

# **The Civil Rights Movement in Huntsville**

*By Kelly Hamlin Fisk*

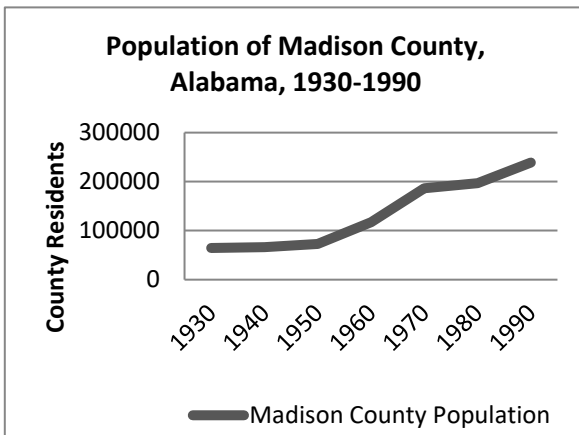
*In the 2019 Volume 44 of the Huntsville Historical Review the timeline of activities related to the historic movement was published. This is the narrative Ms. Fisk provided as a portion of her Master's Thesis that supports the timeline. The Editor*

## **CHAPTER II HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Economic prosperity, federal investment, and racial change came to Huntsville in the 1960s. Civil rights organizers in the city recognized the interdependent nature of these three factors, and their approach to reform meant that the civil rights movement would be received more peacefully in Huntsville in many other Alabama cities. Huntsville experienced the civil rights movement under a unique set of circumstances, including Huntsville's geographic location in north Alabama and its traditional resistance to George Wallace's racist rhetoric; the vocal and persistent protests of the grassroots Community Service Committee who struck fear into the hearts of local boosters; pressure from the federal level through Marshall Space Flight Center, Redstone Arsenal and their affiliated contractors; and the cooperation of the community through business coalitions, biracial commissions, and earnest efforts by both black and white leadership to maintain peace in the city. These factors were significant in making Huntsville a leader in desegregation for the state, but it is important to

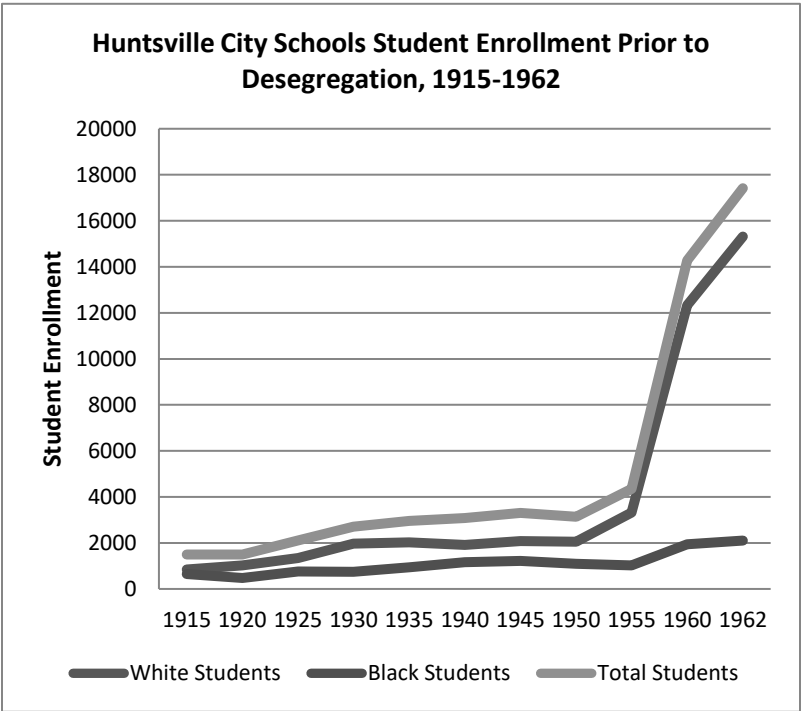
consider the nuances of this history beyond any triumphal claims about the city’s position as a leader in accepting racial equality.

Huntsville has embraced its identity as a progressive Alabama city, reaping the benefits of federal funding and population growth that accompanied the city’s space boom. Its title as first in the state to desegregate continues to be a point of pride. Contemporary explanations credited the city’s large population of racially moderate non-native Alabamans and reasonable community leadership, along with the city’s “economic ties to Washington rather than Montgomery” to explain the peaceful acceptance of changes in racial practices. Huntsville was profoundly influenced by federal dollars and outside investment due to the presence of the NASA’s space program at MSFC and the military at Redstone Arsenal, prompting city leaders to assess their priorities when faced with the possibility of negative press. As explained in a history of the NASA installation, “the Gospel of Wealth had more disciples in Huntsville than did the Gospel of White Supremacy.”<sup>iii</sup>



*Population of Madison County, Alabama, 1930-1990*

The accomplishments of civil rights activists in Huntsville shine most brightly when considered in comparison to the rest of the state. Thanks to national headlines about unrest and violence in Birmingham, Anniston, and Selma, Alabama gained a reputation for its dedication to white supremacy. Governor George Wallace’s 1963 inaugural pledge to defend “Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever” had echoes in local civil rights struggles across the country. Activists across the state put their lives at risk when they spoke out about racial inequalities, and the horror of Anniston’s violent reaction to the Freedom Rides illustrated that Alabama



**Huntsville City Schools Student Enrollment Prior to Desegregation, 1911-1962.<sup>1</sup>**

had just as much hatred toward outsiders trying to lead the state into a future of racial equality. Despite the very real threat of violence against themselves and their families, dozens of activists committed themselves to change in Huntsville.

Huntsville saw explosive population growth in the 1960s. As shown in table left Madison County, of which Huntsville is the county seat, jumped from a population of 72,903 in 1950 to 117,348 in 1960 and 186,540 in 1970. This population boom had impacts on the demographics of the city's schools as illustrated in Table 2.2, which shows changes in student enrollment divided by race. This data illustrates that the overwhelming majority of new students in the city schools were white, reinforcing the concentration of city resources in white communities.

Given these circumstances, the various social groups in Huntsville approached the civil rights movement in understandably different ways. Although many considered the city to be less segregated than some southern communities, its black and white residents lived in completely different versions of Huntsville. The African-American community was not only socially but also geographically distinct from the white community in its neighborhoods, shopping districts, and schools. The most significant black business district, known as The Grove, was demolished during the period of urban renewal to make way for Huntsville's modern downtown. White areas had whites-only establishments. The black district had businesses serving black customers: laundromats, movie theaters, lawyers, dentists, doctors, and restaurants, to name a few. As federal money came into the city, its trickle-down benefits went directly to the white community through salaries, booming residential developments,

and increased spending money in white business districts and schools. The black community, on the other hand, experienced little to no change in their everyday lives as a result of the space boom and influx of federal spending. Luckily, African-American business and community leaders realized the impact this spending was having on the lives of white Huntsville and made it a critical factor in their activism as they launched the Community Service Committee (CSC) in early 1962 to serve the black community. White stakeholders wanted to preserve the gains they saw coming from federal investment in the city and would soon realize that their federal paycheck was only secure if the white community capitulated on its segregationist ways.<sup>iv</sup>

### **1962: Struggles and Successes**

Organized action for civil rights first began in Huntsville in January of 1962, when Hank Thomas, a field secretary for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), arrived in Huntsville and met with Alabama A&M College students to brief them on the practices of peaceful protest. On January 3 1962, the students held the city's first sit-ins at the lunch counters at W.T. Grant Co., H & H Walgreens, the Trailways bus station, F.W. Woolworth & Co., Big Boy, and Sears & Roebuck. At each of these locations they were ignored and left quietly after waiting for service. Later that evening, black students in four cars attempted to purchase movie tickets at the whites-only Parkway Drive-In Theater (Figure 2.1) and Woodey's Drive-In Theater but were turned away. Sit-ins continued in increasing numbers despite these rebukes. Led by Dr. John L. Cashin Jr., a delegation of six leaders from the black community met with Mayor R.B. Searcy on

January 5 but were disappointed to hear they mayor reassure them that “there were no problems in Huntsville” and “the Negroes and the white people had always gotten along well together.” Three days later, on January 8, a mass meeting of the African-American community at First Baptist Church resulted in the formation of the Community Service Committee (CSC) to provide support to civil rights protestors. Given that Alabama had banned the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) from the state just weeks before, local organizers feared the same fate would befall CORE and saw the need for locally organized action. The CSC became the most significant group leading the civil rights movement in Huntsville, and its peaceful yet forceful approach would ensure the moderate course of desegregation for the city.<sup>v</sup>



*The Parkway Drive-In Theater, a whites-only establishment.<sup>1</sup>*

A look at how *The Huntsville Times* covered the events of the civil rights movement gives a clue into how white Huntsville initially perceived blacks' requests for rights. Continuing its tradition of refusing to report news from the African-American community, consistently underreported the numbers in attendance at CSC events. In their reporting on the first sit-ins in Huntsville in January of 1962, the *Times* was suspicious of the protestors' intentions and wrote that they “serve no purpose other than to

endanger the good relations between the white and colored citizens of our community. We cannot believe that anything like a majority of the responsible colored citizens here either endorse or support the tactics used” or that they “have any desire to go into places where they are not welcome.” After only one week of sit-ins the editorial page printed the headline, “It’s Time to Call a Halt,” applauding the patience of Huntsville’s “harassed merchants” and questioning the activists: “What possibly can be gained by violating the legal rights of the owners...of a private business? How does a sit-in movement against a merchant fit in to any logical pattern of an attack against segregation?” Clearly the white community was not willing to compromise with blacks asking for change. *The Huntsville Times* expressed the white community’s disregard for “agitators [who] thrive on violence and its attendant publicity” and cautioned Huntsville residents against “those who seek to provoke us into rash and foolish acts. As the CSC continued its sit-ins and began poster-walking and letter-writing campaigns, the white community took notice and thought immediately of what was at stake: “Such demonstrations serve one purpose. They harm Huntsville’s position in the high competitive race for industrial and intellectual development. [...] Those who are promoting these demonstrations are not considering the over-all community needs or the community future.” As the media voice of the city’s white community, *The Huntsville Times* blamed the protestors, the victims of racial discrimination, rather than addressing the root problem of Jim Crow’s incompatibility with federal policies on racial equality. The newspaper’s position illustrates that the city placed priority on the continued prosperity of

those who had already benefited from the city's boom, rather than on the just distribution of that prosperity to the city's "second-class" citizens.<sup>vi</sup>



*Students prepare to sit in at Woolworth's  
January 31 1962.<sup>1</sup>*

Demonstrators also faced more violent opposition to their demands. Bomb threats were not uncommon at sit-in venues, but some faced harsher retribution from the community. On January 14, two weeks in to Huntsville's sit-ins, Hank Thomas of CORE was participating in a sit-in at the Parkway City shopping center when someone covered his car seat with the severe irritant oil of mustard. Thomas had to be hospitalized that night with severe irritation and burning due to the effects of the caustic oil on his skin. The *Huntsville Times* gave the incident minimal



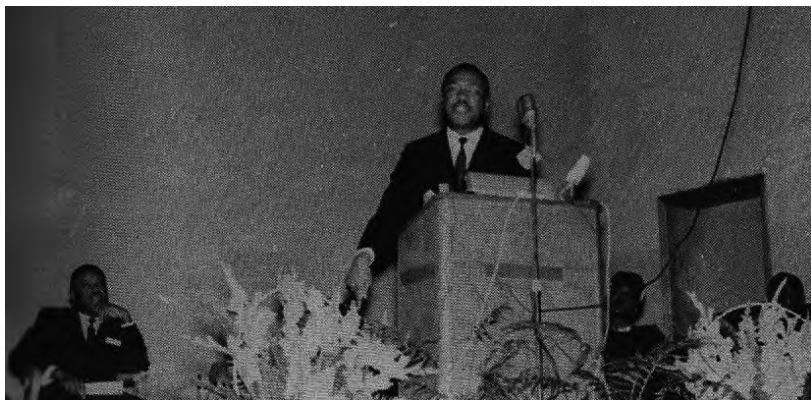
attention with a vaguely worded statement from the hospital about Thomas's injury. One week later, a second incident shook those participating in the movement. Marshall Keith, a white employee at Redstone Arsenal, had recently joined in several sit-ins at local drug store counters. At 1:00 a.m. on the night of January 21 1962, Keith was forced from his home at gunpoint, blindfolded, and driven out of the city where he was told to take off his clothes and then was sprayed with a chemical later found to be oil of mustard. He was then struck and abandoned by his abductors. Keith got help at a nearby home and recovered at the hospital, moving out of state shortly thereafter. His experience illustrates that despite its moderate reputation, Huntsville still had its share of fanatical Alabama racists who were willing to go to great lengths to prove their point.<sup>vii</sup>

After weeks of sit-ins, the Mayor continued to resist the CSC's requests for a biracial committee, illustrating the attitudes of the white community by claiming that he could never find enough whites willing to serve in such a group. Faced with this opposition, the CSC developed further methods of protest. Their tactics were targeted at two of the major interests of the white community: economic success for local businesses and the security of the space program. Boycotts were a powerful force against local businesses, but in 1921 the Alabama state legislature had made it illegal to boycott or to advocate for a boycott. CSC executive committee member Raymond Blackwell, a professor of political science at Alabama A&M, suggested that the committee print small cards with a question for the black community: "Are you shopping for freedom or buying segregation?" When a black family was spotted shopping at an establishment

with discriminatory policies, a CSC member could silently hand them a card with this question, rather than directly asking them to boycott. Mrs. Marian Caudle, in her oral history interview, recalls a childhood memory of shopping with her mother at W.T. Grant in downtown Huntsville and being handed one of these cards to signal the need for their support in the boycott. This simple question, without any mention of boycotting, encouraged members of the black community to send a message to Huntsville's businesses with their shopping dollars.<sup>viii</sup>

In poster walks along the city's busy white business district and the courthouse square, protestors targeted Huntsville's weak spot with posters that read "This is Rocket City U.S.A., Let Freedom Begin Here," "Khrushchev can eat here but I can't," "I ordered a hamburger and they served me a warrant," and "Worried about freedom in Laos and Berlin? We want freedom here!" Following one civil rights rally on the courthouse square, supporters released balloons carrying harsh messages about the ironies of racial inequality in a city "where millions of tax dollars are spent each day to build up Free World defenses."<sup>ix</sup>

Realizing that they needed to reenergize the black community after months of sit-ins and boycotts, the CSC arranged for Martin Luther King, Jr. to speak in Huntsville on March 19 1962. Thanks to fundraising from across the black community, Dr. King spoke to a packed house at the First Baptist Church on Church Street and again to a crowd of 2,000 at Oakwood College (Figure 2.3). King's visit galvanized the community and prepared them for the continued struggle they faced in Huntsville.<sup>x</sup>



*Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speaks at the First Baptist Church.<sup>xi</sup>*

April of 1962 was a flurry of activity for the CSC as its members-maintained sit-ins, boycotts, and poster walks and intensified pressure on the city with new tactics. Faced with *The Huntsville Times's* news blackout of civil rights events, the CSC engineered a situation sure to grab headlines. On April 10, Martha Hereford, who was six months pregnant, and Joan Cashin with her four-month-old daughter Sheryll, sat in at H&H Walgreens with every intention of being arrested for refusing to leave. They were accompanied by CSC president Revered Ezekiel Bell, Reverend S.F. Lacey, and student activist Frances Sims. As expected, the sit-inners were arrested, baby Sheryll in tow. There, the men were released under a \$300 bond but the three women refused to ask for an appeal bond, much to the dismay of Police Chief Grover Pylant who hoped to avoid an uproar over the situation. He resolved to release the three women "on their own recognizance" that day. The next week, as *Jet* magazine published a photo of Joan Cashin being arrested with her infant in arms, the three women arrived for their arraignment and again refused to post

bond. This left the court with no choice but to send Martha Hereford, Joan Cashin, and Frances Sims back to jail, this time without baby Sheryll. At the Madison County Jail, the women faced inhospitable conditions as the jailers tried to convince them to post bond and leave, but with the support of the CSC and the black community they held fast to their principles. Supporters brought the women three meals a day, and organized a telephone committee of people calling the jail and the mayor to inquire, "Is it true you have mothers in jail, you have a pregnant woman in jail?" An exasperated Mayor R.B. Searcy called Dr. John Cashin, urging him to post bond for his wife. After thirty-three hours in the Madison County jail, the three women finally relented and posted bond for themselves after *The Huntsville Times* published news of the event and national news outlets picked up the dramatic story of protests in the Rocket City.<sup>xii</sup>

To reinforce the city-wide boycott of department stores with segregated lunch counters, Easter of 1962 was declared "Blue Jeans Sunday" in the black community. Traditionally, Huntsville businesses enjoyed a seasonal boom in business when black and white families would shop for new dresses and suits in preparation for Easter church services and celebrations. In an act of protest against the discriminatory policies of department stores with segregated lunch counters, African-Americans boycotted clothing stores in Huntsville and instead shopped in neighboring cities such as Fayetteville, Decatur, and Athens. In a show of solidarity, participants wore plain, cheap blue jeans on Easter Sunday instead of expensive new sets of "Sunday best" clothing. With the statewide ban on boycotts in mind, the CSC engineered a clever disguise for this show of

# Don't Invest In Huntsville, Ala.

## It's Bad Business

Demonstrations (sit-ins, picketing, and prayer marches) began in Huntsville, Alabama, January 3rd and continue down to this very hour. Numerous jailings and assaults have taken place. At one point three Turkish soldiers, in Huntsville to study the federal rocket program were taken into custody. Each day many visitors go in and out, yet, city officials still ignore the many local, national, and international ramifications of present policies.

Huntsville has grown faster than any other city in America. This growth has come as a result of federal government expenditures and the entry of many large corporations, among them Chrysler, IBM, Raytheon and Thiokol Chemical.

The Rocket Capital of the Free World must not become involved in riotous racial conflict.

Write Mayor R. B. Searcy and ask him for an early democratic solution. Write President Kennedy ask him to lend his aid and influence.

Please don't delay - Negro citizens are still being jailed if they seek service at lunch counters or try to challenge the status quo.

*Can Democratic Defenses Be  
Built in an Undemocratic City?*

Figure 2.5 Flyer handed out at New York Stock Exchange.<sup>1</sup>

activism. In the week leading to Easter Sunday, CSC volunteers distributed

"Lenten Self Denial Folders"

(Figure 2.4) across the city's black neighborhoods

urging residents to pray for social justice in the Lenten season

and to "decide here and now to deny yourself as

Christ did. Say with us, nothing new for Easter." In

a less veiled suggestion, they also told readers to "stay out of

town, the Mall, Parkway Shopping Center."

As footage from Dr. Hereford's

documentary *A Civil Rights Journey*

illustrates, the boycott was a resounding

success economic shock for Huntsville businesses, who for among the black community. This boycott was an years had relied on the Easter boost to their sales.<sup>xiii</sup>

The CSC was persistent, using a variety of approaches to insist that the white community address racial issues, beginning with sit-ins in January of 1962 and soon adjusting with the understanding that the city's white institutions would require a more powerful push toward change. The CSC's protestors also surprised Huntsville's leaders with a protest on the national level. In the spring of 1962, current and former Huntsville residents along with Alabama A&M alumni picketed in among the black community. This boycott was an years had front of both the New York Stock Exchange and the Midwest Stock Exchange in Chicago, passing out handbills with messages such as "Don't Invest In Huntsville Ala.: It's Bad Business," "Can Democratic Defenses Be Built in an Undemocratic City?" and "To invest in Huntsville, Alabama is to invest in segregation" (Figure 2.5).<sup>xiv</sup>

# LENTEN

## SELF DENIAL FOLDER



### INSTRUCTION FOR USE OF THIS SELF DENIAL FOLDER

As we enter the latter days of the Lenten season thinking of the causes for which Christ died your attention is called to the fact that within the past two years students all over the south have with their sit-in demonstrations tried to advance the cause of brotherhood and social justice. We have succeeded in more than one hundred and fifty cities. Success will be ours in Huntsville.

We as students are praying, we offer our bodies as living sacrifices. Many of us have already been jailed in this Godly crusade. Will you pray with us?

We give this self denial folder to you and ask you to do the following:

1. Read the 6th Chapter of St. Mathew, contained here, for the truth it tells.
2. Daily pray with us earnestly the three prayers that are contained here. The first two have been prayed by Christian for more than one hundred years.
3. Decide here and now to deny your self as Christ did. Say with us, nothing new for Easter.
4. Stay out of town, the Mall, Parkway Shopping Center.

*Lenten Self-Denial Folder to promote Blue Jeans Sunday.<sup>1</sup>*

Thanks to months of pressure from the CSC, in late April of 1962 Mayor Searcy agreed to establish a biracial committee to address the concerns of the African-American community. Three local white businessmen, wholesale grocer Will Halsey, real estate baron Harry Rhett Jr., and James Johnston of Johnston Concrete, agreed to participate under the condition that their involvement would be discreet. Ultimately the city resolved to have a trial period of desegregation of eight lunch counters in July, prearranged with business owners, the police department, the CSC and the mayor. To deter organized opposition by any white groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, the date was kept a secret from the general public. On the first day of integrated dining in Huntsville, there was no violence and not a single protest.<sup>xv</sup>

While the CSC's tactics forced the cooperation of white leadership and the peaceful desegregation of businesses, the course of the movement in Huntsville is also attributed to the city's political climate. Like much of northern Alabama, Huntsville had a reputation for being more moderate on race issues than the rest of the state. Governor George Wallace's style of racism found little support in Huntsville. Both times Wallace ran for governor, in 1962 and 1966, Madison County gave Wallace a smaller percentage of the vote than did any other Alabama county. Wallace's extreme stance set the tone for resistance to racial equality across the state, but Huntsville leaders tried to minimize the local impact of Wallace's rhetoric and politics. While 1962 saw Huntsville begrudgingly accept the first steps of desegregation, the city's response to Governor Wallace's interferences in 1963



would prove that the city was tied more closely to Washington than to Montgomery.<sup>xvi</sup>

Huntsville's early successes seem remarkable in comparison to the violent and protracted battle that proceeded in Birmingham, so a comparison of the two Alabama cities can be fruitful. The frustrations of Birmingham civil rights organizers were embodied in Police Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor, who embraced a public identity devoted to maintaining separation of the races. Huntsville, on the other hand, had no single staunch figure such as Connor to serve as a figurehead and rallying point for segregationists. Bull Connor also served an important role for civil rights organizers, as his violent and impetuous style ensured that any conflict with him would make headlines across the country. In Huntsville organizers struggled to make it into the newspaper at all, particularly in the local *Huntsville Times*, and were never presented with the opportunity to face such a foe as Connor. Huntsville's white leadership did not rely on the fear of violence to keep protesters at bay, but rather took the approach used in Albany, Georgia, with a police force so dedicated to matching nonviolence with nonviolence that they dutifully arrested dozens of protestors at one sit-in after another. As Huntsville's protestors were peacefully arrested from all-white lunch counters and quietly taken to jail, the CSC had to concoct its own ways to create headlines, such as the planned arrest and imprisonment of two well-to-do black mothers, one pregnant and one with an infant in arms, over their desire to eat at a segregated lunch counter. While Huntsville's civil rights leaders couldn't always count on stirring up headlines with their protests, they did take note of some of the most successful campaigns in

other cities, such as Nashville's Easter Sunday shopping boycott that was replicated in Huntsville as Blue Jeans Sunday. Birmingham's deep racial tensions coupled with a white supremacist figurehead in Bull Connor to create a powder keg that wouldn't be found in Huntsville. Instead, the CSC had to think closely about what tactics would pinpoint Huntsville's particular interests and develop targeted protest techniques to hit the city's weak points.<sup>xvii</sup>

### **1963: Battling Against the Governor**

After the successes of 1962, Huntsville prepared for another battle as Governor Wallace challenged the admission of Dave McGlathery and Marvin Carroll to the University of Alabama at Huntsville in June of 1963. CSC committee member Dr. John Cashin recruited these two black professionals involved in missile research at Redstone Arsenal to apply for continuing education credits from the university. The press, the Attorney General's office, and the FBI speculated over whether Wallace would make his stand against desegregation in Huntsville. The 169<sup>th</sup> Combat Engineering Group of the National Guard was even federalized in anticipation of a standoff in Huntsville. When the time came to admit the students in June, Wallace did interfere by changing the registration days for several state universities at the last minute, ostensibly to allow for movement of state troopers between the universities. Fortunately for Huntsville, the governor chose to make his "stand in the schoolhouse door" on June 11 in Tuscaloosa rather than the Rocket City, much to the relief of McGlathery as he enrolled at UAH without any problems on June 14 1963 (Figure 2.6). Ironically enough, the state's university color barrier had been

broken quietly on the Alabama A&M College campus in Huntsville two days earlier, as on June 11 a white man named Robert Muckel enrolled at the traditionally black college with no attention from Governor Wallace. Muckel, a science teacher from Nebraska, did not know that Alabama A&M was a historically black school when he enrolled in the school's summer institute for teachers, and was surprised to learn that he was in fact breaking new ground in the fight for racial equality in the state.<sup>xviii</sup>



David McGlathery enrolls at the University of Alabama in Huntsville.<sup>xix</sup>

Huntsville would not be able to avoid intervention from the governor as it prepared for the court-ordered desegregation of four of its public schools. This battle began on the coattails of the successes of 1962, as the CSC recruited several African-American families who were willing to file a lawsuit demanding the right to enroll in all-white schools despite serious intimidation and threats of violence from the white community. Judge H.H. Grooms of the U.S. District Court in

Birmingham ruled on August 13 1963 that Huntsville had to begin integration that fall. On Tuesday September 3, the first scheduled day of school, four African-American students prepared to be the first to integrate Alabama's public schools: Sonnie W. Hereford III at Fifth Avenue School, Victoria Pearson at Rison Junior High, John Brewton at East Clinton School, and David Piggee at Terry Heights School.<sup>xx</sup>

As these families and others made their way to schools across the city, Governor Wallace dispatched state troopers to block students and faculty from entering the four schools to be integrated. Wallace unexpectedly ordered the Huntsville Board of Education delay the opening of all city schools until Friday September 6, apparently in exchange for a promise not to interfere in Huntsville's schools in any other way. As they were turned away from their schools and returned to their homes, families were disappointed at this obstruction and hoped that Wallace's intervention would stop there (Figure 2.7). That day the Huntsville Citizens' Committee for Better Schools sent a telegram to Wallace in which they urged him "to reconsider any action you may contemplate that would interfere with the orderly and peaceable conduct of free public education in Huntsville." Huntsville Mayor R.B. Searcy told the *New York Times* that he wished Wallace had not closed the schools "since we are getting along all right here. And I didn't see any reason for not opening our schools. We would not have had any trouble."<sup>xxi</sup>



*Sonnie Hereford IV and Dr. Sonnie Hereford III leave Fifth Avenue School.<sup>1</sup>*

At 6:20 a.m. on Friday September 6, parents were disappointed to hear Wallace's state troopers announce over local radio that the four schools to be desegregated would be closed again until Monday September 9. The Board of Education "quickly issued a statement saying that as far as it was concerned, the schools were open." State troopers blocked the doors to the schools and faced crowds of almost

200 parents who "made it plain that they resented what many of

them called an 'invasion' by the governor's forces." Some families pushed their way through the line of troopers, while others confronted or stared silently at the men carrying out the governor's orders (Figure 2.8). *The New York Times* reported that one mother, upon being told by a state trooper that the governor had closed the schools that day, fumed, "Well if that's the way Governor Wallace does things, he ought to be hanged."<sup>xxiii</sup>



*Unhappy Huntsville mother at Fifth Avenue School.  
XXXII*

Much of Huntsville's white leadership clearly resented Wallace's involvement and would have preferred to proceed in desegregation without his attention. Huntsville Chief of Police Chris Spurlock described the governor's actions to the *New York Times* as "a tyrannical use of power" and noted that the city would have preferred to handle desegregation on its own: "The police department didn't invite them [the troopers] here and didn't want them here." He continued: "If it isn't evident to all the world today that that the executive head of our [state] government is a sick man, then by God, none of us are discerning enough to read the facts. To say I'm disappointed is to try to be kind." These strong words from the chief of police illustrate an important difference between Huntsville and other Alabama cities where law enforcement actively opposed desegregation, such as

Bull Connor's Birmingham police force and Jim Clark's deputies in Selma.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Huntsville Mayor R.B. Searcy told the *New York Times* that he wished Wallace had not closed the schools "since we are getting along all right here. And I didn't see any reason for not opening our schools. We would not have had any trouble." He indicted Wallace for his hypocrisy on the matter, telling the *New York Times* that the governor "sits down and out of one side of his mouth he criticizes the President of the United States [Kennedy] for interfering with states' rights, and at the same time he's doing the same thing himself with cities' rights."<sup>xxiv</sup>

In a sharp contrast to their initial reactions to the civil rights movement in town, *The Huntsville Times* lambasted Wallace and fumed that Huntsville's school children had been "used as pawns" in the governor's "long-standing feud with the federal authorities." An editorial seethed at the governor: "Apparently, he places his own political ambitions above the welfare of the school children he has pledged to aid." The newspaper urged, "All Huntsville should let the governor know that this community bitterly resents the senseless and shameful actions of the day."<sup>xxv</sup>



Governor reads "Huntsville Defies Wallace" in *The Birmingham News*.<sup>1</sup>

Huntsville residents took that advice to heart and did not hold back their fury with Wallace. On Monday September 9, the new date set for the start of classes, the governor was served with a restraining order against any further interference in school desegregation in Huntsville, to include any “failure to maintain peace and order within and around the schools.” The CSC, with the assistance of NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund associate counsel Constance Baker Motley, had filed the restraining order in Birmingham’s District Court on Friday after Wallace’s second attempt to block integration in Huntsville. Faced with the restraining order, Wallace did not offer any further resistance to Huntsville’s desegregation. Instead, he sent state troopers to block students from integrating schools in Mobile, Birmingham, and Tuskegee. Monday in Huntsville found just a few local policemen to monitor the schools, and four Huntsville city public schools became the first in the state to desegregate.<sup>xxvi</sup>

### **The Struggle Continues**

The CSC gave momentum to the movement, but the presence and influence of Marshall Space Flight Center and Redstone Arsenal undeniably affected the way Huntsville negotiated the civil rights movement of the 1960s. These federal installations affiliated with NASA and the U.S. Army brought welcome federal money into the area, attracted a new population of educated whites from outside the South, and led to the direct involvement of the federal government in Huntsville’s racial affairs. Washington’s investment in Huntsville via MSFC and Redstone Arsenal was fundamental to the city’s success and economic boom in the 1950s through 1970s. Correspondingly, most



understood that the federal interest in Huntsville made it critical that the city stay far from the type of racism that characterized many headlines coming from Alabama.

Huntsville leaders weighed their options but knew that it would be difficult or impossible to uphold both white supremacy and federal investment in the city. In a 1963 letter to Alabama's segregationist Governor George Wallace, J.A. Barclay of Northrop Space Laboratories, a federal contractor in Huntsville, explained that on the day after Governor Wallace's infamous "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever" inaugural speech, "two engineers with graduate degrees who had agreed to move to Huntsville [from Los Angeles] changed their minds with the explanation that 'they didn't want to get into a racial mess.'" Barclay's experience illustrated the worst fears of Huntsville's contractors and business leaders, as well as many others who had profited from the growth which federal investment brought to the city.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Although organized local civil rights demonstrations began in early 1962, Marshall administrators were not concerned with race in Huntsville until headlines from Birmingham in 1963 brought Alabama national attention for its opposition to desegregation. Soon NASA Administrator James Webb was investigating equal employment opportunity for blacks in Huntsville on behalf of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity. Some in the city thought their fears had materialized in 1964 when the *New York Times* reported Webb's warning that "some research work would have to be switched from Huntsville to New Orleans because the space agency

found it difficult to attract seasoned executives to Alabama.”<sup>xxviii</sup>

Webb’s investigation of federal employment practices at MSFC spurred attempts to rectify some of the racial inequalities there. Marshall established an affirmative action program in 1963 and soon began working closely with Alabama A&M College and Oakwood College, historically black colleges in the city, to improve their engineering education programs. MSFC also offered internships and other incentives for educated blacks entering the Marshall workforce, and worked closely with the city’s contractors to create equal employment opportunity for blacks. The biggest challenge to equal employment was the lack of adequate scientific and technical education available to many African-Americans, and Marshall would continue to struggle with the issue into the next decade.<sup>xxix</sup>

Marshall Space Flight Center and Redstone Arsenal were federally mandated to make steps toward racial equality, but Huntsville’s federal contractors joined the effort at the suggestion of James Webb, NASA Administrator. Webb explicitly requested that area contractors organize to work for progress in race relations; as a result, the Association of Huntsville Area Contractors (AHAC) formed in the summer of 1963. Huntsville’s federal connection meant many lucrative contracts for these businessmen, and they began efforts to shrink the disparity between the races in the city. AHAC pledged to increase minority employment, provide financial aid to black public schools and colleges, and press for equal facilities and opportunities for both races. The city’s industrial expansion committee, headed by local businessmen, pursued a course that put “the city’s economic

boom...ahead of segregationist feelings” and “[made] it plain that they are not going to allow their boom to be jeopardized by a poor racial reputation.”<sup>xxx</sup>

This examination of the course of the civil rights movement brings to light the interplay of state and federal government in Huntsville. The city’s leaders worked hard to maintain Huntsville’s position as the recipient of much federal attention and money. Understandably, the city’s allegiances may have swayed toward Washington as an increasing number of Huntsville paychecks came from the government pocketbook. Governor George Wallace made few friends in the city when he brought his brand of racism to Huntsville and further reminded the city that it looked to Washington rather than Montgomery for leadership. Wallace’s own battle against federal authorities and President Kennedy was fresh in peoples’ minds as the governor imposed his authority upon Huntsville schools, and many recognized Wallace’s hypocrisy on the matter of intervention in local affairs.

Huntsville experienced the civil rights movement in a unique way due to the combination of federal involvement, savvy and determined grassroots organization, and a population eager to move into a future of progress and expansion for north Alabama. Despite its boom and transformation, Huntsville was still at heart a town run by whites in one of the most virulently racist states in the union. For decades African Americans in Huntsville faced the harsh and degrading realities of life in a segregated society. Although it was hard to turn away from entrenched southern racism, Huntsville’s leadership adopted a moderate stance on race after the CSC forced them to consider what was at stake for the city. For many

years, however, the city continued to struggle with employment inequalities between the races. Marshall and Redstone were especially troubled by this problem as they were expected to conform to Equal Employment Opportunity Commission requirements. *Science* recognized Huntsville's unique position in 1967, writing that despite the city's progress, "Alabama's reputation in the race relations field still bears the imprint of George Wallace and of Jim Clark. [Sheriff in Selma, AL] The pervasiveness of the image created by the ultrasegregationists does an injustice to Huntsville and the rest of Alabama's Tennessee Valley area."<sup>xxxix</sup>

Huntsville's experiences illustrate a lesson in the real depth of racial inequality in cities across the country. Although it accomplished school desegregation in 1963, the city has been struggling for fifty years to accomplish a unified school system without severe racial imbalances. As explained by U.S. District Court Judge Madeline Haikala who oversaw the recent review of the case against Huntsville City Schools, "the fact that the district integrated the student bodies of many of its schools in the early 1970s does not automatically lead to the conclusion that the district does not currently operate a dual system." Even after the *de jure* equality that the gains of 1963 afforded, the city struggled terribly to overcome the *de facto* segregation that still exists across the city's neighborhoods and communities.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Huntsville proceeded slowly into school desegregation, enrolling only a handful of black students into any given school in the years following the successes of 1963. By 1964 the District Court was unsatisfied with Huntsville's steps toward integration. Pressure continued to mount throughout the decade

and then intensified as the Justice Department intervened in April of 1966, beginning a decades-long dialogue with the city. Huntsville struggled to design a school desegregation plan that would be amenable both to the city's citizens and to the Justice Department, shattering the hopes of white leadership that their early and token desegregation would help them avoid unwelcome attention and pressure from the federal level. White leaders at MSFC, Redstone, and the city's federal contractors would also be disappointed to find themselves tasked with solving the long and difficult problem of racially unequal school and college curriculums in order to bring more racial equality in their hiring practices. Huntsville's black and white leadership saw important successes in the early 1960s, but both were disappointed and stymied by the deeper problems that would continue to impede true racial equality for the city.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

The trajectory of the civil rights movement in Huntsville might seem to lend itself to claims of victory for all involved. African-Americans saw Huntsville lead the state in desegregation of public facilities and schools, and the city's white leadership could claim Huntsville's progressive identity led them to support these changes. However, a more somber evaluation would conclude that the movement resulted in both victories and defeats for most players in this drama. Huntsville, like cities across the country, would soon realize that the realities of *de facto* segregation posed a much more difficult problem than did establishing *de jure* equality. While the African-American community saw tangible gains in their ability to vote in elections, dine across the city, or enroll in previously all-white schools, they would see progress slow as the 1960s progressed into the 1970s.



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