

## **GAINING EQUAL ACCESS TO OTHER PUBLIC FACILITIES**

### **Mitch Diamond**

Despite progress in the schools, resistance to integration in other parts of life remained strong.

#### **Access to the Library: A Key Milestone**

The public library in Purcellville, the only one of its kind in the County, had not been open to African American residents since it was first opened in 1937. If a black person wanted a book, the only recourse was to ask a white person to borrow it.

However, in December of 1956, two African American upholsterers, Samuel Cardoza Murray and his wife, Josie Cook Murray, went to the library to get a book they needed for their business. When they were refused permission to check out the book, they decided to sue. No local attorney would take the case, but Oliver Ellis Stone, a Washington lawyer, agreed to take it on. It was clear from state law that so long as the library received government funds it had to be open to all – and the library Board of Trustees agreed. But, local segregationists petitioned to make the library private so it could remain for whites only. Protesters demonstrated outside the Murray's home and business, but they persevered.

On April 8, 1957, by a 4-to-3 vote, the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors decided that they would continue to fund the library, and it would be open to all. It is remembered as the first public facility to be integrated in the County.

#### **Leesburg Firemen Refuse to Integrate Swimming Pool**

On June 23, 1965, four African American children went to Leesburg's swimming pool, operated by the Leesburg Volunteer Fire Department, and were refused entry. A suit was filed on their behalf, and in May 1966 the court ruled in their favor. But the pool remained closed, and the firemen filled it with rock and cement rather than integrate. Leesburg did not have a public swimming pool until 1990.

#### **Eating Together in Restaurants - The Kennedys Play a Role**

In 1961 there still were no public restaurants anywhere in Loudoun where an African American could be served. There were several that would provide take out service to standees or through a back door, but no African American could eat sitting down in any public facility in the County. But before the year was half over that would change completely, and it was all due to the coming of the Kennedys.

The young President and his wife planned to spend time in Middleburg and attended their first local Mass at the Middleburg Community Center in February. Several black activists began appearing at the local drug store in April asking for service, which was refused. They proposed inviting in a delegation of activists to protest in Middleburg. The local community, including the head of the Loudoun NAACP, did not wish to embarrass the President and sought to avoid the

confrontation. After some discussion, local merchants agreed, and within weeks local African Americans joined other local residents eating and drinking together in Middleburg restaurants for the first time ever.

A local priest, Father Pereira, who had helped peacefully organize desegregation of Middleburg's restaurants, worked with Loudoun's black and white leaders to do the same in Leesburg. In just a matter of months, their lunch counters and restaurants were integrated. When a month later, several busloads of protesters arrived in Leesburg to "test" local restaurants and lunch counters, they found no problems.

Other areas took a bit longer. Integration did not come to Purcellville's lunch counters until 1966, but by 1970 all of Loudoun's restaurants served blacks and whites equally.

### **Changes up to the Present Day**

In 1950 the first African American in modern times to run for local public office in Loudoun placed his name on the ballot for town council in Middleburg, but lost. Yet by 1966 African Americans gained and continued to hold seats on both the Middleburg and Purcellville Councils.

The '60s and '70s were major periods of change in Loudoun. Dulles Airport had opened, and land that had been farmed for centuries began to give way to houses. In 1953 the first small subdivisions Aspen Hill and Leith Village had covenants barring those of African descent from living there. By 1965, however, when the large new subdivision at Sterling Park opened, African American families were among the first to move there and live in an integrated Loudoun community. And, in 1965, African Americans sat for the first time in the "whites only" section of the Tally Ho Theater in Leesburg.

Change was slow in coming, but unstoppable. By 1970, Loudoun's population, just beginning to grow after decades of stagnation, had reached 37,417 - nearly double that of 1930. Loudoun had finally thrown off most of the public and legal vestiges of the Jim Crow era and was about to grow more than ten times over the next 50 years.

This massive influx of population transformed the County in numerous ways, including changes in interpretations of the County's history. Today, there is growing awareness and recognition of the major contribution that the African American community played in shaping Loudoun's heritage.