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The Desegregation of Land-grant Institutions in the 1950s: The First African American Students at NC State University and Virginia Tech

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This article focuses on the first African American students at two southern land-grant universities, North Carolina State University and Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University (Virginia Tech). Although these institutions integrated in the 1950s, most of the current desegregation scholarship focuses on other southern institutions in the 1960s. Using both primary and secondary sources, this study examines the integration process during the 1950s at two similar land-grant universities in two adjacent states. Importantly, this study offers a balanced comparison of institutional integration not previously examined. Desegregation at both North Carolina State University and Virginia Tech was a gradual process that was less physically violent compared to other southern institutions.

Keywords: *desegregation, history of education, land-grant universities, African American students, Virginia Tech, North Carolina State University*

INTRODUCTION

The desegregation of White colleges and universities in the former Confederacy began in the 1950s. Southern states often resisted integration at both the K–12 and postsecondary levels, even after federal laws banned “separate but equal” in the mid-1950s (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954). While many White institutions experienced nonviolent integration, the most commonly told stories of racial integration at the postsecondary level are those of violence and strong resistance.

The purpose of this historical inquiry is to examine the lesser-known experiences of the first African American students at two southern land-grant institutions, North Carolina State University (NC State) and Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University (Virginia Tech or VPI). The process of desegregation at both institutions began when the first African American students were admitted in 1953. Although these institutions in the Upper South slowly began to admit African American students in the 1950s, most of the current desegregation scholarship focuses on the Deep South institutions in the 1960s. In continuum of Peter Wallenstein’s (2008) work focused on southern White institution integration, this study examines the integration process during the 1950s at two similar institutions in two Upper South states. Desegregation at both North Carolina State University and Virginia Tech was a gradual process that was relatively quiet compared to integration at other institutions in the Deep South. Integration in the Deep South would become more newsworthy, as Dixiecrats had a vested interest in keeping segregation, since the National Guard was sent to enforce integration at some Deep South institutions (Clark, 1993; Wallenstein, 2008).

BACKGROUND

All seventeen states in the South resisted the integration of higher education. Splitting along traditional lines of the Upper South, and the Deep South, the speed and turmoil over integration varied based on geography from the 1950s to late 1960s (Wallenstein, 2008). North Carolina and Virginia are considered part of the Upper South, along with Arkansas, Delaware, Kentucky,

Maryland, Missouri, Tennessee, and West Virginia. The Deep South, or Lower South, includes Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas. As the federal government in 1954 dictated integration, the southern states believed gradual integration would prevent “social trauma” and could be accomplished (Packard, 2002), but implementation varied among Upper and Deep South (Wallenstein, 2008).

Violent physical resistance characterized integration at higher education institutions in Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia. In particular, the integration process was tumultuous at three flagship institutions in these Deep South states. After a multi-year court case, Autherine Lucy, a Black female, attended the University of Alabama in 1956 and mobs of protesting students greeted her over several days. Officials from the University suspended Lucy for her protection, but she sued, stating campus administrators conspired with the rioting students. The Board of Trustees then permanently expelled Lucy (Pratt, 2002). In 1963, Alabama Governor George Wallace made national headlines as he tried to prevent the integration of the University of Alabama. President John F. Kennedy had to nationalize the Alabama National Guard to allow two African Americans to enroll at the university (Clark, 1993).

In Mississippi on September 30, 1962, the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) riot between segregationists and law enforcement officials caused over 300 people to be injured and two deaths. During the protests of the admission of James Meredith, the first African American student at Ole Miss, physical violence broke out between the protestors and the U.S. Marshalls who were escorting Meredith to campus (Elliot, 2012; Wallenstein, 1999). In 1961, Georgia Governor Ernest Vandiver allowed the University of Georgia to integrate to keep the institution from closing, regardless of the 1956 Georgia law that forbade the funding of integrated schools (Kean, 2008). On their first day at the University of Georgia, the two newly admitted Black students, Hamilton Holmes and Charlayne Hunter, were greeted by student protests. Three nights later on January 9th, students threw bricks and glass bottles at the residence hall where Hunter resided (University of Georgia, 2017).

In Upper South states, integration began much earlier than the Deep South (Wallenstein, 1999). For example, the first African American student admitted to a public White institution in the South was Silas Hunt at the University of Arkansas in 1948. Hunt, a World War II veteran, was admitted to Arkansas’s law school, but died shortly thereafter due to wounds from the war. Unlike other southern states, Arkansas had no constitutional provisions preventing African Americans from enrolling in higher education institutions; it was deemed easier to admit them than to go through the courts (Wallenstein, 1999). In Kentucky, integration also began earlier. The University of Kentucky integrated its graduate programs in 1949 and admitted undergraduates in 1954. Soon after, the University of Louisville integrated in 1955 (Hardin, 1997).

However, less is known about the integration of higher education in Virginia and North Carolina. Wallenstein’s (1999) work explored the variation in integration experiences of institutions in Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama, but he did not specifically compare two similar land-grant institutions. Wallenstein (1999) highlighted that even though two people died at the University of Mississippi over the admission of James Meredith in 1962, integration was not as tumultuous at other institutions such as Mississippi State in the mid-1960s. Although the institutions discussed above provide examples of resistance to integration of higher education, it is important to highlight the racism that existed throughout the South in the 20th century. Even when weighing socioeconomic factors, Rury (1988) found that African Americans scored lower on IQ tests than southern White peers in a 1917 Army IQ test. Southern White men had better educational opportunities, increasing their scores over southern African Americans, even though Black men scored higher than both groups in northern states. Furthermore, African American students at land-grant institutions were recognized for breaking racial barriers of higher education, but often did not complete their degrees (Wallenstein, 1997a). This study continues the search for alternative views of higher education integration by looking at two land-grant institutions in Virginia and North Carolina.

Morrill Act and Land-Grant Universities

Land-grant universities were developed from the *Morrill Act of 1862*. During this time, land in the Midwest was appropriated to each state to sell at a profit. The profit from selling the land was then used to fund a college in each respective state (First Morrill Act, 1862). The original mission of these institutions “was to teach agriculture, military tactics, and the mechanic arts [engineering] as well as classical studies so members of the working classes could obtain a liberal, practical education” (Association of Public and Land Grant Universities, n.d.). *The Second Morrill Act* (1890) mandated that colleges eliminate race-based admission criteria or designate a second land-grant institution for Black students to attend. The land-grant schools in the southern states that refused to integrate were then required to divide the land-grant appropriations between both the White and Black colleges (Second Morrill Act, 1890).

The Second Morrill Act marked the beginning of southern states’ dividing the land-grant designation between two colleges in each state, the predominantly White institution (PWI) and the historically Black college and university (HBCU). The two land-grant institutions in North Carolina are North Carolina State University and North Carolina Agricultural & Technical University. Similarly, in Virginia, the land grant was divided between Virginia Tech and Virginia State University. The beginning of integration at both NC State and Virginia Tech was closely tied to the opportunities, or lack thereof, for Black students at the state designated Black colleges.

Historical Court Cases about Desegregation

Several court cases have shaped segregation and desegregation in the United States since the late 1800s. Beginning with *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, the Supreme Court upheld the doctrine of “separate but equal.” Homer Plessy was a man of mixed-race descent who attempted to sit in a streetcar that was designated for Whites only. The Court found that having separate facilities based on race was not a violation of the 13th or 14th amendments. The judges ruled that it was not a violation of the Constitution for states to enact legislation that requires separate facilities based on race, as long as they were “equal” (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896).

While the separate but equal ruling in the *Plessy* case held for over fifty years, the Supreme Court would eventually rule against this decision. In 1946, Heman Marion Sweatt, a Black student, applied for law school at the University of Texas and was denied admission based on his race. At the time, there was no law school for Black students; however, the state then created a law school for Black students as Sweatt brought his case to Texas court (*Sweatt v. Painter*, 1950). The Texas courts upheld the “separate but equal” doctrine from the *Plessy* case. With the help of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the case was appealed to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court reversed the lower court’s ruling and found that the Black law school did not have equitable resources and faculty. The Court ruled in Sweatt’s favor and he was admitted into the University of Texas law school in 1950.

Four years after *Sweatt*, the landmark *Brown* court case officially changed the course of racial segregation in education. In 1951, Black children were denied access to White schools in Kansas and a lawsuit was filed claiming that the facilities were not equitable. The District Court ruled in favor of the Board of Education and cited the *Plessy* case that upheld the state laws of “separate but equal.” The case was then heard before the Supreme Court in 1954, combining four other national cases under *Brown: Briggs v. Elliott* (South Carolina), *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County* (Virginia), *Gebhart v. Belton* (Delaware), and *Bolling v. Sharpe* (Washington DC). In 1954, with *Brown*, the Court overturned the *Plessy v* ruling, concluding, “in the field of public education, the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” (*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954, p. 45).

Massive Resistance

North Carolina and Virginia segregated schools along racial lines and had large public support for segregation. On May 7, 1951, the *Roanoke World-News* stated, “The South is not now and is not likely to be anytime soon ready for an end to segregation” (Heinemann, 2006). After the *Brown* decision, Virginia embarked on a policy of “Massive Resistance” to block the integration of public K–12 education for almost two decades (Golub, 2013). Massive resistance was supported through influential senator, and former governor, Harry F. Byrd whose political machine, the Byrd Organization, controlled almost all elections and appointments in the Commonwealth (Heinemann, 2006). Senator Byrd was seen as unbeatable since he won repeated elections and influenced down-ticket races throughout Virginia over the course of four decades (Ely, 1976).

Although higher education would begin to integrate during the 1950s, resistance to educating White and Black students together would continue at the K–12 level over the next two decades in both Virginia and North Carolina. Prince Edward County, Virginia, abandoned public education in 1959 to avoid integration, and by 1962, less than one percent of Virginia’s African American students attended integrated schools (Ely, 1976). In North Carolina, the local school boards attempted to prevent busing of students in Charlotte to dissuade integration. In the 1971 *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* case, the Supreme Court decided that racial assignment of students was constitutional if the purpose was to integrate rather than segregate primary schools (Fiss, 1974).

HISTORICAL INQUIRY

Postsecondary education in the United States experienced large growth in enrollment after World War II due to the GI Bill. From 1947 to 1986, enrollment in colleges and universities jumped from 2.3 to 12.4 million students, with 77% enrolled in public institutions (Trow, 1988). African Americans who served in World War II alongside White soldiers began demanding the same educational rights as their White peers. The lack of African American GIs from World War II enrolled at southern land-grant institutions highlighted the disparity of opportunity for Black men in higher education before integration (Trow, 1988). Although some Northern institutions, such as Oberlin College, had been integrated from their founding, even these institutions segregated African American students to some degree (Waite, 2001). The majority of African American students attended HBCUs in 1950, but by 1975, approximately 75% of African American students attended PWIs (Allen & Jewell, 2002). While the study of desegregating education in the United States has been extensive and received more recent scholarship due to the 50th anniversary of *Brown* (Anderson, 2004), there has been little historical research on the integration of land-grant institutions in North Carolina and Virginia. This lack of research may be due to the stealth massive resistance in the late 1950s and more interest in the historic blocking of integration in K–12 education; however, the experience of the first Black students at these institutions is also important and should be explored.

Although Peter Wallenstein’s (1997a, 1997b, 1999, 2008) work has investigated desegregation of southern institutions of higher education at the state level, a comparison of sister land-grant institutions has not been explored. In this article, the authors review the desegregation of two similar land-grant institutions in adjacent states, NC State University and Virginia Tech, which both admitted the first Black students in 1953. Through this analysis, a different story of higher education integration in the 1950s will emerge compared to the commonly referenced Deep South examples in the 1960s highlighted in the prior section.

DESEGREGATION AT NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY IN THE 1950S

The first Black students enrolled at NC State University in the early 1950s. Specifically, the first graduate students enrolled in 1953 and the first undergraduate students enrolled in 1956. The

process of integration was slow and not physically violent during this time. North Carolina State University (formerly North Carolina State College) was one of the first three colleges that formed the UNC-Consolidated System, including the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and UNC-Greensboro (formerly Women's Teaching College). UNC-Consolidated had three presidents in the 1950s, during the integration process. Gordon Gray was the President of UNC-Consolidated from 1950–1955. After Gray resigned, J. Harris Purks served as the acting president for only one year, and then William Friday was the president until the early 1970s. Additionally, two Chancellors served at NC State College in the 1950s. The first Chancellor, John Harrelson, held office from 1945–1953 and was succeeded by Carey Hoyt Bostian, who was Chancellor until 1959.

The conversation about integration at UNC institutions began in the early 1950s and the Board of Trustees of UNC-Consolidated discussed integration policies in their meetings. On April 4, 1951, the Board adopted the following resolution:

In all cases of applications for admission by members of racial groups, other than the white race, to the professional or graduate schools when such schools are not provided by and in the State of North Carolina for such racial groups, the applications shall be processed without regard to color or race, . . . and the applicant accepted or rejected in accordance with the approved rules and standards of admission for the particular school. (Board of Trustees, 1951)

This was the first time that the Board acknowledged a change in their admissions policy in the form of a resolution that would allow some Black students to be admitted. The only way for a Black student to be considered; however, was if a specific academic program was not offered at a public Black college in North Carolina. On June 20, 1951, Chancellor Harrelson notified the deans and directors at NC State about the resolution that the Board adopted and included the new admissions policies that would impact their departments. The policy explained that Black students would only be admitted into graduate programs and would not be allowed to enroll in graduate courses or degree programs if they were offered at state-operated Black colleges in the state. Furthermore, no out-of-state Black students would be considered for enrollment (Harrelson, 1951). Given these narrow admissions policies, there would only be a few Black graduate students who could qualify for enrollment at NC State College.

A few months earlier, an article titled “Not Ready?” (1951) appeared in the campus newspaper, *The Technician*, asking students their opinion about the possibility of integration at State College. The paper reported the opinions of students stating, “To a man, the students raised a vociferous NO! Some said that they wouldn't room with a Negro; some said that the fine parents of the South would take their children out of State and send them elsewhere” (Not Ready?, 1951). There was obvious resistance to desegregation in the early 1950s at State College and across the state of North Carolina in general. During this time, a rise in court cases about segregation increased and colleges were deciding how to best handle the possibility of integration. In the early 1950s, North Carolina public schools maintained segregation and even resisted integration after the *Brown* ruling (Douglas, 1995). Specifically, in 1954, NC Governor William Umstead developed an advisory committee that concluded public school integration should not be attempted (Pearsall, 1954).

In May 1952, a Black undergraduate student applied to transfer from North Carolina A&T University (formerly North Carolina A&T College), the HBCU land-grant institution in North Carolina. Chancellor Harrelson wrote a letter to President Gray explaining that he told the Director of Admissions, Mr. Mayer, that “the answer in this case would be no” (Harrelson, 1952). At this time, Black undergraduate students were not considered for admission according to the resolution adopted by the Board of Trustees. The Board was only open to integrating at the graduate level. The first Black students to enroll at NC State College were Robert Lee Clemons and Hardy Liston, who both enrolled in the engineering master's program in 1953. Although academic integration had begun, the college still resisted fully integrating campus events and facilities. For example, during their first year of enrollment, there was still a segregated Negro

section for a campus-sponsored musical (Ford, 1954). In 1954, Chancellor Bostian wrote about the two students when a faculty member at Guilford College inquired about State College's experience with Black students. Bostian stated that the Black students were mature individuals, had little contact with other students, lived off-campus, and did not participate in any extra-curricular activities. He explained, "they are making good progress and no problems whatsoever have been encountered because of their enrollment at the College" (Bostian, 1954). Overall, from Bostian's perspective, Black students' experiences were positive, but they had little contact with other students and only came to campus for academics. While there were no problems from Bostian's point of view, the students were not fully integrated and had limited interaction with their White peers, especially outside of the classroom.

The Associate Dean of the graduate school, Donald Anderson, wrote to President Gray on January 26, 1954 about the currently enrolled African American students. Clemons and Liston had finished their first fall semester and the Dean gave an update about their status. He wrote, "both men have worked hard and have had an excellent attitude toward fellow students and instructors. White students have treated them very well and in many instances have made special efforts to be helpful and friendly" (Anderson, 1954). He goes on to discuss how White students had worked well with Black students in groups and went out of their way to make them feel comfortable. Additionally, Anderson discussed his perception of the Black students' experiences and said that they "have been studiously correct in their attitude and have made every effort to work cooperatively. There has been no evidence of any dissatisfaction, no sign of belligerence or feeling of discrimination" (Anderson, 1954). From the Dean's perspective, it appears that the White students positively interacted with the two new Black students. However, both the voices of the White and Black students are missing in this narrative and the Dean's account of their interactions is only from his limited viewpoint.

The report goes on to acknowledge that the instructors spoke positively about the students' progress, but both were put on probation for their grades. Additionally, the report indicates that Clemons and Liston had positive attitudes toward their instructors and their fellow students. While it seems from the Dean's perspective that White students were friendly to the two Black students, questions remain about the perception of the Black students themselves. Although, Clemons went on to complete his master's degree, Liston withdrew after only one semester (NCSU Libraries, n.d.-a). The reasons behind Liston's withdrawal were unclear, but he later went on to complete his master's degree at George Washington University ("In memoriam: Hardy Liston Jr.," 2012). The fact that Liston had the motivation to complete a master's degree at another university raises more questions about why he left NC State College. If Liston's experience was as positive as the Dean described in his report, it seems incongruent that he would withdraw after only one semester.

The following year, more discussion arose at UNC-Consolidated about the admission of undergraduate Black students. Although the recent decision of *Brown* declared that separate was unequal, the Board of Trustees still followed their 1951 admissions resolution to only admit a select number of Black students at the graduate level. At the May 16, 1955, Board of Trustees meeting, President Gray reported that five Black students applied to undergraduate programs at UNC-Chapel Hill and were told that under the Trustees' regulations they were not eligible for admission as undergraduates (Board of Trustees, 1955).

Overall, the Board felt that the state was providing equal facilities and opportunities to both White and Black students, and they produced several draft letters for admissions offices to use to deny admission to Black undergraduate applicants. After a couple months of deliberation, on July 8, 1955, President Gray notified the Chancellors at the three colleges of the draft letter that was to be used to decline Black applicants, which emphasized the policy that if an equal degree was available at a Black institution, then they were not obliged to offer admission (Gray, 1955).

In 1955, a major court case was brought against UNC-Consolidated in regard to Black undergraduate students being denied admission at UNC-Chapel Hill. Three Black male high school students from Durham applied for admission at Chapel Hill in April 1955. The three students were Leroy Benjamin Frasier Jr., Ralph Kennedy Frasier, and John Lewis Brandon.

After applying, the applicants received an earlier version of the draft letter from the admissions office indicating that they were not eligible for admission to undergraduate programs, because the Board of Trustees had “not yet changed the policy for admission of negro students” (Board of Trustees, 1955). The three students challenged the admissions decision and appealed to the Board of Trustees at UNC-Consolidated. To further stand by their decision to keep undergraduate programs segregated, believing that separate was indeed “equal,” the following resolution was adopted on May 23, 1955:

The State of North Carolina having spent millions of dollars in providing adequate and equal educational facilities in the undergraduate departments of its institutions of higher learning for all races, it is HEREBY DECLARED to be the policy of the Board of Trustees of the consolidated University of North Carolina that applications of Negroes to the undergraduate schools of the three branches of the consolidated University be not accepted. (Board of Trustees, 1955)

Having been denied admission, the three applicants filed a lawsuit against UNC-Consolidated. The case was argued on September 10, 1955, in the North Carolina District Court and decided on September 16, 1955. In the case of *Frasier v. Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina*, the Court stated that the Board of Trustees’ admissions policies were in violation of the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. The court documents state that, “the plaintiffs also ask for an injunction restraining the University and its trustees and officers from denying admission to the undergraduate schools to Negroes solely because of their race and color” (*Frasier v. Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina*, 1955).

The United States Supreme Court later reviewed the case and upheld the decision on March 5, 1956, allowing admission of these three Black students. This Court case was the official beginning of the desegregation of undergraduate education in North Carolina. In February, just before the Supreme Court upheld the decision, State College received applications from two Black students. On February 24, 1956, Chancellor Bostian wrote a letter to Attorney General William Rodman clarifying that “these two applications are to receive the same consideration as those from graduates of our high schools for Whites” (Bostian, 1956). The attorney general responded that State College did not need to integrate, as the Chapel Hill court case was in an appeals process and the Supreme Court had not made its final decision. Attorney General Rodman wrote to Chancellor Bostian on February 28, 1956 stating, “the Supreme Court may at anytime pass on our appeal and, since these Negroes do not seek to enter before next Fall, I do not think you need to take any action at the moment” (Rodman, 1956). Rodman seemed hopeful that the appeal might go through and advised Bostian to not change the current admissions practices for undergraduate applicants.

After the United States Supreme Court upheld the original decision to admit the three Black undergraduate applicants at Chapel Hill (*Frasier v. Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina*, 1955), State College decided to comply with the ruling that qualified Black undergraduate applicants should be considered for admission. Two Black applicants, Edward Carson and Manuel Houston Crockett, Jr., were admitted as freshmen in the summer session of 1956. Two additional students, Irwin Richard Holmes, Jr. and Walter Van Buren Holmes, enrolled for the 1956 fall semester. Walter Holmes enrolled in the mechanical engineering program and the other three students enrolled in electrical engineering (NCSU Libraries, n.d.-b).

On Sunday, October 27, 1956, an article about integration was published in the *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader* titled “Integration Works at N.C. State Colleges; No Incidents Reported,” reporting that “the color ban has remained fast in the state’s elementary and high schools, but integration has proceeded calmly at the university” (Haislip, 1956). However, it is evident that the state’s Attorney General and Board of Trustees strenuously resisted efforts in the courts to end the all-White enrollment policy. Although the university’s administration did not welcome integration, “once Negroes were admitted, the university proceeded with a practice of almost equal treatment” (Haislip, 1956). The Black students were allowed to eat in the cafeteria and

share campus facilities with the White students. At this time, the six Black students enrolled (four undergraduates and two graduates) did not request on-campus housing because they were all from the Raleigh area and lived with their families (Reagan, 1987). As such, the issue of on-campus housing did not need to be addressed until later. Students were able to participate in campus activities. Walter Holmes was the first Black member of the marching band. Holmes at the time thought more about his personal education as opposed to the broader implications of desegregation, and stated, "I didn't come here as a test case or anything . . . I just want to get an education" (Haislip, 1956).

In 1957, Robert Clemmons, one of the first two master's students admitted, graduated with his professional degree in electrical engineering. He was the first Black student to earn a degree from State College (NCSU Libraries, n.d.-b). In the fall of 1957, Chancellor Bostian informed President Friday that eight African American students were admitted into the undergraduate engineering programs for the 1957-1958 school year, including six males and two females (Bostian, 1957). Four male students enrolled in the electrical engineering program including, George Ratliff Bennett, Richard Hausber Bowling, Roy Cecil Dunn, and James Summer Lee. James Edward Oxley entered as a chemical engineering major and Robert Lee Reid entered as a nuclear engineering major (Office of Registration, 1957). Yolanda Laine Fisher and Jessie Mae McQueen were the first Black females to enroll at State College. Fisher entered as an unclassified student and McQueen entered as nuclear engineering major (Office of Registration, 1957). Three of the Black male students who requested housing were able to live on-campus in Watauga Hall (Bostian, 1957). The women did not request housing on campus, because on-campus dormitories were not offered to female students (Reagan, 1987).

In the fall of 1957, the school newspaper reported on integration at State College and encouraged students to be considerate:

Most of you Freshmen are from the South. A great many Southerners have very definite opinions about segregation and/or integration. However, State College has its own opinion about the situation. Here we have integration. There are Negro students attending our school this year, just as there were Negro students here last year . . . Last year we had no trouble at all over the situation. There was no name calling, no buildings dynamited, no trouble at all. The Associated Press representatives, of course, were quite disappointed in this because they didn't get a story. But State College was very proud of its record. We hope that our students this year will continue to treat their fellow students, white and Negro, with the respect and kindness which is expected of a college gentleman. ("Integration, Yes, Mob Violence, No," 1957)

From the perspective of the White individual who wrote that article, the campus community at State College embraced integration; however, the article still acknowledges the tension around integration in general. No incidents were reported in the previous school year, and the newspaper urged students to remain respectful while acknowledging that deep-rooted southern prejudices existed. During that same year, the state of North Carolina passed the Pearsall Plan to further delay public school integration by allowing students to be excused from integrating and requesting that the state provide private school tuition grants to White students (Douglas, 1995). It is clear that while State College allowed a few Black students to enroll, the population of North Carolina in general was resistant to integration.

Enrollment of Black students at NC State in the 1950s remained small and the institution's integration process was gradual. By 1957, Black students of both genders were enrolled at the undergraduate and graduate levels. In 1958, Irwin Holmes joined the NC State tennis team, making it the first integrated sports team at the institution. In 1960, Irwin Richard Holmes became the first Black student to graduate with a bachelor's degree, and Hazel Virginia Clarke became the first Black female to earn a graduate degree from NC State (NCSU Libraries, n.d.-b, n.d.-c).

DESEGREGATION AT VIRGINIA TECH IN THE 1950S

The first Black students enrolled at Virginia Tech (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, VPI) during the early 1950s. During this time, the few Black students who did enroll at Virginia Tech were all males and undergraduate students. As at NC State, the integration process at Virginia Tech was slow and faced some opposition. Prior to the 1950s, a few Asian students had been admitted, but no African Americans had been admitted to any White public institution in the state of Virginia (Wallenstein, 1997a). During the 1950s, the president of Virginia Tech was Dr. Walter S. Newman, who believed in segregation and was asked to be a witness in the *Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County* (1952), one of the five cases that were later collectively reviewed under *Brown* by the Supreme Court. A run-down, overcrowded Black high school in Farmville, Virginia, was promised a new school from the school board, but they only built temporary classrooms in wooden shacks. This lack of promised infrastructure initiated a student-led strike in 1951, wherein students agreed to not attend school until construction had begun on the promised new school building (Conaway, 2007). The students also contacted the Virginia NAACP, which would later file a lawsuit in the U.S. District Court on behalf of the students (*Davis v. County School Board of Prince Edward County*, 1952). The attorney representing the school board, Archibald G. Robertson, contacted Dr. Newman to be a witness in the case and testify in favor of segregation. Dr. Newman wanted to help with the case but later decided not to be a witness, as reflected in his letter to the attorney on February 9, 1952. Newman had his staff research segregation and stated that he was “hoping that we could find evidence from actual studies that segregation does not constitute discrimination . . . I was greatly disappointed not to be able to find as a result of studies something to combat this situation” (Newman, 1952). Newman then said that he no longer felt that he would be a good witness for the case, as he did not have any studies to back up his personal viewpoint on segregation. In alignment with his beliefs, the first Black student who applied in 1951 was denied admission into Virginia Tech. The Director of Admissions, Paul H. Farrier, wrote a letter to President Newman on May 21, 1951, notifying him of the application of Everett Pierce Raney. In the letter he stated that Raney is a Black student and “asked to be admitted here with junior standing to complete work for a degree in business administration . . . Virginia State in Petersburg, however, does offer a four year curriculum leading to a Bachelor’s Degree in business administration” (Farrier, 1951). The Director of Admissions was clear in his letter that there was a Black college that provided the major of business administration, therefore implying that it was unnecessary to offer him admission at Virginia Tech. At this time, there was no policy in place for admitting African American students, as there were Black colleges in the state that they could attend, which was permitted under *Plessy*. Therefore, Virginia Tech continued to remain segregated by rejecting the first Black applicant.

Despite Newman’s personal belief in maintaining segregation, segregation would inevitably end during his tenure at Virginia Tech. In 1953, another African American male, Irving L. Peddrew III, applied for admission into Virginia Tech to study electrical engineering as an undergraduate. Peddrew had also applied to the Black land-grant institution in the state, Virginia State College; however, they did not offer the electrical engineering major he desired to study (Wallenstein, 1997b). Dr. Paul Farrier, the Director of Admissions, went to interview Peddrew in Hampton, Virginia, in early September of 1953 (Cooper, 1953). The registrar at Hampton Institute, later known as Hampton University, sent a letter to President Newman recommending Peddrew. The registrar, William Cooper, stated in his letter:

Mr. Peddrew is a person of excellent character and one of the most promising undergraduates of this year’s class at the Phenix High School . . . If you are able to accept him, I am sure you will find him cooperative in working out the various problems involved. (Cooper, 1953)

Dr. Farrier and the admissions office at Virginia Tech admitted Peddrew in September 1953. The Board of Visitors released a statement articulating Peddrew's admissions qualifications and policies. It stated that Peddrew "possesses the academic qualifications prerequisite to admission and meets the required physical standards for military training" (Farrier, 1953). The Board then justified why Peddrew would be admitted into Virginia Tech as there were no other schools in the state that offered electrical engineering and to meet the terms of "separate but equal."

The *Roanoke Times* newspaper published an article on September 11, 1953, announcing that Peddrew was admitted into Virginia Tech. The article stated, "Dr. Newman announced acceptance of Peddrew after a poll of members of the Board of Visitors" ("Virginia Tech Admits First Negro, Student from Hampton", 1953). Peddrew met the academic qualifications and Virginia State College did not offer the electrical engineering major he wished to pursue. While other colleges across the South had admitted Black graduate students, Peddrew was the first undergraduate to be admitted into a southern White institution (Wallenstein, 1997a). Peddrew was allowed to enroll as a military day student and study engineering, but he was not allowed to live or eat on campus like his White classmates. While Virginia Tech officially enrolled a Black student, Peddrew's experience was still segregated, as he was not allowed to participate in extracurricular activities (Peddrew, 2002). It is clear that Virginia Tech resisted full integration on campus and still treated Peddrew differently than the White students throughout his time at the university.

In the summer of 1954, a principal from a Black high school in Virginia requested admissions applications and catalogs from Virginia Tech's Office of Admissions. The Director, Dr. Paul Farrier, asked President Newman how to best respond to requests like these. President Newman responded by stating:

I am of the opinion that in sending out such forms you should acquaint the applicant with the recent opinion of the Attorney General for the State of Virginia . . . The policy of V.P.I. is to consider applications for admission of [Negro] students provided the facilities and curricular offerings are not available at some state-supported [Negro] college in Virginia. (Newman, 1954)

Three more African American males were admitted in 1954 including Lindsay Cherry, Floyd Wilson, and Charlie L. Yates (University Archives of Virginia Tech, 2003). These three students all came from the same high school in Norfolk, Virginia, and enrolled in the engineering program and the Corps of Cadets. Ironically, Norfolk was a major area of dispute over integration of K-12 public schools under Senator Harry Byrd's Massive Resistance policies of Virginia. In an interview, Cherry discussed his offer of admission to Virginia Tech:

The first we knew of integration was when they decided to send us here to Virginia Tech. As a matter of fact and as far as I know, Virginia Tech was the very first school in the whole South to accept black students . . . Don't ask me about how it worked. All I know is they told me I was going to Virginia Tech. Dr. Newman came down and interviewed us, and we were accepted. (Cherry, 1999)

Additionally, Yates reflected on his college enrollment process. He discussed how one of his teachers, Mr. Perry, was very influential in recommending Virginia Tech to him:

A mentor, a teacher, a supporter—Mr. Perry was always somewhat of an activist, very much involved in education . . . because of his somewhat activist nature and once he learned that VT had admitted a [Black] student in 1953, I guess he wanted to show the world that students from my high school, Booker T. Washington, were trained well enough that we could also be successful at Virginia Tech. So he recommended Virginia Tech. I was sort of looking to go to at least a couple of other institutions. I recall that I applied to MIT and got accepted. But they did not offer me any scholarships. (Yates, 2000)

In the fall of 1955, Matthew Winston was the fifth Black student admitted at Virginia Tech. Later that academic year, the *Radford News Journal* published an article titled, "Not Many

Aware of Integration at VPI” and discussed the admission of Black students. “In sharp contrast to the bitter demonstrations which have greeted a Negro student’s attempt to enroll in the University of Alabama, VPI has admitted Negroes for the past three years and currently has four Negro undergraduate students” (Singo, 1956). The author went on to explain that no incidents of violence had been reported and not many people were actually aware of the integration. The publication of this article three years after the first Black student was admitted at Virginia Tech implies that the desegregation process was relatively quiet. As Black students integrated, no public demonstrations took place, unlike at other institutions in the South. Furthermore, many Deep South states would not integrate until the 1960s after enforcement by the U.S. National Guard. The lack of knowledge, or apathy, about integrating higher education in Virginia may have reflected cultural differences between the Upper South and the Deep South. Instead, with the Commonwealth’s government and Senator Harry Byrd’s attention focused on “massive resistance” in K–12 education (Gates, 2011), policymakers in Virginia may simply not have had time to obstruct college admission of African Americans.

In 1956, Essex E. Finney Jr. was the first Black student to transfer to Virginia Tech from Virginia State College (Virginia State University), the HBCU land-grant institution in Virginia. In an interview, he discussed first selecting Virginia State College and then deciding to pursue transferring to Virginia Tech. Finney (1999) explained, “in order for me to get my degree in engineering, agricultural engineering, it was necessary for me to go to an institution that offered a B.S. degree. So I decided to come to VPI.” Although the integration process was relatively discreet, Black students at this time were not fully integrated, as their access to campus facilities was limited. The African American students were allowed to attend Virginia Tech, yet they were not given the same extracurricular privileges as their White peers. These Black students were sent a clear message that they were only allowed to study at Virginia Tech and that they were not socially welcomed.

The first Black students enrolled at Virginia Tech all lived off campus in the residence of William and Janie Hoge. When Finney was admitted, the Director of Admissions explained in his acceptance letter:

It has been arranged for you to live with Mrs. William Hoge whose address is 306 E. Clay Street. This is an excellent home, and you will be taken care of in the very best way. Mrs. Hoge furnishes room, board, and laundry at the rate of \$60.00 a month (Farrier, 1956).

Lindsay Cherry (1999) was grateful for all that Mr. and Mrs. Hoge did for him and the other Black students. He noted, “what a wonderful couple to take care of us . . . they did everything for us, fed us, washed for us, cleaned and did the whole at very modest fees . . . It’s really been a wonderful experience” (Cherry, 1999). Having a house off campus was the only option for these first students, and they were grateful to have a caregiver so far from home. However, living off campus was a reminder that, although they had been admitted into Virginia Tech, they were not welcome to live in the residence halls and were still socially segregated from their White peers. While Cherry was grateful for the Hoges, these Black students still likely felt isolated and unwelcomed at Virginia Tech.

Three of the four original Black students to attend Virginia Tech dropped out and did not graduate. Peddrew left after his third year and had strong feelings of isolation (Peddrew, 2002; Wallenstein, 1997a). A controversy arose out of the possibility that Peddrew would attend the annual Virginia Tech Ring Dance with his girlfriend. A tradition dating back to 1934, the Ring Dance symbolized the hallmark of a student’s career, where the students received their class rings in their junior year (Virginia Tech, n.d.). After rumors swirled about students’ opposition to Peddrew attending, he wrote an open letter to the *Virginia Tech* newspaper:

Dear Sir: From what I understand, many of my classmates have been strongly concerned about my attending Ring Dance. It is true my girl and I had up to now hoped very much to come. What junior hasn’t? But rather than be the cause of my embarrassment to my date or my classmates, I would like

to make public my decision not to attend. I hope very much that in the near future, letters like this will not have to be written. I want to thank my many friends for their helpful encouragement. (Peddrew, 1956)

Peddrew was clearly disappointed and hurt that in his third year, he was still not socially welcome to attend one of Virginia Tech's biggest school traditions. Shortly after writing this letter in the spring, Peddrew completed his junior year, but would not return to Virginia Tech the next fall to complete his degree. Peddrew (2002) later explained, "I chose to leave here and continue my education otherwise, and not to return to the degradations, the demeaning situations that I found myself in at Tech." After three years of attending classes at Virginia Tech, Peddrew was not fully accepted and integrated into the campus community. While newspapers reported that there were no incidents of violence, African American students clearly experienced numerous incidents of isolation and discrimination. In addition to Peddrew's withdrawal, Floyd Wilson withdrew after one year to join the Air Force and Lindsay Cherry withdrew after three years (Wallenstein, 1997a).

Charlie Yates who enrolled in 1954 continued at Virginia Tech and eventually became the first Black student to graduate in 1958. His experience was more positive than Peddrew's and the other Black students. An article written in the *Norfolk Virginia Pilot* titled, "VPI's First Negro Graduate Would 'Do It All Over Again'" (1958) noted, "Yates, the first Negro to be graduated from the Virginia military and engineering institute, finished with honors. In addition, he is the first Negro to be graduated from any major southern engineering institute." In the article, Yates stated:

I've been very much impressed, pleased, and surprised at the way things worked out there. I've gotten along well with everyone, both students and faculty. I would do it all over again. I've gone alone and 'played by ear,' and I would suggest that other Negro students, in a similar situation, would do the same. My advice, would be to work hard, do his best, be careful with his actions, and take it slow. With time, acceptance will come. Try to become a friend of the students, and you'll have easy sailing. ("VPI's First Negro Graduate Would 'Do It All Over Again,'" 1958)

Yates reflected positively on his experience at Virginia Tech and was glad that he enrolled. His experience is starkly contrasted with Peddrew's difficulties at the university; however, it is understandable that being the first African American student and coming alone that first year added some complexity to Peddrew's experience. Yates, like Peddrew, was not allowed to attend the Junior Ring Dance. President Newman discussed the Ring Dance decision with the Board and "the members also expressed themselves as adhering to the previous policy of the Board regarding Negroes participating in social affairs" (Board of Visitors, 1956). Although Yates indicates that he had a positive experience, he was the only one of the first four Black students to successfully graduate.

In 1959, two more Black students were admitted, James Whitehurst and Robert Wells, who both successfully graduated. Whitehurst's personal goal was to receive the best education and he said he chose Virginia Tech over Virginia State because he felt the institution offered better professors and resources (Wallenstein, 1997a). Whitehurst was interested in studying physics but chose electrical engineering in order to be admitted into Virginia Tech, as Virginia State did offer a physics major (Wallenstein, 1997a). Early in the 1960s, Whitehurst became the first Black student to live on campus and attend the Ring Dance. He later became the first Black member of the Board of Visitors in the 1970s (University Archives of Virginia Tech, 2003). Whitehurst was able to push through more barriers, as the first few students paved a pathway for him to help further integrate the campus.

Virginia Tech in the 1950s admitted a total of eight Black males into the engineering program. All students lived off campus and were classified as "military day students." The students were excluded from social activities and not able to live on campus. While three of the first four students did not complete their degrees, five of the original eight students admitted in the 1950s graduated from Tech. The experiences of the first Black students were challenging,

and racism among both the administration and White students was evident. Although there were not any reported incidents of physical violence or major demonstrations, Black students were not fully integrated into the campus, and several of them dropped out. Several of the students who stayed and completed their degrees discussed their experiences in a positive manner. Notably, Yates later returned to Virginia Tech as a faculty member in the engineering department, after obtaining his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins (University Archives of Virginia Tech, 2003).

CONCLUSION

The stories of the first Black students at two similar land-grant institutions are important, overlooked milestones in the postsecondary desegregation literature. Although many historians have focused on the violent resistance to desegregation at some higher education institutions in the Deep South, this study highlights the integration of two Upper South land-grant institutions. Paradoxically, land-grant institutions in southern states refused to integrate in the late 1800s and decided to share the land-grant designation with a Black college in the same state. However, the story of integration in the 1950s shows that the two institutions were not truly “separate but equal.” All of the first Black students at both NC State and Virginia Tech were admitted because the engineering majors they were interested in were not offered at the Black land-grant institution (or any other public Black college) in their state of residency. So while there were both Black and White land-grant institutions in each southern state, Black students were not offered as many majors, particularly in engineering, compared to White students attending their respective land-grant institution. This inequity ultimately was the beginning of postsecondary integration at land-grant institutions in North Carolina and Virginia.

There were many differences in the desegregation process at NC State and Virginia Tech, but there were also numerous similarities. The desegregation process began as both institutions admitted the first Black student in 1953, a year before the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Both institutions had resistant administrations that supported segregation and were reluctant to change. Offers of admission came only after some Black students were denied admission. The first Black students admitted were offered admission only in cases where a specific major or degree was not offered at the state-designated land-grant HBCU. Overall, newspapers and White administrators reported positively on integration at both institutions and indicated that the process was non-violent.

The Black students admitted at the two institutions in the 1950s varied by gender, location, and degree level. Virginia Tech admitted only Black male undergraduate students in the engineering program. In contrast, NC State admitted male and female students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The students who attended Virginia Tech were not from the local area and many of them traveled more than four hours to attend the institution. In contrast, the majority of the original Black students at NC State lived in the local Raleigh area.

Unlike the first Black students at NC State, Black students at Virginia Tech were not socially integrated into the campus culture. For example, the Virginia Tech students did not live on campus in the 1950s and were required to live off-campus at a local Black couple’s home. During the first year, the NC State students resided with their families, because they were all locally based; however, the second year that NC State enrolled undergraduates, the university offered them on-campus housing and several students accepted. Furthermore, the Black students at Virginia Tech were not allowed to have the same social privileges as White students, such as living on campus, eating in the cafeteria, and attending social events. In contrast, extracurricular activities and social events integrated at a faster pace at NC State, including participation in intercollegiate athletics and the marching band. Although NC State seemingly integrated at a faster rate, Black students likely had some trouble adjusting since a few students even dropped out.

Both Virginia Tech and NC State had administrations that were reluctant to integrate, but conformed when influenced by federal and state court rulings, similar to other institutions in the South (Wallenstein, 2008). Virginia Tech was the first White institution in the South to admit an African American student at the undergraduate level, and NC State followed three years later. According to the newspapers, White students at both schools were relatively tolerant of the new Black students, and there were no major demonstrations of protest such as those that occurred at institutions in the Deep South. However, the newspapers provide a limited perspective on the thoughts and attitudes of White students and it is possible that while there were no major demonstrations, White students were resistant to integration. Evidence of this resistance is found in Peddrew's account of how upset White students were with the possibility of him attending the Ring Dance at Virginia Tech.

While some of the first Black students to attend the two institutions examined here did not graduate, the ones who did reflected positively about their experiences. Compared to the experiences often cited in scholarship about the integration of higher education in the Deep South, the experiences of the first Black students in North Carolina and Virginia seemed less controversial (Wallenstein, 2008). NC State and Virginia Tech administrators were slow to change their policies and to accept African American students; however, they did not resist integration like similar institutions attempted to do in the Deep South. Although segregation in any form is intolerant and unequal, the administrations of both institutions accommodated Black students in the 1950s, which was much earlier than many other institutions in the South. For instance, as NC State admitted their first Black students in 1953, neighboring Duke University began discussing integration starting in 1954, but would not officially integrate until 1963 (Kean, 2008).

Desegregation at both NC State and Virginia Tech was gradual, similar to other institutions in the Upper South (Wallenstein, 2008). White students and the administration were reluctant to change in many ways, but were non-violent and did not protest. Although there were no large displays of racism and intolerance, the narratives of these first students' experiences are often told by White administrators, teachers, reporters, and students. Both universities resisted integration for as long as they could and would only allow Black students to enroll under very narrow circumstances. These first African American students were courageous, as they faced many new challenges in a society where segregation was accepted and defended by the White majority. Virginia Tech and NC State are examples of a slow and non-violent integration process compared to the tumultuous integration of higher education at other southern institutions. While several of these Black students successfully enrolled and graduated, many students were isolated from their campus communities and left before graduating. It is important to recognize these institutions as pioneers for postsecondary integration in the South, while also acknowledging their inherent resistance to integration and remembering the lesser-told stories of the Black students that were the first on these campuses.

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