

# **Clemson and Harvey Gantt**

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January 28, 1963, was an important day for the United States of America and for Clemson Agricultural College of South Carolina. One of the most memorable days in Clemson history, it stands as only one of a few days when an action taken at Clemson truly affected the nation. It was “integration day,” the day that the first public, traditionally-white institution in South Carolina since Reconstruction admitted an African-American student.

What made the day all the more important was that it culminated in some ways the more than two-decade legal struggle of African Americans for “civil rights.” While the battle itself was as old as the nation, even as old as European North America, the confluence of many streams swelled mightily with President Harry Truman’s executive order in 1948 ending racial segregation in the American military. In May 1954, the United States Supreme Court unanimously overturned its 1896 “Plessy versus Ferguson” decision permitting “separate but equal” treatment of the races.

For Clemson Agricultural College of South Carolina, the historical streams originated in a series of events as well. Thomas Green Clemson had founded the school by his will, which was drafted in 1886 and submitted for probate shortly after his death on April 6, 1888.

The will provided for the creation of a “high seminary of learning,” a school mindful of the needs of the agriculturally engaged citizens of South Carolina. Mr. Clemson also urged those who carried out the provisions of the will to model the new school after the Agricultural College of Mississippi, now Mississippi State University in Starkville. This recommendation and the Morrill Act’s stipulation (1862) that all land-grant colleges must teach military tactics, are why Clemson opened its doors as a military institution, which it remained until 1955. The will is remarkable for its

time in that it made no restrictions on who might benefit from the institution; no restrictions on residency, gender, or race were included. The only other provision Mr. Clemson stipulated was the considerable authority he granted the school’s board of trustees. He established seven life trustees as a self-perpetuating corporation and provided that should the state accept his donation the legislature could name up to six additional members. The majority, therefore, would always rest with the life trustees.

After more than a year of political maneuvering and dispute, John Richardson, Governor of South Carolina, signed what has come to be known as the “Act of Acceptance” (November 27, 1889). Following this formality, it took slightly less than four years to build the college, hire the faculty, and design the curriculum. When the college opened for business, the president, the secretary-treasurer, fifteen faculty, a physician, and a janitor greeted four hundred forty-six students. (In the same year, the University of South Carolina in Columbia had about one hundred students.) Despite the latitude of the will, every student admitted was a white male from South Carolina, but the restrictions avoided by the will were there in force on July 6, 1893.

The residency restriction was relaxed as students from neighboring states started to enroll in the first decade of the twentieth century. But the all-male, all-white characteristics would remain for another half century or more. In fact, there were some, including Trustee and United States Senator Benjamin Ryan Tillman who declared that the composition and authority of the board was designed to guarantee racial separation. (Tillman Papers, CUL Special Collection)

By the 1950s, the Clemson Board of Trustees was convinced that the school needed to change if it was to remain useful to the state. Charles

Daniel, the industrialist-trustee, proposed hiring a management-consulting group, Cresap, McCormick and Paget, to make recommendations. In their report, the consultants urged ending gender segregation. The trustees adopted the recommendation because there was no restriction against women in the will. In the autumn of 1955, women were admitted to Clemson for the first time. But racial restrictions, required by the South Carolina Constitution of 1895, remained.

Yet at the same time, the civil rights movement was gaining momentum across the country. To counter this impetus, the South Carolina legislature established the “Gressette Committee” in an effort among other things to maintain racial separation in all South Carolina schools. Nevertheless in 1960, Harvey Gantt, an African-American high-school student from Charleston, applied to study architecture at Clemson, which was and is considered one of the leading undergraduate programs in the United States. By chance he met the civil rights lawyer, now Federal judge, Matthew Perry who remembered, “I met him when I was in Charleston handling a case that involved a student demonstration, and young Harvey Gantt and others were involved. He came up to me and said, ‘Hello. My name is Harvey Gantt. I’m going to be an architect. I want to go to school at what I understand is one of the finest schools of architecture in the country, Clemson College. But I understand [that] there might be a problem, and they tell me that I might not qualify because of the color of my skin.’ He wanted to know if he applied and was not accepted, whether I felt I could, nevertheless, try to get him in. In other states, we were reading about black students being admitted pursuant to court order. Just over in Georgia, there was the case of Charlene Hunter. There were other such cases . . . [for example,] down in Alabama. So, you see, he was mindful of what

was going on around the country. So, he and I established our relationship right there. I immediately considered him a bright young man. People thereafter have said, ‘Well, you certainly chose a very fine, very bright young person. We didn’t choose Harvey Gantt. He found me.’” (Interview of Reel and Michael Allsep with Matthew Perry, February 2000).

Harvey Gantt first wrote Clemson asking for the school catalog in 1959. He was, at that point, interested in four schools: Clemson, Howard, Iowa State, and Tuskegee. “[My] counselor at Burke High School pointed out that 99% of the people in this country who practice architecture are white, and you need to be trained at an institution where they are.” (Interview of Reel and Allsep with Gantt, January 2000.) Based upon his counselor’s advice, Gantt enrolled at Iowa State where the South Carolina Regional Education Board paid \$149.51 per quarter (the difference in the cost between in-state and out-of-state tuition and fees) rather than permit him to attend Clemson, which had the only architecture program in the state. Gantt recalled, “It was only when I got [to Iowa] that I realized I didn’t want to be there. I realized I was a child of the South. It was the South where I wanted to be. It was only when I got there [that] I discovered kids who were going to graduate from the school . . . [and] go on to practice architecture in Iowa or maybe Illinois or Nebraska. I certainly didn’t want to stay there. It was January of 1961 when I decided [to apply to Clemson] after traipsing across to the physics class and freezing my nose in the 23 degree below zero weather. When I got back to my dorm, I said, ‘This is for the birds. There is no way I will stay here. I’m not used to this.’” So Gantt applied to transfer from Iowa State to Clemson. He remembered that the correspondence with Clemson was pleasant until the transcript from Burke High School, an all African-

American school in Charleston, arrived. The court records show that Gantt was not accepted at Clemson because his application was incomplete; it seems the most recent transcripts had not been sent by the Iowa school. Though the application was still incomplete, Gantt was, nevertheless, asked to come for an interview. Accompanying him on that initial visit was Timothy Cornelius Fludd, another prospective student, and Matthew Perry. Perry remembered, "... we did not go on campus. We fully understood that that would be inappropriate." In June of 1962, it was too late to be admitted for the fall semester. Robert Cook Edwards, then the President of Clemson College remembered, "Let's look at the picture as it was at that time. Following the [1954] Supreme Court decision, the General Assembly of South Carolina became really concerned. The legislature created a committee, which became known as the "Gressette Committee." The late state Senator Marion Gressette was the chairman.... A provision was written [and approved by the committee] that in the event of integration, funds would be stopped, and for all practical purposes, we would [have been] out of business. We would have been shut down. In June of 1962, Matthew Perry, attorney at that time, came to the campus with Harvey Gantt and Timothy Cornelius Fludd for their interview. I happened to be in Gaffney at the Peach Festival at that time. Dean Kenneth Vickery [Dean of Admissions and Registration] telephoned me and let me know what had happened. There had been enough correspondence over time with Harvey. He was enrolled at that time at Iowa State, but he was determined to have a degree in architecture from Clemson.... We were boxed in as to what we could legally do.... Early on, I talked with state Senator Edgar Brown, the chairman of the [Clemson] Board of Trustees.... We all knew that Harvey Gantt was qualified for admission to

Clemson. We recognized that we had to go through the judicial process, but we were going to go through it step by step...in the most positive way possible and accomplish everything we could with the least confusion at every step." (Interview of Harry Durham with Robert C. Edwards, November 2002.)

The pace quickened significantly in the autumn of 1962. During the summer, Gantt had filed suit in court to gain admission. As the case moved from court to court five different times, Perry and Edwards took the measure of each other, each gaining the other's respect, a respect that would ultimately lead to friendship. Perry remembered that, "Based upon the Dr. Edwards that I came to know subsequently, I have to feel that Dr. Edwards would have gladly received Harvey Gantt had he not been operating under the [state's] restrictions." Forty years after Gantt's admission, Dr. Edwards still feels that the integration of Clemson would have been unquestionably more difficult if Gantt and Perry had not been men of sterling character.

After the suit had been filed, the first ruling of Judge Cecil Wyche was that because Clemson did not have a complete application the school was not in violation of the law. Undeterred, Perry appealed to the Fourth Circuit Court in Richmond, which overturned the decision returning it to the lower court to try the case on merit. During Thanksgiving week, Justice Wyche ruled again in Clemson's favor. Like the first, that decision was appealed to the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals which overturned it. Clemson College's lawyer, William L. Watkins, then took the case to the Supreme Court. In January, Chief Justice Earl Warren upheld the Circuit Court's ruling that Gantt should be admitted at the start of the next semester. As Chief Justice Earl Warren emerged from a barber shop, he was handed Clemson's appeal by Mr. Watkins. Warren read it and wrote, "Denied, E.

W.” The legal phase was over. Gantt would be admitted in the spring of 1963 with the blessing of the United States Supreme Court.

Having survived the terrible September of 1962 in Mississippi, President John F. Kennedy and Attorney General Robert Kennedy were very concerned about South Carolina. Senator Edgar Brown, as President of the Clemson College Board of Trustees, called on the Attorney General in Washington to assure him that civil order would be maintained because the Clemson administration had a plan for peace.

Indeed they did. Even before the legal actions had started, Edwards, given his commitments to the state and especially his commitment to Clemson, had begun the planning process. Dutifully, he met with the Clemson board and kept them apprised each step of the way. He discussed the impending change with faculty leaders, administrators, and student leaders, among them the President of the Student Body, Bill Hendrix. President Edwards arranged for the student



*John K. Cauthen*



*Charles Daniel*

leaders to meet in early October 1962. He explained the process that would be followed and told the students the issue would be settled in the courts. Hendrix, now a Life Trustee of Clemson University, remembered, “Dr. Edwards and Dean Cox were clear in the way they conveyed the coming events to us, about what was going to take place, and how we were going to deal with it. They made it clear that it was going to be a peaceful, appropriate academic acceptance for our first African-American student.” (Interview of Harry Durham with Bill Hendrix, October 25, 2002.) The business leadership of the state through Charles Daniel, the construction magnate, and John Cauthen, Director of the Textile Management Association, were also kept well informed. Governor Ernest Hollings, then in the last months of his term, was firm in his support of Dr. Edwards’s plan. Edwards also visited with Donald Russell, the governor-elect who was similarly supportive. One of Dr. Edwards’s decisions was to issue 4,300 students, nearly 2,000 staff members, and 400 faculty members a picture

identification card. Jim Burns, who was in charge of Clemson photography, remembered, “We had to photograph each one of them and put the picture on a laminated I.D. card to keep strangers from coming on campus [and causing] trouble. (Interview of Harry Durham with Jim Burns, December 2002.) Burns was also asked by Edwards to be the primary contact with the State Constabulary (now known as the State Law Enforcement Division or SLED) because he had been an officer in the Greenville Police Department since 1946. (Interview of Harry Durham with Jim Burns, December 2002.) Through his work in Greenville, Burns got to know Peter Strom, SLED’s director, very well, so it was both a useful and most appropriate contact. Burns was also assigned to work with the press covering Gantt’s arrival.

Finally, the planned-for day arrived. Matthew Perry remembered, “The morning of the trip to Clemson, I met in the office of the State Attorney General first and then in the Office of the Governor. This was when I was given the written itinerary that I have come to know that Dr. Edwards authored.” When Perry was asked if there was a fear that an effort would be made to stop the process on the 120-mile drive from Columbia to Clemson, he commented, “We were being preceded up the road by highway patrolmen as much as a half mile or more away, we were being followed ... by another such officer, and we were being monitored from the air. We arrived in Greenville where at a prearranged place Mr. Gantt [Harvey’s father] and Reverend Blake [Harvey’s minister] got out of the vehicle, and we proceeded. The plan was to arrive at Clemson as close to 1:30 as possible. Harvey became aware that he and I were going to part company when he got out of my car at the administration building. The plan was for somebody ... to escort me around to the dormitory where Gantt was to stay. Others were

to remove his luggage from my vehicle, and I was instructed to exit the campus along a specified route. So Harvey knew that once he got out of my car, we would not see each other again, certainly not at the moment on that date. And the record will display that we arrived in front of [Tillman Hall] at 1:34 p.m.” Had the two men not stopped somewhere along U.S. 123 to allow Gantt an opportunity to make sure he had not forgotten his checkbook, they no doubt would have been precisely on time! (interview of Reel and Allsep with Matthew Perry, February 2000).

As Gantt left Perry’s car, a select cadre of newsmen and photographers confronted him. About one hundred students were also in front of Tillman Hall, the central administration building. Other than the clicking of camera shutters, the scribbling of pencils and pens, the muffled voices of the journalists speaking into tape recorders, all were quiet and respectful. No epithets or taunts were shouted, no antagonizing signs displayed, no rocks thrown. All were quiet and respectful.

Gantt entered the building with the statue of the founder, Thomas Green Clemson, behind him. Through the Romanesque archway at the base of the bell tower and into the hall, Gantt moved with an escort of college officials towards the registrar’s office. A few journalists of each medium followed in his wake. He matriculated, wrote a check for his tuition and fees, gave a brief interview to the press, and walked three blocks to the office of Harlan McClure, dean of Clemson’s School of Architecture and a highly regarded architect himself. McClure, many years later, remembered that Harvey was polite and reserved as he presented his transcript and the catalog from Iowa State for course evaluation. Normally this duty is performed by the student’s faculty advisor, but Dr. Edwards was determined that there would be no mistakes.



*Harvey Gantt answers questions from the press, January 28, 1963*



*Harvey Gantt consults with Dean Harlan McClure, January 28, 1963*

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that there were no problems. During the months of preparation for Gantt's admission, several crude "hate" letters were received by the administration. Furthermore, a spate of Ku Klux Klan rallies took place around the state. Former Governor Ernest B. Fritz Hollings remembered, "It began the day I was inaugurated. I will never forget walking back up [to the State House and finding], a green [and] gold embossed envelope on my desk. I had [been given] a lifetime membership to the Grand Klavern of the Klan. I got hold of Peter Strom and asked if we had many Ku Klux Klan [members] in this state because I had never run into it." He said, "We sure have. We have got 1687 members." I said, "Well, let's get rid of them." He said, "You are the first governor that is willing to do it." Strom told Hollings that there had been weekly meetings of the Klan, including Klansmen from North Carolina. Hollings continued, "So I had to control that group, and then I moved on from there. I knew where the trouble would come from, and I moved with the university authorities. There is none better than Dr. Edwards, himself. He and I were, of course, friends. [As the chief state law enforcement officer, however,] I was in charge. We were not going to have any of that nonsense that they



*Governor Hollings with Clemson President R. C. Edwards, c. 1962*

had at Oxford, Mississippi, and the other college campuses. Bobby Kennedy and I were two of 'Ten Young Men of the Year' back in 1954, [so] we were close friends. I told Robert, 'Don't be sending marshals running around here starting news stories about all the trouble we are going to have.'" (Interview of Harry Durham with Ernest B. Hollings, December 2002.) Fortunately—and for whatever reason—the Federal government did take a hands-off approach in South Carolina.



*President Edwards conducts a press conference*

The press was also something of an unpredictable element. At that time, Clemson College owned and operated the Clemson House, a pleasant eight-story brick hotel with Tillman Hall and Bowman Field directly down the hill. The press corps was encouraged to stay in the Clemson House, and, from them, a small pool of journalists was accredited to be on campus at any one time. Before the event, there was a briefing set up by Joe Sherman and the College News Services staff. Governor Hollings told the journalists, ". . . the primary function here is education, but you will have Harvey Gantt [to interview] when he comes on campus . . ." (interview of Harry Durham with Ernest F. Hollings, December 2002). Sherman met with the media on the Sunday evening before Gantt's arrival. Telephone lines for the press were



set up in the Clemson House basement and lounge. On the evening of the 28<sup>th</sup> when the Gantt enrollment was complete, Dr. Edwards recalled that, “Everything went off precisely and beautifully....” (Interview of Harry Durham with Robert C. Edwards, December 2002). Edwards has long given much of the credit for the success in handling the media, and tempering public opinion, to Wayne Freeman, editor of the *Greenville News*).

The day ended without trouble, but that is not the end of the story. After Gantt registered, President Edwards shook his hand and welcomed him into the Clemson family. Gantt commented that because of the administration’s firmness, there were no altercations. Just to be safe, Gantt was followed for a few months by young SLED agents. He remembered, “I recall an architecture buddy of mine faking a fight just to see what would happen. [We wanted to] see whether or not there would be people coming out of the woodwork and sure enough they were still there....One afternoon after a football game [in the fall of 1963], some students were inebriated, and somebody on the fourth or fifth floor of [Johnstone dormitory] ... yelled out something to the effect, ‘Nigger, go home.’ [But this was] definitely not the pattern at all.”



*Harvey Gantt moves into Johnstone Hall, Jan. 28, 1963*

After a few days had gone by, Bill Hendrix, the former student-body president, and his close friend, Joe Swann, now a Clemson trustee, went to call on Harvey. “We went by and met him and introduced ourselves and had a brief talk. After that, I really never crossed paths with him very often. He was in the architecture department where the students stayed basically by themselves.”

On weekends, Anna Reid and other members of the Clemson African-American community offered Harvey a taste of home. He became involved with the Golden View Baptist Church, and Mrs. Reid remembered, “He joined the adult choir and he just sang.” In 2003, Gantt publicly acknowledged his debt to the Clemson staff, especially the African-American custodians, gardeners, and cafeteria line workers who always



*Harvey Gantt receives Clemson diploma, May 29, 1965*

had a kind word, a smile, or an extra helping for their young hero.

In the fall semester of 1963, a few more African-American students enrolled in Clemson. Among them was mathematics major, Lucinda Brawley. She and Harvey met, began to date, and fell in love. Ronnie Estes was one of the new students admitted that year. Estes recalled that, “Lucinda and I became friendly, and she sometimes

rode on the back of my motor scooter. Eventually [however] she and Harvey got together.”

In his conversation in January of 2003 with Harry Durham, President Edwards remembered that a reporter asked, “Do you consider this to be a great day for Clemson?” Edwards said to the reporter, “I simply stated that as far as I was concerned, we are happy that things occurred as they have, and we’ll let future generations determine whether this was the greatest day in the life of this institution” (interview of Harry Durham with Robert C. Edwards, November 2002).

Forty years have gone by. More than a generation has passed. The racial violence associated with the civil rights movements has had a profound effect on the conscience of America. It is not too much to see in the people and the events surrounding Harvey Gantt’s peaceful entrance into Clemson a new direction. Clemson Agricultural College of South Carolina’s peaceful and purposeful response to one of America’s greatest challenges was a turning point in the long struggle for civil rights. South Carolina’s response to one of its greatest challenges was a great day for Clemson, a great day for South Carolina, and a great day for the United States.

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