



**Frederick Douglass High School, opened in 1941**

*The fight for equal rights took decades. Not until the 1930s and 1940s did the County begin to improve schools for black children, and that was against stiff white resistance. Even after the U.S. Supreme Court in **Brown v. Board of Education (1954)** finally shattered the legal basis for segregated public schools, the Loudoun County government initially followed the lead of Virginia Sen. Harry F. Byrd, Sr. in his “Massive Resistance” campaign against school integration. Despite repeated court orders the County did not fully desegregate its schools until 1968-1969. The vestiges of Jim Crow discrimination persisted in other areas of everyday life, such as theaters and restaurants, but passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act -- a full century after the Civil War -- at last guaranteed federal protection of these privileges for all of Loudoun’s citizens.*

## **THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY’S FIGHT FOR BETTER SCHOOLS IN LOUDOUN COUNTY -- PART I**

**Mitch Diamond**

In the mid-1930's, as the County and the nation struggled through the Great Depression, Loudoun's African American residents continued their tradition of organizing to press for the rights and privileges they had been denied for so long. Their first target was education and their strategy was to press for the “equal” part of “separate but equal” facilities as required under the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court. This was in keeping with a national strategy promoted by the NAACP to press for equalization of salaries and facilities, assuming that the costs of “equality” would soon lead to acceptance of integration as a better option.

In 1935 the various Loudoun County African American PTAs merged into the County Wide League to fight for equal education for Loudoun’s black residents. And, in 1940 a local chapter

of the NAACP organized in Loudoun to add to the effort for better quality education for African Americans in Loudoun. Their initial goal was an accredited high school for Loudoun's African American students.

### **Frederick Douglass School –First Accredited High School for African Americans**

Any education for either enslaved or free African Americans in all of Virginia was legally banned in the 1830s after the Nat Turner rebellion. After emancipation and the Civil War, educational programs for African Americans began in Loudoun County, sponsored by a combination of private organizations and the federal Freedmen's Bureau. However, in 1930, a full 65 years after the Civil War ended, Loudoun's education for black students still did not extend beyond the sixth grade.

Finally, in 1930 the first secondary school for black students was established in two rooms above the elementary school on Union Street in Leesburg and became known as the Loudoun County Training School. However the building was in poor condition and unsafe, had little equipment and offered limited subject matter. And, because the instruction was unaccredited by the state, students could not qualify for higher education.

In the mid-1930s the black families of Loudoun decided to organize and begin pressing for a better alternative. They formed the County-Wide League to petition the School Superintendent and Board and the Board of Supervisors (BOS) about the unsafe and unsatisfactory situation at the Training School and to ask for a fully qualified high school for black students.\* They were aided and encouraged in their efforts by Gertrude Alexander who had recently been hired by the County as the Supervisor for African American Education.

### **Community Action**

On November 4, 1939, a land transfer of eight acres just east of Leesburg was registered in the County Courthouse. That simple transaction, resulting from years of effort to raise funds, months of secret negotiations and the intervention of America's most prominent civil rights attorney, Charles Hamilton Houston, was a major milestone in the struggle of Loudoun's African American community to gain equal rights.

The school board and the BOS put up obstacle after obstacle and found all sorts of ways to avoid taking any useful action. They first argued that there was no suitable land available for such a school. The County-Wide League then launched a program of fund raising using rummage sales, dances, ball games, bake sales and donations to accumulate the funds to actually find and buy a piece of suitable land. In a series of secret transactions, and aided by a loan secured by a black contractor, in late 1939 they secured 8 acres of land on the outskirts of Leesburg for \$4,000.

The School Board and BOS continued to resist and enacted a series of local ordinances that thwarted efforts to establish the new school, including rejection of the site now owned by the County Wide-League. This culminated in a large public meeting at the County Courthouse in 1939 where African American residents insisted that the problematic ordinances be reversed and the school be constructed. And, they argued, we can provide the land for it. The school board and

BOS then argued that there was no construction funding available from the State Literacy Fund, the source for school construction funding, so the parents would just have to wait.

## **Success**

Finally, in 1940, the County-Wide League was tired of waiting and engaged famed black attorney Charles Houston (former dean of the Howard Law school, legal counsel to the NAACP and well known in Loudoun from the Crawford case a few years earlier) to lead their efforts. He drafted and sent a series of pointed letters to the Superintendent of Loudoun Schools fully describing the safety and accreditation problems with the existing Training School and the clear legal requirements on the School Board and County to provide an adequate high school. And, he threatened to sue if action was not taken. His threat was taken very seriously since he and his NAACP legal team had been winning “school equalization” suits in federal courts around Virginia and the Loudoun school board did not look forward to facing Mr. Houston and his team in federal court.

At last, under combined community and legal pressure, the BOS, the School Board and the State Literacy Fund relented and came up with \$30,000 to construct the new school. The County-Wide League then transferred ownership of their property to the County for just \$1, a construction contract was awarded, and the long sought school was, at last, actually built. It was named in honor of Fredrick Douglass, the great pioneer in seeking freedom and rights for African Americans.

But the problems did not end there. The Loudoun County School Board had built the school, but they had furnished it minimally. The community and the County Wide League once again began fund-raising, they were able to provide the school with the additional furniture and other supplies it needed to begin operations.

In 1941 the school began full operations. It received its letter of full state accreditation in 1942. The Frederick Douglass School, the only high school for African Americans in Loudoun until desegregation in 1968, still stands at 408 E Market Street in Leesburg. The school was added to the Virginia Landmarks Register and the U.S. National Register of Historic Places in 1992.

The Frederick Douglass School is a great monument to the desire of Loudoun County’s African American community for good education, and to their extraordinary efforts to work together to actually get the education they sought in spite of the many obstacles put in their path. After Douglass High School was established, the community and Loudoun County continued the County program for providing segregated but better quality educational facilities. The first modern elementary school for African Americans, George Washington Carver, opened in Purcellville in 1946. And in 1948, a second new elementary school for African Americans, Benjamin Banneker, opened in St. Louis in western Loudoun. The campaign to gain these needed new schools had been ongoing since 1927.

## The Struggle for School Integration in the 1950s and 1960s

Up to now, the black community was working under the confines of the “separate but equal” doctrine of *Plessy v. Ferguson* as it applied to public schools. In 1954, however, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that racial segregation in public schools was inherently unequal and hence unconstitutional.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, school and government officials in the county generally followed the lead of other Virginia politicians who opposed racial integration of the public schools and other public accommodations; their responses ranged from quiet inaction to open defiance of the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1954 ruling. Local and state officials increased funding to build and equip segregated schools and tried to pressure the African American community to accept these resources in exchange for dropping their demand that schools be integrated. In 1956 the Loudoun Board of Supervisors, falling in line with the state-wide anti-integration campaign called “Massive Resistance,” voted to withhold funds and even close the schools unless they remained segregated.

Pressured to respond by continued community and legal pressure, in 1963 the County instituted token desegregation of some of its public schools using a Freedom-of-Choice plan that required African American students to apply to transfer to schools intended for whites. Only four of the twelve Loudoun African American students who applied to the three-man Pupil Placement Board were approved and hardly any African American students were actually admitted under this plan. No white students attended any of Loudoun’s schools for African Americans, and teaching staffs remained strictly segregated. The great majority of African American students could not attend nearby schools and were still bused long distances to attend the few schools designated strictly for black students.

In 1963 black parents represented by the NAACP filed suit in Federal Court against the Pupil Placement Board. Finally, in 1967, Federal Judge Oren R. Lewis ruled that the Loudoun freedom-of-choice plan did not meet the requirement that schools be freely and fully integrated, and ordered the county to establish geographical attendance zones, integrate the faculty and staff, and desegregate school bus routes.

By the end of the 1968-1969 school year, school officials in Loudoun County had at last implemented these reforms and fully integrated all school facilities.

### Note:

\* Virginia historian James Hershman, Jr. notes that County-wide Leagues had begun operating in various Virginia counties in the 1930s as part of the NAACP’s campaign to improve African American public schools, prompting the state to launch a frantic effort to “equalize” school buildings in order to head off the courts. After the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, black parents began to petition local school boards in Virginia for desegregation. *Email to Mitch Diamond, 1-31-2019.*

### Sources:

- Douglass High School Nomination – National Register of Historic Places – OMB No.1-24-018 - submitted 8/20/92
- “Douglass High School”, Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, African American Historic Sites Database
- Douglass High School: Legacy of a Changing Era” Elaine Thompson, February 2004, Friends of the Thomas Balch Library

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**THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY'S FIGHT  
FOR BETTER SCHOOLS IN LOUDOUN COUNTY -- PART II**

**Kacey Young**

Well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Supreme Court's formula of "separate but equal" in Loudoun County's public school system was implemented solely as "separate"; anything built for African Americans was considered "equal" even if buildings and transportation services were actually subpar or non-existent. Unequal facilities were often blamed on a general lack of funding, but even when monies became available, they were usually reserved for the white community.

In response, African Americans formed local, community-based associations. They started at the beginning: they had to find places to build schools, and then build them. One of the most influential groups was the County-Wide League, "made up of parent-teacher associations throughout the county and anyone else interested in helping" end the unequal treatment of African Americans in the Loudoun school system.[1]

The effort was costly and difficult. Rosa Lee Carter recalled the poor conditions at Middleburg's Grant School. She and her students would huddle around a single pot-bellied stove, many with frost bitten digits earned while walking instead of being bussed to school. And "when it rained the roof leaked." The community League asked the school board for repairs, but they "said the League would have to raise half the money. So the adults of the community put on a play to raise their half...[B]y this endeavor the money was raised and sent to the school board." [2]

The difficulties were the same across the County. The Loudoun County Training Facility, which was the only facility offering secondary education to African Americans in Loudoun, "was full of safety hazards, like windows that wouldn't open to fire escapes and an open oil drum stored under the stairs. Only a very sparse curriculum was offered and there wasn't any transportation provided to students." Frederick Douglass High School was built in 1941, but the existing Training Facility remained open as an elementary school for another 17 years until the County built an appropriate, safe elementary school in Leesburg.[3]

Meanwhile, the communities of Purcellville and Middleburg worked toward securing land and building for graded schools in their towns. Each community had to purchase land and building materials, raise funds for construction, and then supplement the County's meager allotted funds for furniture and texts. And yet, in 1946 the George Washington Carver School opened in Purcellville, followed by Benjamin Banneker in St. Louis in 1948.

Reacting to the desegregation mandate of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), Virginia Sen. Harry Byrd, Sr. penned his "Massive Resistance" manifesto of 1956. Based on a platform of states' rights, he argued the state government should "interpose" itself between the federal courts and the citizens of Virginia. Byrd assumed the schools would remain segregated, with whites turning toward private and semi-private ventures to side-step federal law.[4] What he did not take into account was how integral public education had become; private schools were not affordable for most white families. In just four years the state-wide Massive Resistance campaign crumbled

under pressure to keep public schools open, but the legacy that Sen. Byrd set delayed full desegregation of Loudoun schools for another 12 years.

Local support for “separate but equal” remained strong. The School Board and Superintendent O. L. Emerick attempted to withhold funds for new and improved schools for African American children:

In January 1956, the Loudoun County School Board and the Board of Supervisors attempted to use their control over funds for school construction to persuade African-American parents to accept segregated public education. At a joint session, members of the two boards threatened to abandon a proposed bond issue to cover the costs of new and improved schools for African Americans unless parents expressed support for “our considerate opinion that their education can be promoted better by their continued school attendance on a segregated basis.”[5]

The tactic, however, failed to intimidate activist groups and their communities. On February 4th, 1956, the local NAACP sent a letter to the School Board requesting funding for a new elementary school in Leesburg. After supervisors claimed the funds again were unavailable, the County-Wide League, the Loudoun County Branch of the NAACP, and the PTAs for Banneker and Bull Run Elementary Schools protested that it “is another effort by them [School Board and Board of Supervisors] to intimidate Negro parents, teachers and children into continuing to accept discriminatory educational practices currently existing in this county.” Funding was found shortly thereafter, and the new Frederick Douglass Elementary school opened in 1958.[6]

Funding no longer the barrier it had been, school choice became the next hurdle. The school board sought to make schools slated for desegregation as unappealing as possible for Caucasians and African Americans alike. African American parents wanting to send their children to integrated schools had to submit their student’s name to the newly minted, state-wide Student Pupil Placement Board (SPPB) for review. The SPPB accepted only those African American students who had proven their elementary training was sufficient for them to excel in a “white” school. Since the most up-to-date classroom tools were withheld from African American students, it was easy for the board to find inadequacies in the candidates. Even if accepted, students had to face entering a building dominated by a white community that was still largely opposed to desegregation.

At this point, the African American communities, now led by NAACP president William McKinley Jackson and the County-Wide League, decided to focus on pushing the system to open the Caucasian-dedicated schools to everyone. In 1962, the SPPB reviewed the applications of 12 African American children for admission to either Loudoun Valley High School in Purcellville or Loudoun County High School in Leesburg. The SPPB granted permission to only four.

The remaining eight filed suit later that year. The verdict by Judge Oren R. Lewis in 1963 concluded that race should not be a factor in school assignments; rather, the student should be permitted to attend the nearest available facility.[7] During the trial the SPPB announced its intention to “eradicate segregation, effective for the 1963-64 school year,” and took the extraordinary measure of disbanding as a board.[8] Full desegregation of the Loudoun County’s public school system finally began in 1968.



## Notes

1. *The Essence of a People: Portraits of African Americans Who Made a Difference in Loudoun County, Virginia*, p. 64.
  2. Ms. Carter stayed on as a teacher in Middleburg for 40 years despite the uncomfortable and dangerous condition of the buildings in which she worked. *Ibid*, pp. 19-20.
  3. See [https://www.loudountimes.com/news/celebratingthe-quiet-tenacity-that-built-loudoun-s-first-black/article\\_24e5db18-c0ce-55bf-beb0cdeb86fe6731.html](https://www.loudountimes.com/news/celebratingthe-quiet-tenacity-that-built-loudoun-s-first-black/article_24e5db18-c0ce-55bf-beb0cdeb86fe6731.html)
  4. At one point, the state created tuition grants for private education. James Hershman, Jr. comments on the Byrd organization's response to NAACP challenges in Virginia in the early 1950's as follows: "Their initial response was to allocate considerable state funds to a program constructing new black schools, perhaps the program could persuade the courts of 'equality in education,' or, failing that, it was hoped that black parents would be hesitant to pull their children from new schools to accept the perils of attending white schools. If that failed, the next strategy was for whites to create a system of private schools subsidized by public funds, using public school facilities obtained by leasing or favorably priced purchase." *Hershman e-mail to Mitch Diamond, 1-31-2019*.
  5. From *Desegregation in Loudoun County Public Schools, 1954-1970 Timeline of Events Associated with Douglass Elementary School (55 Plaza Street, SE, Leesburg) People Associated with Douglass Elementary School, 1954-1970*, p. 6. Hershman recounts that when he spoke with NAACP leaders in Loudoun about the 1956 incident 20 years later, they characterized the Loudoun authorities' position as "basically a carrot and stick approach: we'll pass a \$700,000 bond issue for the black schools if you don't bring the NAACP lawyers in; we'll close the schools if you bring them in." The local NAACP did not back down, but Oliver Hill, the NAACP lawyer handling such cases was so overwhelmed that he could not take the Loudoun case until 1962. *Hershman e-mail to Diamond, 1-31-2019*.
  6. Frank Raflo, *Within The Iron Gates Loudoun: Stories Remembered (1925-1975)*, pp.381.
  7. Upon appeal, Judge Lewis on August 29, 1967 affirmed his original 1963 order to end the "dual school" system in Loudoun County and ordered its immediate implementation in the 1967-1968 school year; see <https://www.leagle.com/decision/1967343283fsupp601335>
- Although they had the opportunity to transfer, most seniors elected to remain at Douglass High School, graduating just before it closed in 1969. *Richard Gillespie email to Robert Pollard, 1-30-2019*. The School Board's decision to close Douglass H.S. rather than integrate it, and its subsequent conversion first to a special-needs, then to an "alternative" school, angered some African Americans in Loudoun, because they regarded the high school as the heart of their community. See Kevin Dulany Grigsby, *Howardsville: The Journey of an African-American Community in Loudoun County, Virginia* (2008), pp. 264-265.
8. *Desegregation in Loudoun County*, p. 8. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 had brought the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) into play. The state told HEW that it was working out its "Freedom of Choice" plan for desegregation, and used that as the reason to delay the appeal of Judge Lewis' 1963 order for another four years. *Hershman e-mail to Diamond, 1-31-2019*.

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