

Introduction: “Quiet Courage”

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On Jan. 28, 1963, Harvey Bernard Gantt walked into Tillman Hall accompanied by hordes of photographers, reporters and curious onlookers. They were there to watch history being made—not just Clemson history, but American history.

It was Clemson history because Gantt was the University's first African American student—a native-born South Carolinian who simply wanted to study architecture and wanted to study it at Clemson.

It was American history because of what did NOT happen that day. Unlike desegregation at most previously all-white Southern institutions of higher learning, Clemson's integration occurred without riots, violence, the presence of federal marshals, protests or acts of defiance by students, government leaders or anyone else. For the era, this was an amazing feat—one that was called "integration with dignity" by the *Saturday Evening Post* and one that has often been called Clemson's finest hour.

In January 2003, Clemson celebrated the 40th anniversary of desegregation with two full days of events that included a national conference on issues facing today's African American college students, the unveiling of a historical marker outside Tillman, a roundtable discussion featuring the people who were there, and the campus premiere of a documentary retelling the fascinating story.

The anniversary also provided an opportunity to educate current students about this particular part of Clemson history. As journalist and author Juan Williams said when speaking on campus in 1991, "Over half the American people were born after 1965 ... therefore, most of the people did not live through the heart of the civil rights

movement. People don't know about the sacrifices that people, black and white, had to make."

On July 7, 1962, Gantt filed suit against Clemson and its Board of Trustees, becoming the first African American legally to challenge the long-standing tradition of denying admission to black students. Behind the University's admission policies were a state constitution that required its public schools to be segregated and a state law that said a school that chose to desegregate could face termination of state funding and closure.

In support of Gantt and his attorneys, including current U.S. District Court Judge Matthew Perry (who recently received an honorary degree from Clemson), were a Supreme Court ruling abolishing the "separate but equal" tradition, which allowed school segregation as long as both races had access to equal facilities, and a growing number of precedents from legal challenges in other states.

The national environment at the time of Gantt's suit was ominous. James Meredith's attempt to enroll at the University of Mississippi just months earlier had led to rioting and bloodshed, causing two deaths and dozens of injuries. Alabama Gov. George Wallace stood in the doorway at the University of Alabama, refusing to allow access to federal troops sent to enforce a court order.

Few expected South Carolina to be different. State leaders had convened a powerful and influential committee of legislators and gubernatorial appointees—named the Gressette Committee after its chair, Sen. Marion Gressette—to study and recommend actions on racial issues. However, many assumed the committee's unofficial charge to be the preservation of segregated schools.

But desegregation was different in South Carolina—and not by accident. There were three critical ingredients in Clemson's success: (1) a

defense strategy that bought Clemson valuable months to prepare; (2) the behind-the-scenes work of a group of state leaders, galvanized by Clemson President R. C. Edwards, to influence and change public opinion and develop a strategic plan for what they saw as the inevitable end of segregation; and (3) Gantt himself.

In its response to Gantt's suit, Clemson claimed that it had not denied admission, merely delayed a decision until Gantt completed all admission requirements. Because colleges have substantial discretion over how they evaluate applicants, particularly transfer students, the argument was plausible enough to win early courtroom battles.

Edwards made wise use of the time earned during the appeals process, leading what one reporter later called "a conspiracy for peace" by gaining the support of some of the state's most powerful voices:

- Edgar Brown, state senator and chairman of Clemson's Board of Trustees, who voiced Gantt's enrollment as simply this: Violence would not be tolerated at Clemson—a position no legislator or editorial writer could gracefully oppose;
- S.C. Gov. Ernest Hollings, now senior U.S. senator, who ordered state law enforcement officials to develop a foolproof plan to ensure that Gantt's enrollment would be orderly, and later convinced U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy not to send federal marshals to the Palmetto State;
- Construction giant Charlie Daniel, whose public comments about "fairness" for black citizens influenced legislators, editorial writers and the general public;
- Gressette himself, who—to the disappointment of those who saw his committee as the protector of segregation—turned out to be dedicated to preserving peace, law and order, not the status quo.

Edwards, a powerful voice in his own right, set the tone early by declaring that Clemson would not disobey the law and would not close. In private meetings with key legislators, Edwards put his job on the line, saying he would resign if they did not support his handling of Gantt's enrollment.

While this unofficial team collaborated to change public opinion, Edwards' administration put together a plan to ensure that Gantt's enrollment would be uneventful. He sent his public relations director, Joe Sherman, to Mississippi to learn from their mistakes. Sherman developed a strategy for managing the news media that kept sensationalism and inflammatory tactics at bay.

The dean of students, future president Walter Cox, engaged student government leaders—current trustees Bill Hendrix and Joe Swann among them—to maintain order among the student body. In a memo to Clemson students, Cox wrote, "The faculty and administration of Clemson College have confidence in the intelligence and integrity of our students and expect them to exercise good judgment," but also warned that lawlessness and disorder would not be tolerated. Finally, Edwards made sure that Gantt and his attorneys were fully informed about and satisfied with plans for managing the enrollment.

"We kept each other informed of what was happening and why it was happening," says Edwards. "I am sure that the reason we succeeded and did not have the problems that might have occurred was the fact that everybody knew everything they needed to know as it occurred."

Gantt continues to admire Edwards for his courage and leadership. "He was on the front line. He was like the general out there with the infantry, so to speak," says Gantt. "All of the other political leaders were back in Columbia or somewhere else. He was right there, right in the middle of it."

But while state and University leaders deserve the praise they have earned for Clemson's desegregation, many say that the majority of credit goes to Gantt himself.

"There is no question in my mind ... that the [successful integration of Clemson] would not have been possible if we had not had Harvey Gantt, the wonderful person that he is, and Judge [Matthew] Perry, the wonderful person that he is, and the understanding of everyone involved of the responsibility to work together in a positive manner," says Edwards.

Those who watched as students had the same impression. "[Gantt] did not come across as someone who was there to prove something or someone who had a chip on his shoulder, but as a student," says Hendrix.

Possibly the only person who was *not* surprised by Clemson's handling of desegregation was Harvey Gantt.

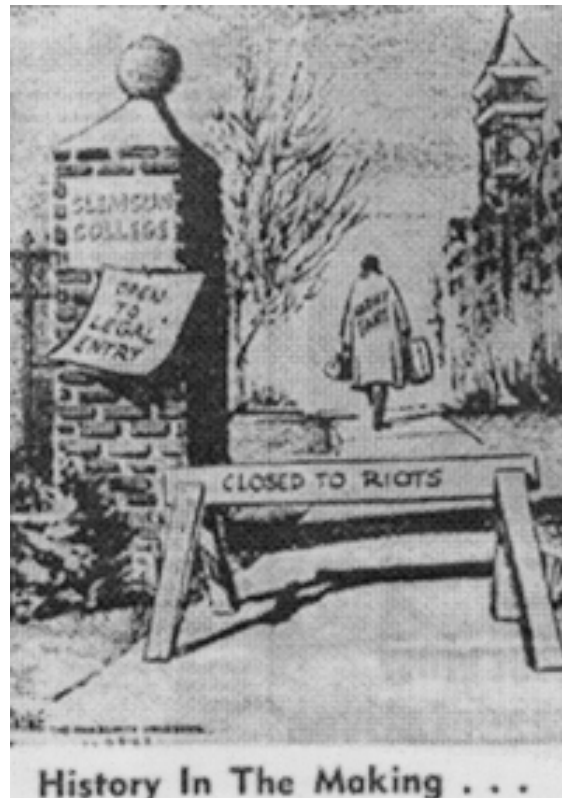
"Maybe it was just a gut feeling," says Gantt. "The Clemson gentleman was always something we heard about. There was this suggestion that even if people disagreed with [desegregation], they would be civil about it." As he followed events unfolding in state newspapers, including *The Tiger*, Gantt says he had the sense that people on campus "would not get out of line or do anything to hurt Clemson's image."

Hendrix recalls that when he and Swann went to Gantt's room to introduce themselves, "He was by himself, and everything was quiet." Hendrix realized at that moment how much courage it must have taken for Gantt to walk into Tillman Hall, knowing he would be the only African American student on campus.

Fortunately, that distinction didn't last long, beginning with the arrival the following semester of Lucinda Brawley, who would later become Gantt's wife. Today, Clemson's student population

includes people of all colors, religions and 95 nationalities.

Gantt's entry paved the way not only for other minority students, but also for a more diverse and advanced Clemson—a Clemson in which South Carolina and America can take much pride.



The rest of the story

In 1965, Harvey Gantt graduated from Clemson with honors in architecture. In 1970, he received a master's degree in city planning from Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He's practiced architecture for over three decades in Charlotte, N.C., where he also served two terms as mayor. He's currently a partner in the architectural and city planning firm of Gantt/Huberman Architects.

His past and present affiliations with professional organizations include being a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects and a board member

and vice president of the N.C. Board of Architecture. He's also a member of the American Planning Association, the Minority Affairs Committee of the American Institute of Architects and the N.C. Design Foundation.

Lucinda Brawley Gantt finished her college career at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She's worked for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System; Peat, Marwick, Mitchell; and F.D.Y. Inc. Currently, she's business manager of East Towne Manor, an assisted-living establishment.

The Gantts continue to be prominent residents of Charlotte where they raised four children. They have long been active in numerous civic, professional, cultural and educational organizations.

They also continue to support Clemson. Gantt has held various posts with Clemson's College of Architecture, Arts and Humanities. He's currently a member of the President's Advisory Board.

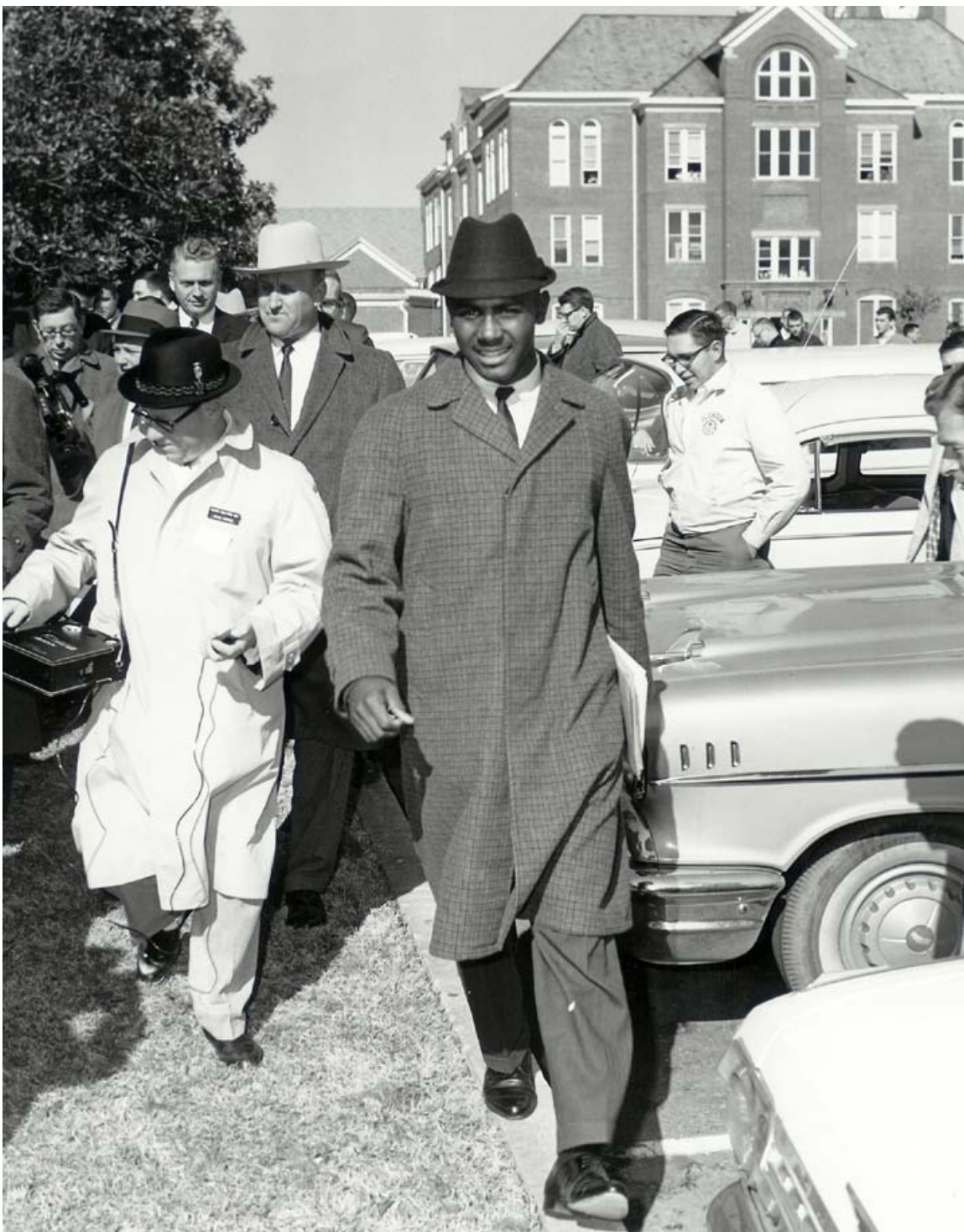
A Scholarship Endowment Fund was established in the late 1980s to honor Gantt and has since produced many outstanding Gantt Scholars. In 2000, Clemson's multicultural affairs office suite in the Hendrix Student Center was named for Harvey and Lucinda Gantt.

Even those with tremendous foresight could not have imagined the enduring legacy Gantt's courage and quiet grace would have for Clemson, the state of South Carolina and far beyond.

Harry Durham contributed to this article.



Harvey Gantt in Registrar's Office, January 28, 1963



Harvey Gantt walking on campus after registering, January 28, 1963