

# PERSISTENT RESISTANCE: The Struggle Against School Integration in Tuscaloosa, Alabama (1956-2007)

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*Seventy years after the supreme court ruled “separate but equal” education illegal, the Tuscaloosa City School system is still deeply segregated: Central and Bryant High are around 90% Black while the city’s third high school, Northridge, (and the city’s private “segregation academies”) are majority-white. This article takes national narratives of desegregation history and applies them locally through analysis of school board documents, court rulings, white newspapers, and interviews with teachers and administrators from Central High School. With this hyper-local focus, the article uncovers the overt and implicitly violent mechanisms of white resistance that Tuscaloosans used to maintain this school segregation. Through an examination spanning fifty years of white Tuscaloosans’ segregationist policies and protest, this article expands upon the research of segregated education by highlighting the power of local white people to fight school integration and ultimately perpetuate white supremacy in America.*

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## Introduction

In 1885, the citizens of Tuscaloosa established their public school system. From the start, it was marked by startling inequity. White children attended a brick schoolhouse while Black students went to school next to the railroad yard and city horse barn. At the Black school, three teachers instructed five grades with 173 students enrolled.<sup>2</sup> Today, more than a century later, in a time when Americans supposedly value integration and equality, schools remain unofficially segregated and majority-Black schools still face disparities in educational resources and support. The percentage of intensely segregated, minority schools (90-100% non-white students) has tripled since the height of integration for Black students in 1988.<sup>3</sup> This observation begs the question: how is it possible, after the dismantling of Jim Crow and the push for equality during the Civil Rights Era, that segregated education still persists?

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<sup>2</sup> McDonald Hughes, *A History and Personal Account of Secondary Education for Blacks in the Tuscaloosa City School System, 1889-1976* (Hughes, 1979) 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Erica Frankenberg et al., “Harming our Common Future: America’s Segregated Schools 65 Years After Brown,” [www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu](http://www.civilrightsproject.ucla.edu). (2019), 21.

Tuscaloosa serves as an important case study for the history of segregation in America. The city saw one of the earliest instances of a Black student integrating a public white university after the *Brown v. Board* ruling;<sup>4</sup> the public school system was then radically integrated under federal oversight, and after it was later released from court supervision, Tuscaloosa became one of the most extensively resegregated school districts in the country.<sup>5</sup> This return to segregated education fifty years after the *Brown* ruling suggests the presence of a powerful, continuous, and understudied white resistance movement. This paper will investigate the evolution of white resistance to integration through analysis of the protests led by local politicians, educational leaders, white supremacist organizations, and families as well as the policy of local, state, and national authorities.

Elizabeth McRae's *Mothers of Mass Resistance* and Joseph Bagley's *Politics of White Rights* inspired the methodological framework for this essay. As opposed to scholars like Gary Orfield or Charles Clotfelter whose work quantified integration and resegregation using enrollment data, McRae and Bagley used analysis of political rhetoric, legislative action, and protest events to describe the deliberate preservation of white supremacist power structures.<sup>6</sup> In a similar vein, this paper analyzes local primary source documentation such as city school documents, local and national white newspapers (namely the *Tuscaloosa News*), court rulings, and interviews with city school employees and students.

Nikole Hannah-Jones, reporter for *The New York Times* and developer of The 1619 Project, largely inspired the hyper-local focus for this investigation.<sup>7</sup> Her work, "Segregation Now," outlines the history of segregation in the Tuscaloosa City Schools (TCS) through an intergenerational family history. Similarly, this investigation uses a local scale of analysis to show how white Tuscaloosans perpetuated a system of racially segregated education over the course of fifty years. This local historical approach is significant because it reveals the important role of grassroots resistance movements in preserving segregation, an element of history that is too often overlooked by the national perspective maintained by most scholarship. Other noteworthy sources referenced in this paper explore segregation in TCS, but unlike "Segregation Now," research on the history of white resistance strategy is not currently a major focus.<sup>8</sup>

The paper is divided into three sections that separate Tuscaloosa's history of white resistance into thematic eras. Section I explores the violent, "massive resistance" movement and subsequent "law and order" approach that developed in response to integration at the University of Alabama. Section II investigates the white opposition towards integrating the primary and secondary schools in Tuscaloosa during a time of federal oversight. Finally, Section III explores how white families fought to get rid of federal supervision, resulting in the resegregation of the schools.

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<sup>4</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education*, 1 (Supreme Court of the United States, 1954).

<sup>5</sup> Nikole Hannah-Jones, *Segregation Now* (Atlantic Media, Inc, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Charles T. Clotfelter, *After Brown: The Rise and Retreat of School Desegregation* (Princeton University Press, 2011); Gary Orfield, "Schools More Separate: Consequences of a Decade of Resegregation" (2001).

<sup>7</sup> Nikole Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project."

<sup>8</sup> Cuddy L. Carter, "Derrick Bell's Interest-Convergence Thesis and Tuscaloosa City Schools (AL) Desegregation" (The University of Alabama, 2014); Kathleen Mary Kinslow, *Resegregation: A Case Study of the Failure of the Color Blind Ideal in K-12 Schooling Policy* (University of Alabama Libraries, 2009); Jonathan Barron, "Amending no Child Left Behind to Prevent School Rezoning and Resegregation: A Response to the Tuscaloosa City Schools," *Columbia Journal of Law & Social Problems* 42, no. 3 (2009), 373-414; Hughes, *Secondary Education for Blacks in the Tuscaloosa City School System*.

### From “Massive Resistance” to the “Law and Order” Movement: Early Resistance to Integration after *Brown*, 1956-1963

In February of 1956, the nation was on edge to see what would happen in Tuscaloosa. After three and a half years of legal dispute, Autherine Lucy Foster had finally been admitted to the University of Alabama (UA) (see fig. 1). Foster’s efforts to attend the university followed the recent *Brown v. Board* ruling and raised the question of whether the ruling would actually dismantle Jim Crow segregation in the South.<sup>9</sup> White Tuscaloosans had previously maintained segregation through a regime of racial terror; the city had a strong Ku Klux Klan (KKK) presence and over a dozen documented lynchings as late as 1933, so it came as no surprise that Foster’s admission was not peacefully accepted.<sup>10</sup>

During her first night at UA, fraternity members formed a mob and burned a cross on the Quad in protest of her presence (see fig. 2), and the week before Foster’s admission, thirteen other crosses had been burned in protest across Tuscaloosa.<sup>11</sup> The next night, a mob of at least 1,200 white men—some of whom wore KKK robes—marched downtown chanting “keep Bama white” and “to hell with Autherine” (see fig. 3 and fig. 4).<sup>12</sup> On Foster’s third day, a swarm of more than 2,000 “university and high school students and townspeople” waving Confederate flags forced Foster to hide in the education library.<sup>13</sup> She managed to escape to the safety of Rev. Thomas Linton’s barber shop in Tuscaloosa’s majority-Black West Side where beauticians cleaned her hair of the eggs that had been thrown at her.<sup>14</sup> Shortly after this violent occurrence, she was suspended by the university “for her own safety.”<sup>15</sup>

The protests in Tuscaloosa were significant because they represented some of the earliest and most violent opposition to educational integration that resulted after the *Brown* decision. As Black students continued to integrate institutions throughout the South, white people across the region organized their resistance. In March 1956, 101 Southern congressmen signed the “Southern Manifesto” in which legislators formalized their desire to fight integration “by all legal means.”<sup>16</sup> As exemplified in Tuscaloosa, the resistance tactic relied on outward, violent, and often large-scale demonstrations of absolute defiance towards integration and was dubbed the “massive resistance” movement.

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<sup>9</sup> G. Ward Hubbs, *Tuscaloosa: 200 Years in the Making* (University Alabama Press, 2019), 140.

<sup>10</sup> Abrams, Summer, Ambrose McCoy, Kenaddi Steele-Williams, and Benjamin Trost, “Dan Pippen, A.T. Harden, and Elmore Clark.” Unpublished research project for “History of Us,” Central High School, Tuscaloosa, AL; March, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Bill McEachern, “Campus Curious, Calm as Negro Starts Class,” *Tuscaloosa News*, February 3, 1956.

<sup>12</sup> Bob Kyle, “1,200 UA Students Stage Midnight Demonstration: Cross Burns in Center of University Ave,” *Tuscaloosa News*, February 4, 1956.

<sup>13</sup> Bill Gibb and Stroube Smith, “Patrol Slips Lucy Away from Mob,” *Tuscaloosa News*, February 6, 1956.

<sup>14</sup> Simon Wendt, “God, Gandhi, and Guns: The African American Freedom Struggle in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 1964- 1965,” *The Journal of African American History* 89, no. 1 (2004): 38.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Bagley, *The Politics of White Rights: Race, Justice, and Integrating Alabama’s Schools* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2018), 28.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White Women and the Politics of White Supremacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2.

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Figure 1: *Autherine Lucy enrolling at the University of Alabama on her first day. February 1956. Birmingham News. Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, AL.*



Figure 2: *Cross burning during a student anti-integration demonstration on University Avenue in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. February 1956. Birmingham News. Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, AL.*



Figure 3: *Student anti-integration demonstration on University Avenue in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. February 1956. Birmingham News. Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, AL.*



Figure 4: *James William Oakley. Group of robed Ku Klux Klan members during an Autherine Lucy enrollment protest. February 1956. The University of Alabama Libraries Special Collections, Tuscaloosa AL.*

Within Tuscaloosa, Foster's attempt to integrate UA demonstrated what many Black townspeople had feared—the *Brown* ruling would not be enough to counter white Tuscaloosans' demands for segregated education. On top of the rioting and mob violence, a few nights after Foster's enrollment, a thousand men crowded into Tuscaloosa's largest courthouse to form the West Alabama Citizens' Council. The inaugural meeting drew white Tuscaloosans from all social spheres, including parents of children in the public school system. They sought to "protect their rights in the South" and "to help defeat the NAACP." Jesse Hall, the temporary vice president of the organization, declared that "our schools are created by your dollars, the taxpayers dollars, and we do not appreciate being branded as mobsters and rioters when we go out as Southern gentlemen on our own property to see what's going on."<sup>17</sup> Citizens' Councils sprouted up across the South as white locals saw the violent regulation of public education as critical to the protection of a centuries-old system of segregation.

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<sup>17</sup> Wayne Philips, "Tuscaloosa Gets a White Council," *New York Times*, February 18, 1956.

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These early efforts had immediate success at preserving segregation through violence and intimidation; however, politically minded Southerners quickly realized these “massive resistance” strategies created bad publicity and stained the image of the South. In Tuscaloosa, Buford Boone, the editor of the *Tuscaloosa News* published his Pulitzer-prize winning editorial “What a Price for Peace” in which he harshly criticized the mob protest around Autherine Lucy’s enrollment and called for “law and order.”<sup>18</sup> Boone wanted to bring an end to the rioting, and to encourage citizens to adopt a new strategy of resistance—one that worked within the law. The “law and order” approach recognized that rioting and violence were detrimental to the image of the South and that lawmakers could fight integration effectively using legislation.

At a state level, officials produced “color-blind” policies that were meant to comply with federally-mandated desegregation guidelines in writing; but in practice, these policies perpetuated a system of racially segregated schooling. For example, after the *Brown* ruling, the Alabama legislature quickly passed the Pupil Placement Law. Under this legislation, schools could use criteria like available classroom space, “the adequacy of the pupil’s academic preparation,” or even “morals, conduct, health and personal standards” to place children in schools. Though the law claimed to adhere to lawful, race-neutral language (allegedly “color-blind”), it ultimately resulted in segregated outcomes.<sup>19</sup>

Many historians contextualize these “law and order” strategies as a move toward non-violence, but it is important to recognize that violence remained inseparable from the fight against desegregation. White leaders exacerbated the racial divides that years of violent oppression had codified to protect white values. Legislation reinforced centuries-old racial Southern racial hierarchy, ultimately perpetuating years of violence towards Black people. Additionally, many acts of violence continued through this time, as is discussed below. Although white moderates looked down upon outward violence, such instances demonstrated that white extremists were willing to use force to preserve racial divides.

Tuscaloosa had its first test of the “law and order” approach when Vivian Malone and James Hood once again attempted to break the color barrier at UA. George Wallace had won the state’s most recent gubernatorial election on his platform of defying the federal government and maintaining “segregation forever.”<sup>20</sup> As admission day for Malone and Hood drew near, local white townspeople were unsure of how to express their opposition. In order to prevent the disorganized mob violence similar to that which erupted in response to Foster’s admission, political leaders delivered a clear message about how to advance white resistance efforts within the structure of the new “law and order” approach.

The Birmingham city police chief, Eugene “Bull” Connor, traveled to Tuscaloosa to address the White Citizens’ Council in anticipation of vicious protests. Connor had recently attracted national attention for his treatment of civil rights protestors after beating them down with hoses and attacking them with snarling dogs. His resistance strategy was far too violent, and it became an international news story that Civil Rights activists used to garner attention and momentum for their cause. Connor encouraged Tuscaloosans not to adopt his failed strategy:

You can never whip these birds if you don’t keep you and them separate, I found that out in Birmingham. You’ve got to keep your white and the Black separate, just like you’ve got to keep them in schools. Don’t go around that university. ... You know

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<sup>18</sup> Buford Boone, “What a Price for Peace,” *Tuscaloosa News*, February 7, 1956.

<sup>19</sup> Bagley, *The Politics of White Rights*, 25-26.

<sup>20</sup> Bagley, *The Politics of White Rights*, 43.

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those Kennedys ... They'd give anything in the world if we had some trouble here, if we don't have any trouble, we can beat them at their own game.<sup>21</sup>

Wallace had expressed similar sentiments the day he came to Tuscaloosa: "Martin Luther King likes to fight these things out in the street. But we're going to right it in the courts. We're going to have peace here."<sup>22</sup> This shift in strategy away from mob violence exemplified the new Southern resistance movement of law and order. These leaders were confident that new legislation, rather than violent protest, would be effective at sustaining racial division in the South.

On June 11, 1963, Wallace, unaided by a mob, fulfilled his promise and stood in the door of Foster Auditorium (see fig. 5 and fig. 6). Although he was not successful in blocking the integration of the school and was eventually removed by the federalized National Guard, Wallace made it clear that the absence of a mob certainly did not mean white Southerners had given up in the fight for segregation.<sup>23</sup> "Law and order," a strategy whose long-lasting effects are still deeply felt today, would be the new mode of resistance in Tuscaloosa.



Figure 5: Robert Adams, Vivian Malone and James Hood leaving Foster Auditorium after registering for classes at the University of Alabama. 11 June 1963. Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, AL.



Figure 6: Robert Adams, U.S. Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach speaking to Governor George Wallace during his "stand in the schoolhouse door" at the University of Alabama. 11 June 1963. Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, AL.

On the surface it may appear that this strategy was non-violent; indeed, white politicians wanted the nation to believe the South was moving away from such aggressive resistance. However, through the lens of local historical investigation, it is clear this was simply untrue. For example, four of the National Guardsmen who were mobilized to protect Vivian Malone and James Hood planted explosives near Malone's dorm, though she fortunately remained unharmed.<sup>24</sup> Within Tuscaloosa, racial terror groups like the KKK gained followers through this supposedly non-violent era of "law and order" resistance.<sup>25</sup> Before Wallace's "Stand," Robert Shelton, the Imperial Wizard of the United Klans of America, spoke to a gathering of thousands in a field outside Tuscaloosa. He promised that Wallace could "rewrite history in Tuscaloosa in the next three or four days," and Shelton's words remain true 50 years

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<sup>21</sup> WSB-TV Newsfilm Clip of Eugene "Bull" Connor Addressing a White Citizens' Council Rally and Preparation for the University of Alabama Integration in Holt, Alabama, and Tuscaloosa, Alabama, 1963 June 7, Newsfilm Clip, (Atlanta, Georgia: WSB-TV, 1963).

<sup>22</sup> Dick Looser, "University Showdown at Hand: Wallace Prepares to Stand in Door," *Tuscaloosa News*, June 11, 1963.

<sup>23</sup> Hubbs, *Tuscaloosa: 200 Years in the Making*, 147.

<sup>24</sup> "4 Guardsmen are Charged in Bombings," *Alton Evening Telegraph*, December 20, 1963.

<sup>25</sup> Stephanie Taylor, "Renown Northport Klansman, 73, Dies," *The Tuscaloosa News*, March 19, 2003.

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later.<sup>26</sup> Through Wallace's rhetorical commitment to seemingly progressive "law and order" opposition, narratives of white violence have largely been largely written out of the history of white Tuscaloosans' long-lasting struggle for segregated education.<sup>27</sup>

Although UA was the first school in Tuscaloosa where students challenged segregation, it is important to place these events in the larger context of the city school system. It was the parents of local school children who joined Citizens' Councils and demonstrated with the KKK, and high school students themselves marched through the streets waving Confederate flags. Meanwhile, the Black community organized a Civil Rights movement that would play an important role in fighting for the desegregation of the TCS.<sup>28</sup> An examination of the responses to the enrollments of Foster, Malone, and Hood reveals that white individuals established violent, community-wide resistance strategies in the decade following Brown. When the federal government finally began to enforce desegregation in the TCS during the mid-1960's, white Tuscaloosans had already developed the tools to fight racial integration.

### **White Resistance Fails?: Federal Oversight and the Integration of the Secondary and Primary Schools, 1964-1979**

After Wallace failed to halt the admission of Vivian Malone and James Hood to the University of Alabama, white Alabamians feared that integration of the primary and secondary schools would soon follow. The Alabama legislature's post-Brown "color-blind" strategies as well as the local resistance strategies of white Alabamians kept the state's school systems entirely segregated through 1963. Even though the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) had been pressuring school districts across Alabama to desegregate since 1954, the federal government did very little to support these efforts.<sup>29</sup> In July 1964, a federal court finally ruled on the landmark *Lee v. Macon* case, which focused on the violent backlash of white families following the attempted integration of Tuskegee High by a group of Black students. The Court's decision laid the foundation for a statewide desegregation order and ruled the Pupil Placement Law unconstitutional (as mentioned in Section I).<sup>30</sup> Additionally, a few weeks prior to the ruling, the US Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, allowing the federal government to withhold funding from school districts if they maintained segregation.<sup>31</sup>

These new legislative developments did not immediately cause the integration of the Tuscaloosa schools, as is evidenced by the fact that there were no transfers in the 1964-1965 academic year; however, the following school year, school districts were put under increased pressure as the federal government tightened its guidelines. Every school district across the state would need to submit a desegregation plan and make a "good faith start" to fully desegregate their school facilities, student bodies, and faculty by 1967.<sup>32</sup> Alabama's schools were extremely reliant on federal funding, so this threat finally provoked a strong reaction in the state. TCS, like many other school districts across Alabama, implemented a "freedom of choice" plan. Similar to the Pupil Placement Law, this was a "color-blind" plan that supposedly allowed students to apply for admission to any school in the district regardless of where they

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<sup>26</sup> "Shelton Predicts Economic Boycott." *Tuscaloosa News*, June 9, 1963.

<sup>27</sup> For an example, see Hubbs, *Tuscaloosa: 200 Years in the Making*, 154-155.

<sup>28</sup> Wendt, "God, Gandhi, and Guns," 44.

<sup>29</sup> Bagley, *The Politics of White Rights*, 12-43.

<sup>30</sup> Bagley, *The Politics of White Rights*, 88-89.

<sup>31</sup> Bagley, *The Politics of White Rights*, 90.

<sup>32</sup> Bagley, *The Politics of White Rights*, 94.

lived. In theory, these plans would bring desegregation, but Tuscaloosa used excuses like overcrowding in schools to purposefully limit integration.<sup>33</sup>

In the 1965-1966 school year, eighty-eight Black students from the all-Black Druid High applied for transfer to Tuscaloosa High, the city's white high school, but only twenty-five to thirty of these students actually attended on the first day. The *Tuscaloosa News* described the schools as having "mixed quietly," but the ongoing conflict between local Civil Rights activists and white terror organizations makes this claim seem unlikely.<sup>34</sup> During the mid-1960's, race relations in Tuscaloosa were inflamed, with Black citizens leading a strong Civil Rights movement and white Tuscaloosans putting forth a violent counter-movement. The Civil Rights movement erupted on June 9, 1964, also known as "Bloody Tuesday." Headed by Reverend T.Y. Rogers, Black protestors (many of whom were high school students) peacefully petitioned for the desegregation of the city courthouse but were met with extreme violence from the local police force. The protestors were horrifically beaten, demonstrating that integration in Tuscaloosa would not be accepted peacefully.<sup>35</sup>

As the Civil Rights movement grew in Tuscaloosa, the KKK gained popularity in response. Robert Shelton, leader of the local United Klans of America (UKA), made Tuscaloosa the headquarters of the chapter and membership peaked in 1965 with around 26,000 to 33,000 people. The UKA was one of the most violent KKK chapters in the country and was responsible for the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing that killed four girls in Birmingham.<sup>36</sup> Shelton had warned long ago of "bloodshed" if Black students attempted to integrate schools and said that "we are ready to take whatever steps are necessary to maintain segregation and our Christian ideals in the state of Alabama. We mean business."<sup>37</sup>

The regime of racial terror in Tuscaloosa—whether it came from local law enforcement or white supremacist terrorists—severely limited integration. Across the state, KKK members and local officials violently intimidated Black students and only 1% of Black students attended a previously all-white school in Alabama that year.<sup>38</sup> Although politicians preached a policy of "law and order" resistance to integration, segregation was largely preserved through white violence.

Despite the extreme limits placed upon desegregation in the 1965-1966 academic year, white families still made plans to avoid attending the racially mixed schools. A week after school began, an article appeared in the *Tuscaloosa News* detailing plans for a "private school for all white children in Tuscaloosa."<sup>39</sup> These new "segregation academies" sprung up across the state in response to federally ordered desegregation. The state incentivized this transition by giving tuition grants to children who left the public system for the private schools.<sup>40</sup> White Tuscaloosans elected to abandon their public school system in droves rather than face attending school with Black students.

The federal government changed the guidelines to increase desegregation the following year. They required districts to sign the 441-B form that would promise expanded freedom of choice plans and initiatives to desegregate school faculties.<sup>41</sup> In

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<sup>33</sup> Paul Davis, "Mixing here Speeded Up," *The Tuscaloosa News*, April 1, 1966.

<sup>34</sup> "Schools here Mixed Quietly," *Tuscaloosa News*, Sep 7, 1965; Paul Davis and Ed Watkins, "Schools here Prepare for Integrated Classes," *Tuscaloosa News*, Aug 15, 1965.

<sup>35</sup> Wendt, "God, Gandhi, and Guns," 36-37.

<sup>36</sup> Stephanie Taylor, "Renown Northport Klansman, 73, Dies," *Tuscaloosa News*, March 19, 2003.

<sup>37</sup> "Shelton Speaks—Klan Warns of Violence," *Anniston Star*, January 3, 1959.

<sup>38</sup> Bagley, *The Politics of White Rights*, 98.

<sup>39</sup> "Still Pushing Private School, Frazier Says," *Tuscaloosa News*, September 15, 1965.

<sup>40</sup> Bagley, *The Politics of White Rights*, 80.

<sup>41</sup> Bagley, *The Politics of White Rights*, 100-101.

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response, the city schools modified their freedom of choice plan to include all elementary and high schools and started the process of transferring a select few Black faculty members to white schools. The school board correctly predicted that its revised guidelines would probably “go too far to please Gov. George Wallace and probably not quite far enough to make federal officials happy.”<sup>42</sup>

Soon after TCS released its revised freedom of choice plan, Rev. T.Y. Rogers began a series of demonstrations demanding stricter desegregation of the schools and better facilities for Black students and employees, as well as advocating for the TCS school board to sign the 441-B form (see fig. 7). Although the city had revised its desegregation plan, the school board refused to sign the 441-B, thereby refusing to abide by the new federal guidelines.<sup>43</sup>

Figure 7: *Signs of Protest Displayed by Negro Demonstrators: Low Pay For Lunchroom Workers, Janitors Among Grievances, April 16, 1966, Tuscaloosa News, Google News Archives.*



Meanwhile, George Wallace escalated his efforts to maintain school segregation by intimidating local school boards. In an attempt to limit the federal government’s desegregation authority, the state legislature passed Wallace’s “Anti-Guidelines Act” in August 1966, nullifying the 441-B desegregation forms. Wallace claimed that Alabama could compensate districts for the funding they lost from the federal government, though this was almost certainly untrue.<sup>44</sup> One Tuscaloosa educational official protested: “I think the bill is real bad because it takes the authority away from local boards of education. Some city and county boards may be helped by the bill because they aren’t getting any aid, but it just kills us.”<sup>45</sup> While Wallace fought federal oversight and attempted to return autonomy to the local school districts, he simultaneously imposed laws to take decision-making power away from those very same educational systems. Wallace’s aggressive anti-integration policy formed a rift between white Alabamian officials and education leaders, thereby weakening white resistance across the state.

<sup>42</sup> Paul Davis, “Mixing here Speeded Up,” *Tuscaloosa News* April 1, 1966.

<sup>43</sup> “Negroes Seek Compliance of New Guidelines,” *Cullman Times* April 26, 1966; “Protestors Brave Rain, March Here,” *Tuscaloosa News* April 26, 1966; “Schools Hit by Walkout,” *Tuscaloosa News*, May 4, 1966.

<sup>44</sup> Bagley, *The Politics of White Rights*, 105.

<sup>45</sup> Paul Davis, “County Officials Testify Against Anti-Guides Bill,” *Tuscaloosa News*, August 24, 1966.

As the Tuscaloosa city schools opened their doors for a new academic year in September 1966, 240 Black students chose to attend previously all-white schools.<sup>46</sup> When Wallace received a letter with over 2,000 signatures complaining about the desegregation of the city schools, he became incensed and threatened to use the state's "police power" if faculty members were not segregated.<sup>47</sup> Reminiscent of the resistance to Autherine Lucy Foster's admission, angry white citizens again marched through downtown Tuscaloosa (see fig. 8). Protestors claimed that local officials had broken the law by following federal guidelines. One marcher commented on a recent editorial concerning the integration of the schools: "The editor complimented the people on going so smooth. He said it was a bitter pill but one that had to come. I want to tell you this ... it is still lodged in our throat and we are getting ready to spit it out."<sup>48</sup> Even though Wallace encouraged lawful resistance in speeches and public settings, he consciously stoked white Alabamians' outrage over desegregation, which resulted in mass protests similar to those in Tuscaloosa occurring across the state.<sup>49</sup>



Figure 8: Verner Colburn, *Marchers Protesting Faculty Mixing Approach Warrior River Bridge*. September 11, 1966. *Tuscaloosa News*, Tuscaloosa, AL.

In March of 1967, a new ruling on the *Lee v. Macon* case brought the entire state under a desegregation order and integration accelerated considerably.<sup>50</sup> Although 1,000 Black students had desegregated Tuscaloosa's previously all-white schools by 1969, one white student had yet to attend a previously all-Black school.<sup>51</sup> The courts used this as proof to show that the freedom of choice plan did not work, and Tuscaloosa was put under a court order, called "*Tuscaloosa I*," to create a more effective desegregation plan. The policy used color-blind mechanisms like "geographic zones" that were dependent on "residential proximity," and very little desegregation occurred.<sup>52</sup> Even so, the changes enraged Tuscaloosa's KKK leader,

<sup>46</sup> Paul Davis, "School Mix Figures Here Take Big Jump," *Tuscaloosa News*, May 12, 1966.

<sup>47</sup> "Schools here Get Wallace Warning." *The Tuscaloosa News*, September 10, 1966; Paul Davis, "Wallace Order Sparks Worry Here," *Tuscaloosa News*, September 11, 1966.

<sup>48</sup> "Wallace Order Sparks Worry Here," *Tuscaloosa News*, September 11, 1966.

<sup>49</sup> Bagley, *The Politics of White Rights*, 99-100.

<sup>50</sup> Bagley, *The Politics of White Rights*, 120.

<sup>51</sup> Paul Davis, "More Choose White Schools," *Tuscaloosa News*, April 15, 1969.

<sup>52</sup> *Lee v. Macon County Bd. of Education*, 29584 (United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit 1970). Referred to as *Tuscaloosa I*.

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Robert Shelton, who encouraged white families to boycott the TCS, saying it was their duty to “stay home and take a stand” because it was the only thing they could do to “end this menace.”<sup>53</sup> Families continued to leave the district for the Tuscaloosa County School system and private schools as white leaders like Wallace and Shelton continued to preach a message of defiance.

The *Tuscaloosa I* plan was so unsuccessful in desegregating previously all-Black schools that by 1978 only ten of the 1007 students at Druid High were white.<sup>54</sup> Once again, Tuscaloosa came under the scrutiny of the courts. A second court order (*Tuscaloosa II*) more radically restructured the organization of the school system using bussing. Druid High (see fig. 9 and fig. 10) and Tuscaloosa High (see fig. 11 and fig. 12) combined to form a new “mega” high school called Central High, and under the new plan, each of the middle schools would house an individual grade. Although the elementary schools were initially included in the integration plan, a court order in 1980 ruled that the integration of the elementary schools was too “impractical” because the cost of bussing children to various elementary schools was too expensive.<sup>55</sup>



Figure 9: John E. Scott, *Druid High School in Tuscaloosa, Alabama*. December 14, 1955. Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, AL.



Figure 10: John E. Scott, *Students in an art class at Druid High School in Tuscaloosa, Alabama*. December 14, 1955. Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, AL.



Figure 11: John E. Scott, *Tuscaloosa High School in Tuscaloosa, Alabama*. December 13, 1955. Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, AL.



Figure 12: John E. Scott, *Students in art class at Tuscaloosa High School in Tuscaloosa, Alabama*. December 13, 1955. Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, AL.

<sup>53</sup> “Shelton Urging Boycott,” *Cullman Times*, September 9, 1970.

<sup>54</sup> *Lee v. Tuscaloosa City School System*, 76-3644 (United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit 1978). Referred to as *Tuscaloosa II*.

<sup>55</sup> *Lee v. Macon County Board of Education*, 79-2499 (United States Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit 1980).

Some Black leaders were furious over the merger, and pleaded to rezone the schools as opposed to combining them. Joe Mallisham, president of the Tuscaloosa



Figure 13: Steve Hope, *Joe Mallisham speaks for TCAC*. July, 25 1978. *Tuscaloosa News*, Google News Archives.

Citizens for Action Committee (TCAC), said that “we will march, we will protest, and we will go to jail” to preserve Druid High, and he encouraged Black students to boycott the school (see fig. 13).<sup>56</sup> Similarly, John England, a prominent lawyer in Tuscaloosa, said that Black leaders would use “every avenue available” to stop the plan’s implementation (see fig. 14). It was mostly white officials who aggressively pushed for Central’s creation because it was the only option that would “give promise of a more lasting solution.”<sup>57</sup>

This tension demonstrates that debates over integration are nuanced, and Black citizens’ interests do not necessarily align with strict desegregation. Druid High had become a place of community for Black Tuscaloosans, and the preservation of the school was of importance to Black leaders.<sup>58</sup> When the schools did eventually merge, many of the veteran Black teachers and administrators from Druid were

replaced with white faculty members who had minimal teaching experience in order to comply with federal desegregation guidelines. McDonald Hughes, long-time principal of Druid High, reported that by 1970, over “31,384 Black teachers were replaced through discriminatory hiring and dismissals” in the United States.<sup>59</sup> The pushback from Tuscaloosa’s Black community problematizes the assumption that integration can only produce positive outcomes for all students and suggests that desegregation can have harmful outcomes for those who it aims to benefit, especially when its implementation fulfills the desires of a whole population against the wishes of the minority community.<sup>60</sup>



Figure 14: Steve Hope, *Petitions presented by John England*. July 25, 1978. *Tuscaloosa News*, Google News Archives.

<sup>56</sup> See Wendt, “God, Gandhi, and Guns,” 46-47.

<sup>57</sup> Doris Flora, “Druid and THS Will be Paired,” *Tuscaloosa News*, July 25, 1978; “Citizen Group Vows Fight: Pairing Plan Draws Fire,” *Tuscaloosa News*, July 25, 1978.

<sup>58</sup> Davis Flora, “Druid High Change Not Board’s Plan,” *Tuscaloosa News*, January 13, 1970.

<sup>59</sup> Hughes, *Secondary Education for Blacks in the Tuscaloosa City School System*, 100-107.

<sup>60</sup> A growing body of research shows that in some instances, majority-Black institutions (some of which are the products of systematic, white enforced segregation) are sources of pride, safety, and solace for Black individuals. For research on this topic, see Barbara J. Shircliffe, *The Best of that World: Historically Black High Schools and the Crisis of Desegregation in a Southern Metropolis* (Hampton Pr, 2006); Janelle L. Williams and Robert T. Palmer, “A Response to Racism: How HBCU Enrollment Grew in the Face of Hatred,” (2019); Erik Gleibermann, “Challenging the Stigma of an all-Black School: The Selma High Story,” *The Black Scholar* 48, no. 3 (2018), 27-45; Adam Fairclough, *A Class of their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Harvard University Press, 2009).

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As the city made preparations to reorganize the schools in 1979, the KKK staged a last-ditch protest. Only a few dozen members of the group actually attended (see fig. 15 and fig. 16) while Joe Mallisham organized a counter-protest that garnered a huge crowd (see fig. 17 and fig. 18). Don Black, the Grand Dragon of the Knights of the KKK, said “students can’t learn in an environment that resembles a jungle” and that the KKK would fill all local governmental positions and “work for the interest of other good white people.”<sup>61</sup> Even though the KKK had lost followers through the 1970’s, this did not suggest that white Tuscaloosans had become accepting of desegregation.



Figure 15: Bruce Boswell, *Don Black*, grand dragon of the *Knight of the Ku Klux Klan* (right), talks with the editor of the *Klan newspaper, the Crusader* (left), as they march down *University Boulevard*. *Crimson White*, August 27, 1979, The University of Alabama Libraries Special Collections, Tuscaloosa, AL.



Figure 16: *But public opinion has never stopped the Klan*, Corolla, 1980, The University of Alabama Libraries Special Collections, Tuscaloosa, AL.

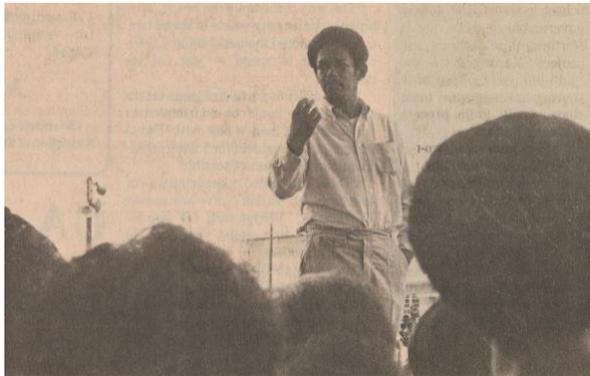


Figure 17: *Steve Money, Rev. R.B. Cottonreader* addresses a crowd gathered at *Community Park* to protest the march of the *Ku Klux Klan Saturday*. *Crimson White*, August 27, 1979, The University of Alabama Libraries Special Collections, Tuscaloosa, AL.



Figure 18: *The sentiments of the Klan met with considerable resistance from local residents*. Corolla, 1980, The University of Alabama Libraries Special Collections, Tuscaloosa, AL.

By the time the schools restructured in 1979, over two thousand white students had fled the city school system.<sup>62</sup>

The success of the era of federal oversight is debatable. Although the schools substantially desegregated after 1979, it took almost three decades for the federal

<sup>61</sup> Sonny Brasfield, “Klansmen Demonstrate in Tuscaloosa,” *Crimson White*, August 27, 1979; Suzanne Kennemer and Steve Money, “Blacks Hold Rally to Build Unity,” *Crimson White*, August 27, 1979.

<sup>62</sup> *Lee v. Tuscaloosa City School System*, 76-3644, 1978; “Schools here Get Wallace Warning,” *Tuscaloosa News*, September 10, 1966.

government to accomplish. White leaders and families fashioned potent strategies to preserve segregation, many of which are still present in Tuscaloosa today, such as the implementation of the “color-blind” rezoning policy from *Tuscaloosa I* as recently as 2014.<sup>63</sup> Not only did the federal government fail to desegregate the school system quickly, but it also gave room for Tuscaloosans to develop the mechanisms of white resistance that continue to perpetuate segregation today.

The Class of 1979 marked the last group of graduates from Druid High and Tuscaloosa High. The commencement speaker for Tuscaloosa High tellingly gave a speech titled, “The Times They are A-Changin’, but the Important Things Stay the Same.”<sup>64</sup> The times certainly were changing with the most desegregation TCS had ever experienced. But since white commitment to segregation remained strong, the era of integration would be short-lived.

### **Back to the Beginning: White Flight and School Resegregation, 1993-2007**

The Tuscaloosa City Schools hoped that the new integration plan would represent a blank slate for the school system. After years of dodging desegregation orders and resisting school integration, TCS wanted a solution that would inhibit further federal intervention.<sup>65</sup> The idea to combine all high schools into one mega-school was a sweeping approach that most Southern school districts did not take. As soon as Central High was established, TCS made sure that Druid and Tuscaloosa High were forgotten: “By this fall, a federal court order will have erased all that was Tuscaloosa and Druid. School names will be chiseled from brick, mascots will be obliterated and murals will disappear from walls.”<sup>66</sup> With these measures, many hoped that the system’s deeply segregated history could simply be swept away, allowing a new era of “integrated” learning to emerge.

Mega-Central only lasted from 1979 to 2003, but for that time many Alabamians considered the school to be one of the best in the state. The school set records for its number of National Merit Scholars, regularly won state championships in sports and academic competitions, and possessed a wide variety of extracurricular activities and advanced course offerings.<sup>67</sup> The school’s success was largely attributed to its large size: the combined Central East and West campuses had around 2,300 students. In many ways, Central served as a prototype for the mega-school model that many well-known Alabama schools like Hoover and Vestavia Hills later employed.<sup>68</sup> The main advantage of the mega-school model is that the large size of the school allows it to bring in more funding. A large student body has diverse interests and goals, and the increased funding allows the school to afford activities to engage every student.<sup>69</sup>

Even as an integrated mega-school, Central still struggled with issues of educational inequity. The school separated its students with “tracking” based on academic performance, resulting in white students being placed in honors classes while many Black students were directed into vocational courses.<sup>70</sup> Across the school system, Black students were disproportionately punished for behavioral infractions and funneled into special education courses, and Black students also had higher

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<sup>63</sup> Carolyn Jones (Central High School teacher) in discussion with the author, February 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Regina Wright, “Druid, THS Era is Ending,” *Tuscaloosa News*, May 31, 1979.

<sup>65</sup> Doris Flora, “Druid and THS Will be Paired,” *Tuscaloosa News*, July 25, 1978.

<sup>66</sup> Regina Wright, “Druid, THS Era is Ending,” *Tuscaloosa News*, May 31, 1979.

<sup>67</sup> Hannah-Jones, *Segregation Now*.

<sup>68</sup> Dr. Teresha Jones-Hamilton (Central High School principal) and Marlisa Wiggins (Central High School teacher) in discussion with the author, December 2019.

<sup>69</sup> Hannah-Jones, *Segregation Now*; Kinslow, *Resegregation*, 172.

<sup>70</sup> Hannah-Jones, *Segregation Now*.

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dropout rates than their white counterparts.<sup>71</sup> In 1999, for example there were 280 disciplinary referrals for non-white students as opposed to just six for white students.<sup>72</sup> These divisions demonstrated that combining all students into one school does not simply erase inequality; however, the mega-school model was the only way to ensure that students had equal access to resources.

Even though Central proved to be one of the state's flagship high schools, the ever-decreasing white enrollment worried city officials. As desegregation was more strictly enforced, white people responded by creating more segregation academies: Tuscaloosa Academy opened in 1967, the American Christian Academy opened in 1978, and Holy Spirit Catholic School added its high school program in 1995. White families increasingly joined private schools, but some left the city altogether to live in the exponentially growing suburbs which quickly resulted in the overcrowding of the County School system.<sup>73</sup>

White flight from Central demonstrated that a deeply rooted desire for racial segregation was still ingrained in Tuscaloosan society. Central High School was performing at a higher level than the old white school, Tuscaloosa High, in terms of athletic and academic achievements; the only difference was that Central had a desegregated student body. Rather than fleeing from an underperforming school system, white families were simply refusing to attend an integrated one.

White flight from the schools started to affect the city's economic success. The 2000 census revealed that the city's population had only grown by 147 people in ten years, a 0.2% growth rate.<sup>74</sup> Businesses in the downtown's core struggled to survive. When the city failed to attract the car manufacturer, Saturn, officials blamed the school system's large Black population.<sup>75</sup>

City officials faced a dilemma: they could either resegregate schools in order to bring white families back to the city, or they could keep the schools integrated at the expense of the city's economic success. White families that had fled the schools made integration impossible—there simply were not enough white bodies to have racial balance. White Tuscaloosans had weaponized integration: if the city wanted white students to return economic resources to the city and white bodies to diversify the city's schools, the school board would need to comply with white families' demands to have segregated, majority-white schools. In essence, white people had taken integration, a virtue that was meant to topple the system of white supremacy in Tuscaloosa, and instead turned it into a weapon of racial stratification. Tuscaloosa's leaders decided that their only choice to save the city would be to build majority-white schools.<sup>76</sup>

With Tuscaloosa still under a desegregation order, it was impossible to create a majority-white school. In 1993, Tuscaloosa officials tested the courts' willingness to free the city of federal oversight with a proposal to build Rock Quarry Elementary (RQE).<sup>77</sup> Between 1980 and 1990, over 10,000 residents fled from Tuscaloosa's

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<sup>71</sup> *Tuscaloosa City Schools Disproportionate Impact Analysis: 1997-98 School Year*, (1998), in Tuscaloosa City Schools archives, "Unitary Status" binder; *An Equity Plan to Strengthen Academic Excellence in Tuscaloosa City Schools*, (1999) in Tuscaloosa City Schools archives, "Unitary Status" binder.

<sup>72</sup> *An Equity Plan to Strengthen Academic Excellence in Tuscaloosa City Schools*, (1999).

<sup>73</sup> Anna Thibodeaux, "Would Unitary Status End Student Flight from City?" *Tuscaloosa News*, March 18, 1998.

<sup>74</sup> Stephanie Taylor, "Looking for Answers: Census Worries Local Officials," *Tuscaloosa News*, March 16, 2001.

<sup>75</sup> Hannah-Jones, *Segregation Now*.

<sup>76</sup> Hannah-Jones, *Segregation Now*.

<sup>77</sup> Hannah-Jones, *Segregation Now*.

historic downtown to suburbs located north of the Black Warrior River. The school board decided to build RQE in the heart of these suburbs in an effort to draw white students back into the school system.<sup>78</sup> The proposal was highly controversial, but some influential Black leaders decided to support the idea. They claimed that the school would be better for the community as a whole and privately admitted that restoring white students to the system might be the only way to attract business to the failing city.<sup>79</sup>

Judge John England Jr., a prominent Black leader in Tuscaloosa, later said he had compromised with white officials to support the new school in exchange for stronger educational opportunities on Tuscaloosa's majority-Black West Side. He believed the school system had reached the point where the burden of desegregation had fallen on Black children: "Under the court order, England said, Black students had ridden buses all over the city chasing an ever-receding white population. Desegregation had not ended the stigmatization of Black children, England said. It had reinforced it."<sup>80</sup>

After the Court permitted the construction of majority-white RQE, the school board decided it was safe to apply for release from court oversight. More conservative leaning Supreme Court rulings and general exhaustion in the Court over these desegregation cases had weakened the stricter guidelines that previously granted school systems "unitary status."<sup>81</sup> After city members made their cases for and against eliminating federal supervision, Judge Sharon Blackburn released the three-decades-old court oversight.<sup>82</sup> With federal supervision gone, years of work to integrate the system was undone.

Once the city school's desegregation order was lifted, Board of Education members hastened their efforts to restructure Tuscaloosa's schools. In 1999, the board voted to return the middle schools to their original structure, allowing Eastwood, Westlawn, and Tuscaloosa Middle Schools (TMS) to each host grades 6-8. Although TMS and Eastwood were reasonably integrated, a return to neighborhood school zoning left Westlawn almost entirely Black.<sup>83</sup>

In many ways, Westlawn was a preview of what education at Central High School would become. The school had 571 students and only five of them were white. Immediately, test scores dropped and the community's perception of the school worsened. Students at the school complained about the lack of test preparation and the fact that they were the only school that required the students to wear uniforms. Similarly, Westlawn was the only middle school to have a police officer on-site. Students perceived that the school had fewer resources, fewer opportunities and teachers who were not interested in the students' success. Poignantly, B.J., then a 7th grader at Westlawn, said: "the city board changed the middle schools because of some spoiled white people. I liked being with them, but it's still wrong"; he continued, "they ship us out as long as they get us out and they don't care where we go. They're using us."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> *Lee v. United States*, 70-0251 (United States District Court for the Northern District of Alabama, Southern Division 1996).

<sup>79</sup> Hannah-Jones, *Segregation Now*.

<sup>80</sup> Hannah-Jones, *Segregation Now*.

<sup>81</sup> Brian L. Fife, *School Desegregation in the Twenty-First Century: The Focus must Change*, Vol. 41 (Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), 40; Nikole Hannah-Jones, *Segregation Now*.

<sup>82</sup> *Lee v. Macon County Board of Education*, 70-0251 (The United States District Court for the Northern District of Alabama Southern Division 2000), in Tuscaloosa City Schools archives.

<sup>83</sup> Lisa Deffendall, "Disparities Abound among Tuscaloosa's Three Middle Schools," *The Tuscaloosa News*, Aug 13, 2000.

<sup>84</sup> Lisa Deffendall, "Disparities Abound among Tuscaloosa's Three Middle Schools."

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Once the middle schools were restructured, the high schools were next on the school board's docket. After seeing an uptick in middle school enrollment for the first time since 1994, along with fifty-five transfers from private schools, the school board was convinced that restructuring the high schools would reverse white flight.<sup>85</sup>

In August of 2000, board members voted to split the city's mega-school into three smaller high schools. Smaller schools would reduce class sizes, which would supposedly benefit struggling minority students. More importantly for city officials, though, was the fact that two of these high schools would have sufficient white enrollment to attract more white families. In the process, this model would create an all-Black school: "Thus we have the irony that smaller schools may be of the greatest benefit to less affluent students, and yet a three-school scenario virtually forces the creation of an all-Black high school." This restructuring plan stated that the district would one day rezone in order to desegregate the schools, but twenty years later this rezoning has yet to happen.<sup>86</sup> Black board member Olympia McCrackin was concerned about the return to segregation in the city and remained unconvinced that restructuring would be able to attract white families back to the system.<sup>87</sup> Even so, every white member of the board voted in support of multiple schools fully aware of the segregation that would develop.<sup>88</sup>

The desire to attract white families to the school system had completely overshadowed the need for integration. The board decided to create three new high schools: Bryant would be placed on the Eastern side of the city, Northridge would go in the affluent neighborhoods north of the river, and the new virtually all-Black Central would take the location of old Central East. When Board Member Shelly Jones voted for this measure, she said: "Yes, we're out from under court order, but it bothers me to think that people would feel that we would go back to doing things like we used to do it. That just isn't going to happen."<sup>89</sup> Jones was wrong. When Central High opened, the school was just as segregated as Druid High was in the 1970's.<sup>90</sup>

To the dismay of the school board, the restructuring efforts of the Tuscaloosa City School system largely failed to reverse white flight. White enrollment had dropped to 22% in 2007, and the school system decided to take even more drastic efforts to segregate the school system.<sup>91</sup> Many of the remaining white families north of the river complained about the overcrowding and "safety" issues at their schools, so the district decided to rezone.<sup>92</sup> They claimed the reorganization would limit overcrowding and more equally use school buildings. This rezoning was touted as a racially-unbiased policy that would affect students of all races equally, but in reality, Black students were almost exclusively rezoned. The school system saw a return to neighborhood schools where Black students who had been bussed to affluent schools

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<sup>85</sup> Lisa Deffendall, "Tuscaloosa's Middle Schools: 2 Out of 3 Ain't Bad?" *Tuscaloosa News*, August 13, 2000.

<sup>86</sup> Tulane Duke, Jay Guin and J. Louise Crawford, *Report of the Restructuring Committee for the Tuscaloosa City Schools High Schools*, (2000); April Wortham, "Tuscaloosa Schools on Separate but Equal Course," *Tuscaloosa News*, July 6, 2003.

<sup>87</sup> Lisa Deffendall, "School Board Tips its Hand: Most Favor Multiple Schools," *Tuscaloosa News*, August 11, 2000; Lisa Deffendall, "Board picks multiple schools," *Tuscaloosa News* August 15, 2000.

<sup>88</sup> Lisa Deffendall, "Board Picks Multiple Schools," *Tuscaloosa News*, Aug 15, 2000.

<sup>89</sup> Lisa Deffendall, "School Board Tips its Hand: Most Favor Multiple Schools," *Tuscaloosa News*, August 11, 2000.

<sup>90</sup> *Lee v. Tuscaloosa City School System*, 76-3644,1978; April Wortham, "Tuscaloosa Schools on Separate but Equal Course," *Tuscaloosa News*, July 6, 2003.

<sup>91</sup> Hannah-Jones, *Segregation Now*.

<sup>92</sup> Jones Antwanette, "Divided School Board OKs Restructuring Plan." *Tuscaloosa News*, May 4, 2007.

north of the river were rezoned for schools with a high density of poverty located in Tuscaloosa's underprivileged West Side.<sup>93</sup>

Many of these policy decisions mirrored the opposition methods that white Tuscaloosans had used during the era of federal oversight. The school board used the excuse that the recently passed "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) policy gave parents the opportunity to transfer their children from underperforming schools into better ones, so the decision to return to neighborhood schooling was justified. NCLB used test scores to identify which schools needed improvement leading to the large-scale stigmatization of majority-Black, impoverished schools that failed to perform as well on standardized tests. Additionally, only around 3% of parents who were eligible to transfer their children to higher-performing schools were successful in doing so.<sup>94</sup> This new NCLB policy closely resembled the freedom of choice plans from the 1960s and 1970s that used nuanced legal language to limit the ability of minorities to attend white schools. Similarly, the return to neighborhood school zoning patterns was the exact same strategy used in *Tuscaloosa I* to limit all meaningful integration in 1970. To top it all off, there were no federal guidelines to strike down the blatant racial segregation this "color-blind" policy created. White Tuscaloosans had successfully created an all-Black school and made certain that their children would never attend.

### Conclusion

Through an examination of the protest and policy that have maintained school segregation in Tuscaloosa over the last fifty years, this paper demonstrates the need for more scholarship investigating white resistance to educational integration at the scale of local, community-wide analysis. Although the federal and state governments played significant roles in the history of segregated education in Tuscaloosa, the work of maintaining school segregation overwhelmingly came from local white Tuscaloosans who utilized strategies such as racial terror organizations, "color-blind" policy, and mass protest to resist integration. The continued separation of Black and white people in the Tuscaloosa City School system allows white Tuscaloosans to perpetuate their privilege through the racist myth of white supremacy and the isolation of economic resources. In order to dismantle white supremacy in America, there must be a larger body of work that emphasizes the overt and implicit violence of grassroots resistance by local white Americans to integration.<sup>95</sup> Only after this analysis historians can fight against white supremacy with truth-telling and a process of reconciliation that illuminates the structural ties between segregation and the American education system.<sup>96</sup>

With this anti-white supremacist aspiration, this paper provides the historical framework for dismantling structural school segregation in Tuscaloosa. Modern-day Central High School exemplifies the degree to which Tuscaloosa's white resistance history is still deeply ingrained, as many members of the white community label the school as Tuscaloosa's "failing"<sup>97</sup> or "bad Black high school"<sup>98</sup> without having ever stepped foot into Central High. White families hear and tell stories of drugs, violence,

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<sup>93</sup> Nikole Hannah-Jones, *Segregation Now*.

<sup>94</sup> Barron, "Amending No Child Left Behind," 394.

<sup>95</sup> See Chana Joffe-Walt, *Nice White Parents*: Serial, 2020 on research of local school segregation history in New York, NY.

<sup>96</sup> For work on a national scale, see Equal Justice Initiative. *Segregation in America*. Equal Justice Initiative, 2018.

<sup>97</sup> "Tuscaloosa's Drop-Out Rate is Unacceptable," *Tuscaloosa News*, October 10, 2007.

<sup>98</sup> Kinslow, *Resegregation*; 68, 75, 96, 110.

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and low academic achievement.<sup>99</sup> With Central being over 95% Black, racial stereotypes and implicit bias allow these narratives to persist within the white community.<sup>100</sup> The overarching effect is that Central, a school where 80% of students live in households around the poverty line, is stigmatized and labeled as “bad.”<sup>101</sup>

As a member of Tuscaloosa’s white community, I too was guilty of consuming and circulating these racist myths. After attending Central for four years, it is now clear to me that the school is extraordinary in its fight against the systemic deprivileging of Black communities in Tuscaloosa.<sup>102</sup> White families brand Central as “bad” to legitimize their instinct to send their children to “good” majority-white schools.<sup>103</sup> It is through communication across racial divides and an understanding of the harmful modern day legacies of white resistance that Tuscaloosans will successfully dismantle this systematic segregation in our schools.

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<sup>99</sup> For discussion on the negative effects of the “bad” label on Black students at Central High School, see Kinslow, *Resegregation*, 110-146.

<sup>100</sup> “Search for Public Schools: Central High School,” accessed February 10, 2020.

<sup>101</sup> “Search for Public Schools: Central High School,” accessed February 10, 2020.

<sup>102</sup> See Clarence Sutton Jr., “MY TURN: Central High School Designation Unfair, Misleading,” *Tuscaloosa News*, February 20, 2016.

<sup>103</sup> For more discussion on the relationship between white supremacy and “bad”/“good” schools, see Chana Joffe- Walt, *Nice White Parents*: Serial, 2020.

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