housing movement to house the displaced black residents of Vinegar Hill and the whites in a different location. Segregation was alive and well.

The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke at the University on March 25, 1963, just a few months prior to his famous "I Have a Dream" speech in Washington. Inspired local citizens led a "sit-in" on May 30 at the segregated lunch counter at Buddy's Restaurant, where one U.Va. faculty member was beaten and several protesters arrested.

Democrats demonstrated remarkable new willingness to embrace African Americans, and even more astounding was the willingness of black leaders to ally with the party that previously had been their foremost antagonists. Some of the key bridge-building Democrats and civil rights leaders in Charlottesville included Randolph Perry, Paul Gaston, Harrison Nesbitt, Bill and Mary Ann Elwood, Drewary Brown (local NAACP president), Francis Fife, Robert Tinsley, plus Eugene Williams, and the Reverends Henry Mitchell and Benjamin Bunn.

Eventually the segregation of institutions was abolished due to the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 by majorities of both Democrats and Republicans in Congress, and by the signature of President Lyndon Johnson. Within a year, the final integration of Charlottesville's public schools took place. For the first time in the city's history, all citizens regardless of color or gender were able to exercise the right to vote and have access to all schools and government services equally. The previously used word "Negro" became obsolete after new terms began to be used in the 1980s. Although individual racial discrimination was still a problem, nonetheless, the last 50-year period of the city stands apart from all the previous ones.

The high-profile association of Presidents Kennedy and Johnson with Dr. King and the new legislation, given that 1964 Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater had opposed the passage of the Civil Rights Act, shifted most remaining black Republican voters to support Democrats, a shift almost unthinkable less than 40 years before.

Historic breakthroughs followed in the city for blacks and women. In 1970 Charles Barbour became the first African American elected to city council, and became mayor in 1974. Grace Tinsley became the first black woman on the school board in 1976, and Cornelia Johnson became the first black female police officer. Democrats were widely credited for encouraging these developments. Black religious leaders, the Rev. E. G. Hall and Rev. Alvin Edwards, were elected to City Council and Edwards also as mayor. A local African American, Paul Harris, bucked the racial voting trend when he ran as a Republican and was elected to the House of Delegates in 1998. Maurice Jones became the first African American city manager in 2010.

The University's College of Arts and Sciences faculty adopted in 1970 a new interdepartmental major in African American Studies. U.Va. also created the Institute for Afro-American and African Studies, later naming it after Carter G. Woodson, the Virginia-born scholar and founder of African American History Month. African American scholar and activist Julian Bond joined the faculty in the 1990s. Bond also served in national leadership of the NAACP. Rita Dove, a U.Va. professor, became the first African American to be appointed U.S. Poet Laureate and the second to receive the Pulitzer Prize for poetry.