Why Prince Edward County?

Prince Edward County, Virginia,
September 16, 1963, 6:30 a.m.

THE SCHOOL BUS WAS not due at the stop for another half hour, but nervous students dressed in their finest church clothes had already begun to gather. They struggled silently with feelings that were more intense, more complicated than the typical back-to-school jitters. For the first time in the county, black and white students would attend classes together—but this was not Little Rock. Black students would not enter schools through a gauntlet of angry white adults, and inside nearly all of their fellow classmates would be black. Their uneasiness was more fundamental: many had not been to school in four years. Prince Edward had abandoned public education in 1959, its school properties padlocked and marked with "No Trespassing" signs, because county leaders believed that closed public schools were preferable to desegregated ones. Prince Edward had once again refused to allocate money for schools in 1963–64, but the county had agreed to lease dormant school buildings to the Free Schools, an experimental, one-year school system created by the Kennedy administration and funded by private donations. The county would reopen its schools the following year, under orders from the Supreme Court.

Prince Edward County (PEC), Virginia, is the neglected chapter in American civil rights history. In 1951, black high school students in this rural county of fourteen thousand went on strike to protest unequal school facilities, several years before civil rights activities elsewhere in the South began to penetrate public consciousness. The strike led to an NAACP law-

suit that became one of five cases decided by the Supreme Court in 1954's *Brown v. Board of Education*, which outlawed official segregation in public schools. Afterward, state and local political leaders competed among themselves to prove their uncompromising allegiance to segregation. In the signature gesture of his successful 1957 campaign for governor, Lindsay Almond would raise his right arm and vow to sacrifice it before one black child entered a white school.[1] The following September, Almond closed nine schools in three locales on the cusp of desegregation, per the state's "massive resistance" laws. By January, massive resistance was dead, its key provisions struck down by federal and state courts on the same day. The Virginia General Assembly and Governor Almond—his right arm intact— revoked their commitment to total segregation, seeking instead to minimize school integration. Prince Edward's white leaders would make no such concession. Faced with a court order to desegregate its schools in fall 1959, the county withdrew from the public school business. Some other communities had prolonged segregated school systems through intimidation of aspiring black integrators, legal maneuvers, or delays in the opening of mixed schools (typically by a month or two), but Prince Edward's five-year abandonment of public schools was unparalleled.

Black students constituted a little more than half of the school population. During the closing years, most white students enrolled in the segregated Prince Edward Academy, which attempted to draw from state and local funds as a revenue stream; federal judges disallowed such a strategy after a year. According to recent estimates by Edward Peeples, nearly twenty-seven hundred black students were locked out of public schools; fewer than five hundred received some formal education outside the county. White county leaders believed that they were creating a blueprint for defying desegregation mandates in the rural South and, they hoped, throughout much of the United States. Had the Supreme Court decided not to strike down the school-closing strategy—thirteen years after the school strike, a decade after *Brown*, and five years after schools had closed—these Virginia segregationists may have been right. It would take until the 1970s for the schools to become meaningfully integrated.

Mapping the Racial Landscape of Prince Edward County

Oak, pine, and dogwood trees cover the low, rolling hills of Prince Edward County, which spans 356 square miles near the geographic center of the

state. If not for its singular place in history, "the present day traveler would have little reason to take note of [Prince Edward], since its terrain is similar to the other towns, villages and hamlets . . . found at the beginning of the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia," the Reverend L. Francis Griffin, the county's preeminent black leader, wrote in 1979. The area was first "settled" in the early eighteenth century by Tidewater Virginians and their black slaves. A second wave of migration came several decades later when Scots-Irish families moved from Pennsylvania, where they had encountered "Indian troubles," according to the county historian. Prince Edward was established in 1753 from parts of neighboring Amelia County.[2]

The racial history of Prince Edward is rich and complex. At least three black or mixed-race families had acquired land in the county during the last two decades of the eighteenth century. When Richard Randolph died in 1796, his will called for the emancipation of the slaves he had reluctantly inherited from his father and implored their forgiveness. Randolph's family evaded his dictate until 1810, at which point 90 black Prince Edwardians were freed and granted nearly four hundred acres of the family's land. Virginia had passed legislation in 1806 requiring all free blacks to leave the state within a year, but residents of the new settlement, which they dubbed Israel Hill, were allowed to remain. In 1860 the county was home to nearly as many free blacks (466) as slaveowners (582), in addition to 3,455 other whites and 7,341 slaves.[3] In his exhaustive examination of the "Israelites," Melvin Patrick Ely finds that free blacks prior to the Civil War experienced a surprising amount of flexibility in their daily lives:

> Most of the things people did in Prince Edward County, blacks and whites sometimes did together. People of both colors who had money transacted business with one another. Two families, seeking their fortune, one white and the other black, moved west together. Men of both races labored shoulder to shoulder on construction sites and along the Appomattox River. Even in this color-conscious society, free blacks and whites of modest means worked together as hired harvesters on wealthier people's plantations, and men of both races earned the same wages.[4]

The county's pliable race relations also permitted blacks a limited voice in legal matters. Though not permitted to testify against whites in court, "free Afro-Virginians in Prince Edward sued white neighbors and defended themselves against suits by whites; the blacks typically received a full hearing and sometimes won their cases." During the generation pre-

ceding the Civil War, one in ten black Prince Edwardians was free; state-wide, the proportion was one in eight. The Commonwealth had the most slaves of any state, as well as the second largest population of free blacks (after Maryland).[5]

White residents of Prince Edward County were never very fond of out-siders meddling in their business. The Richmond *Enquirer* had concluded during debates in Virginia that Prince Edward "may be set down as perhaps the most unanimous county for immediate secession in the state."[6] The de-nouement of the Civil War took place in and around the county. General Lee arrived in Farmville on the morning of April 7, 1865, before crossing the Appomattox River and burning the bridge his army had traversed. At 5 p.m. that day, General Grant relayed a message to Lee from Farmville, asking that the Confederate commander surrender to avoid further blood-shed. On April 9, the two met thirty miles west of Farmville at Appomattox Courthouse (which twenty years earlier had been part of Prince Edward County), agreeing on terms of the Confederacy's surrender. According to Herbert Clarence Bradshaw's 1955 history of the county, "Prince Edward was devastated by the conquering army and the stragglers in its wake. The memory of the destruction of food and goods remained vivid in the minds of those who experienced it, even small children. Those old enough to re-member people who lived through those hard days know well the wreck and waste which were the lot of practically every home and farm. Horses, livestock, poultry, provisions, valuables were carried off, and goods, fur-niture, and property were wantonly destroyed." Though federal soldiers accounted for some of the destruction, their behavior compared favorably to the "camp followers, thieves, and plunderers" who followed in their wake.[7]

The end of the Civil War radically reshaped race relations in the county and beyond. "Ironically," Ely finds, white Virginians prior to the end of the Civil War "could afford to recognize free black individuals as skillful, upstanding, productive members of society in part because most of their fellow Afro-Virginians remained enslaved. That fact insulated free black achievement from any suspicion that it posed a threat to white supremacy." The end of the Civil War led to a shift in white attitudes: "Local whites, regardless of their prewar politics or habits, saw the war effort as an attempt to defend Virginia from invaders—indeed, from aggressors who threatened to undermine slavery and thus the entire social order."[8]

For a brief period, state politics reflected this shift in the social order, as 27 blacks were elected among the 180 new members of the state assembly

in 1870. Black inclusion in state politics would not last long. By 1885, the Democratic Party had relegated blacks to the very margins of state politics. A surprising exception to this trend came in Virginia's Fourth Congressional District, of which Prince Edward is a part.[9] In an 1888 contest characterized by extensive fraud and vote buying, John Mercer Langston—son of a white planter and a freed slave—was declared the narrow winner by the House of Representatives after a prolonged investigation. The state's first black member of Congress served the remaining months of his term, but he was defeated easily in his reelection bid. The second black Virginian would not be elected until nearly a century later. By 1891, the Virginia General Assembly was entirely white, and only three Republicans remained.[10] Racially targeted voting restrictions enacted by the state in 1902 decimated the black voting population. In Prince Edward, a nearly 60 percent black voting majority had been transformed into an 83 percent white majority.[11]

Prince Edward lies in the "Black Belt," a stretch of land that extends from the Chesapeake Bay through the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and East Texas. Historically, Black Belt counties "are predominantly rural, have a Negro population of at least one-third (and in some instances a majority), and possess stringent mores and laws requiring racial segregation." Whites in Black Belt communities adamantly resisted black gains, which could lead to profound transformations in political power, economic leverage, and social customs.[12] The virulence of Prince Edward whites in preserving segregation equaled that found in many Black Belt communities of the Deep South, but their style of resistance was characteristically Virginian, largely eschewing violence in favor of legalized repression.

During the 1950s, the county experienced considerable outmigration, losing 8.3 percent of its residents. Most of the decrease came from the black population, who represented 44.6 percent of Prince Edward's 15,398 residents at the beginning of the decade and 39.9 percent ten years later, when the population was 14,121.[13] Prince Edward's social and economic center was and remains Farmville, the county seat and the largest town in a fifty-mile radius, which had a population of 4,293 in 1960. Though agriculture played a key role in the local economy, less than one-fifth of the work force listed agricultural occupations in 1960. Dark-fired tobacco and lumber were the two most significant cash crops; local farms also yielded peaches, apples, dairy products, livestock, and small grains. The county included one community hospital, two all-white colleges (Hampden-Sydney and Longwood), seven Protestant churches, and one Catholic church. A shoe

factory with 350 employees was the largest industrial plant. In 1959, the median income for whites was $4,070, more than double the amount for Negro families ($1,848).[14] The professional strata of black Prince Edward-ians included two doctors, one dentist, one mortician, a dozen ministers and—until schools closed—around seventy teachers. Socioeconomically, the Negro population ranged from "a substantial element . . . [who had] ac-quired comfortable homes and prosperous farmland," to some sharecrop-pers "who from year to year might have no cash income at all."[15]

Understanding the School Closings

Southern Stalemate is a political history and analysis that seeks to discover why Prince Edward, alone among localities, elected to abandon public edu-cation for five years. In the process of solving this puzzle, I confront a range of related questions:

- How were state and federal actors implicated in the collapse of public education?
- How did the distinctive nature of Virginia's and Prince Edward's non-violent resistance to integration shape the stalemate?
- How did white leaders in the county justify the abandonment of public education?
- How did blacks and whites respond to the termination of public schooling?
- What were the strengths and limitations of the NAACP's focus on litiga-tion over street protests?
- Why, after one of the earliest civil rights protests in the modern era (1951), did black Prince Edwardians wait until 1963 to launch a direct-action campaign?
- How did these direct-action protests affect Prince Edward?
- What happened after schools reopened in 1964?
- What does the Prince Edward story tell us about current battles over racial equality?

The impact of the struggle in Prince Edward reverberated far beyond county borders. The Supreme Court's 1964 *Griffin v. School Board of Prince Edward County* (377 U.S. 218) decision, ruling that the county must allocate tax monies to operate public schools, equaled the significance of

subsequent rulings—such as 1968's *Green v. New Kent County* (391 U.S. 430) and 1969's *Alexander v. Holmes County* (396 U.S. 1218)—that limited political strategies to avoid desegregation. Other school districts, especially those in the rural South with large black populations, saw the appeal of closing public schools, sometimes threatening to do so if blacks pushed desegregation. In places where an educated citizenry was seen as a threat to the established social and political order, closed or financially starved schools served a political purpose as well as an economic one. Thus, the legal victory by county blacks after thirteen years provided important protections to African Americans and other vulnerable populations throughout the United States. Unsurprisingly, the reopening of public schools in the county did not erase racial inequalities or the struggles of blacks there. When public schools reopened in 1964, only a handful of white students attended. County funding was minimal, despite the severe educational needs of individuals who had experienced lengthy interruptions in their schooling. The slow evolution of the county school system into an adequately funded, well-integrated one, a development that never occurred in many communities, adds another layer of intrigue to the Prince Edward story.

On a theoretical level, *Southern Stalemate* utilizes Prince Edward as a case study to investigate rhetorical defenses of racial segregation. While the county's practical strategy for resisting desegregation ultimately failed, Prince Edward's rhetorical approach was a crucial early draft in the depiction of segregation as a reasoned, natural choice free of racial rancor. Prince Edward's peaceful resistance drew from Virginia's traditions of penalizing blacks who defied the rules of racial deference to white concessions and timetables, skepticism about public schools, and reluctance to provide services to those who paid few taxes. White county leaders saw themselves as heroes taking a principled stand against federal interference with local matters, identifying themselves as "patriotic constitutionalists" rather than "diehard segregationists."[16] From this perspective, black parents were to blame for the interruption of their children's education, since blacks had chosen integration over education and spurned offers by local segregationists to start a private school for black children. Whites who contested the dominant interpretation were shunned and silenced, creating the appearance of unanimity.

In their views that tax money primarily should benefit the largest taxpayers, that government should fund private school education, and that segregation could be justified in nonracial terms, Prince Edward's whites anticipated the "colorblind," conservative strain of rhetoric that gained currency

in the late 1960s and the 1970s, and that continues to thrive. Historians such as Lisa McGirr, Kevin Kruse, and Matthew Lassiter have documented the ways that whites who abandoned multiracial cities for homogenous suburbs substituted an "ahistorical colorblindness" (to use Lassiter's apt phrase) for frankly racist rhetoric, offering a palatable rationale for separate (though hardly equal) public spheres. To these initiators of "white flight," residential segregation was "the class-based outcome of meritocratic individualism rather than the unconstitutional product of structural racism," Lassiter observed.[17] *Southern Stalemate* reveals that Prince Edward's white leaders began to make a comparable rhetorical shift earlier, beginning in the 1950s. A rethinking of rhetorical defenses of segregation and the roots of modern conservative rhetoric is warranted. In doing so, *Southern Stalemate* forges more comprehensive conceptions of white resistance to desegregation and reveals how many convictions of modern conservatism—such as enthusiasm for school choice, a "fee-for-service" mentality about taxation (whereby the highest taxpayers receive the most services), and reduction of public services—have their roots in places like Prince Edward County.

Prince Edward is also a crucial case for studying social movement strategies. Backed by the NAACP, black Prince Edwardians pursued justice primarily via legal mobilization, the pursuit of social movement goals through litigation. Social movement scholars have largely ignored litigation as a movement strategy. Instead, this literature typically focuses on the use of protest tactics to gain political concessions from elites. Scholars have documented numerous cases in which direct action by local blacks provoked violence by white authorities, bringing forth media attention and eventual federal involvement.[18] But the direct-action strategy alone may not work in all contexts, or for all demands. Resistant localities proved adept at avoiding school desegregation until they were forced to dismantle the dual school system by federal courts or agencies. The severe damage inflicted upon students missing up to five years of school provokes the question of whether a greater reliance on direct-action tactics might have complemented the legal mobilization strategy and pressured the county to reopen schools at an earlier time. Blacks in the county did not engage in sustained direct-action protests over the 1959 school closings until the summer of 1963. *Southern Stalemate* probes the reasons for this lag and examines the likelihood that earlier protests would have succeeded. I analyze whether the PEC civil rights movement might have provoked violence and subsequent federal intervention or mustered sufficient economic pressure locally to cause an earlier reopening of schools. As part of this inquiry, I evaluate the distinctive

nature of school desegregation protests, whose participants could not exert direct economic pressure on decision makers, as boycotts of businesses or public transportation could. *Southern Stalemate* uses the Prince Edward case to analyze the use of legal mobilization and direct-action tactics in addressing racial inequalities, assessing *how* and *when* legal mobilization and direct action—separately and in concert—may lead to tangible benefits. As the PEC story illustrates, the outcomes of civil rights conflicts can be made intelligible only by examining the specific demands of social movement organizations and the interplay between those demanding change and those resisting it.[19]

Many residents paid a brutal price for the abandonment of public education. Though the county witnessed relatively few acts of physical violence, the closings left deep scars. Beyond the obvious costs paid by students denied an education, the closings also led to the separation or breakup of numerous black families, many of whom sent children away to continue their education. While blacks were aware of their inferior status in Prince Edward, many were stunned that their white neighbors would show such disregard for the education of black children. Blacks in Prince Edward were the primary victims of the school lockout, but some county whites—those who were unable or unwilling to send their children to the private white academy and the handful who vocally opposed the closings—suffered as well. While local residents bore the brunt of the closings, the Prince Edward story is incomplete if confined to county borders. Indeed, one can scarcely comprehend the school closings outside the context of state and national politics.

Prince Edward County in Context

It is no longer novel to claim that the dominant narrative of the civil rights movement is inadequate and myopic, artificially imposing geographic and temporal boundaries on attempts by African Americans to secure political, social, and economic equality in the twentieth-century United States. Classical conceptualizations rested on a series of dichotomies—"between South and North, nonviolence and Black Power militancy, de facto and de jure segregation, and the movement before 1965 and after"—which have proven insufficient in accounting for the sprawling complexity of the quest to achieve racial justice. Obscured from this framing are the long history of racial struggle and resistance that extended beyond the geographic bound-

aries of the Deep South and the temporal boundaries of the movement's "classical" phase, which lasted from 1954 to 1965. "Dominant explanations of the civil rights movement, then, have turned on the evils of southern whites and the goodness of southern blacks, and on the liberalism of northern whites and the alienation of northern blacks," Jeanne Theoharis noted. The reality is considerably more nuanced. As Jacquelyn Dowd Hall elucidated, the agricultural and industrial strategies of Southern oligarchs

> created a particularly brutal and openly racialized social system, especially in the Deep South. But its basic doctrines—racial and class subordination, limited government regulation, a union-free workplace, and a racially divided working class—dovetailed seamlessly with an ethic of laissez-faire capitalism rooted deeply in American soil. This is not to minimize regional differences. It is, however, to suggest that the further we move away from the campaigns that overturned the South's distinctive system of state-sponsored segregation, the easier it is to see the broader and ultimately more durable patterns of privilege and exploitation that were American, not southern, in their origins and consequences.[20]

The conventional narrative of the civil rights movement has had serious political implications, Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino contend, resulting in a self-justifying narrative of "white racial innocence (occasionally compromised by the 'southernization' of northern race relations), of a benevolent superpower (that temporarily tasted the 'southern experience' of defeat after Vietnam), of an essentially liberal national project (if only the red states would stop preventing the blue states from resurrecting the Great Society)."[21]

Within such a framework, the Prince Edward story could be read as a confirmation of the dominant narrative's emphasis on the singular racial cruelty of the South, of whites so blinded by racial hatred that they would deny black children an education for five years. This is not my aim. Indeed, black boycotts of segregated schools and fierce white resistance to desegregated schools—which led some communities to resort to legal contortions and even school closings—had unfolded in the North decades prior to the era of *Brown*.[22] Northern communities that desegregated in fact, rather than in name only, were typified by small black populations; as black populations expanded, legislators who supported school desegregation did so with the knowledge that residential segregation, gerrymandered school zones, student transfer policies, and white escape to private schools

and homogenous suburbs would allow most whites with some financial re-sources to keep their children in overwhelmingly segregated schools if their parents so chose—and many did.[23] While joining in the skepticism about the exceptional South, I do not wish to minimize the devastating costs that county leaders imposed on black citizens for demanding that the county obey the law of the land. Instead, I seek to understand why Prince Edward chose to abandon public education while whites in countless other locales blanched at the prospect of desegregating schools and sought all available means to avoid doing so, but stopped short of locking school doors.

In unraveling the Prince Edward story, I do not attempt to modify or replace the outmoded narrative of the civil rights movement that has come under recent scholarly attack. Much of the recent scholarship seeking to eviscerate the dominant narrative seeks to widen our field of vision beyond the familiar Southern battlegrounds, but the standard narrative fails even to account for the divergent ways that racial struggles unfolded within specific state and local contexts of the South. To wit, Prince Edward's battle over segregated schools took place in a border state (outside the supposed cen-ter of action, the Deep South); was free of public violence (which helps ex-plain the lack of media and scholarly attention); featured an extremist legal response couched in "civilized," mostly nonracial rhetoric; and stretched from the late 1940s into the 1970s, before and beyond the classical phase that began with *Brown* and ended with passage of the Voting Rights Act. The lessons to be culled from the Prince Edward story, then, do not apply only to a particular community, state, or region, but indeed to the entire system of American race relations.

Rather than continue the fruitless search for a singular, overarching nar-rative, we should try to make sense of variation among sites of civil rights activism and counteractivism. Why did blacks protest in some locales, but not others? When blacks did exert pressure on local authorities, white objections were numbingly common, but communities responded in dis-tinct ways, which included brutal repression, delay, tokenism, and white abandonment of public schools—why? Context is crucial. School closings in Prince Edward were not eminently predictable, nor were they random. If Prince Edward were wholly typical, one might reasonably question the need for another local case study of the movement. If the county represented nothing more than an inexplicable outlier, the case might be intriguing, but it would yield little insight into broader struggles over racial inequality. Prince Edward was—and is—neither typical nor incomprehensible. Ex-amining the details and trajectory of the struggle in Prince Edward offers

broader insights into how communities chose from an array of options to resist school desegregation; how "colorblind" conservative rhetoric developed to justify continued racial inequality; how legal mobilization provided blacks with exciting possibilities and sobering constraints; and how specific responses to civil rights activism could shape future options to contest racial domination.

The Dawn or the Setting Sun in Virginia

"Face the dawn and not the setting sun," NAACP attorney Oliver Hill urged the unsegregated audience of two thousand, packed into the Mosque (now the Landmark Theater) in Richmond. "A new day is being born."[24] It was November 1954, six months after the Supreme Court had horrified much of the white South with *Brown v. Board of Education*. Hill made his unsuccessful plea at the only public hearing of the Gray Commission, a panel of state legislators appointed by Governor Thomas B. Stanley to navigate Virginia's path in the wake of *Brown*. As one of two Southern states directly touched by the ruling (South Carolina was the other), Virginia was compelled to respond at an early juncture to the edict that legally enforced school segregation was no longer permissible. White political leaders recoiled at the prospect of breaking with the state's tradition of racial segregation.

The past held a romantic appeal to white Virginians, who cherished the state's distinguished history and rued the times—Nat Turner's 1831 slave insurrection in Southampton County, the "tragic" Reconstruction era—where the narrative of peaceful, uncontested white supremacy veered off course. Virginia had a central role in the Battle between the States: the capital of the Confederacy was in Virginia; many of the South's war heroes came from that state; many of the most intense Civil War battles took place on Virginia soil. Yet, "this southern state of mind is unevenly distributed throughout Virginia, as is the state's Negro population," the political scientist Robbins Gates observed in 1962. Gates identified four Virginias. The Black Belt, which included counties in the Tidewater region and the region known as the Southside, comprised thirty-one counties with a composite black population of 51.7 percent; individual counties ranged from 40 to 81 percent in 1950. "Almost entirely rural," the Black Belt represented "a chamber-of-commerce problem child. Diversified, large-scale manufacturing [had] settled elsewhere, and cities [had] drained off the most ambitious and competent of the area's successive generations—Negro as well

as white."[25] (If Gates's observation is generally accurate, the main actors, black and white, in the Prince Edward drama proved to be a glaring exception.) The Southside, "a crescent of a dozen counties [Prince Edward among them] spreading south of Richmond to the North Carolina line," is "a bleak country of red clay and scrub pine; of somnolent small towns; of marginal, worked-out farms; of much poverty, ignorance and prejudice. It is here that the fire of racial animosity, fanned lately by the school segregation crisis, burns most fiercely," Cabell Phillips wrote in 1957.[26]

Other parts of the state looked quite different. In the "White Belt," a stretch that mainly adhered to the western edge of the state, there was little tradition of slavery, and black populations did not exceed 10 percent, averaging half that. Thus, for the most part, the possibility of desegregation raised more muted alarms.[27] The "middle ground," in Gates's schematic, stood between the Black Belt and the overwhelmingly white mountains and valleys west of the Blue Ridge. Counties in this group were situated for the most part in a strip running through the center of the state, from its northern to its southern border; also included were a number of counties on the state's eastern shoreline. Black populations ranged from 10.1 to 39.8 percent, with an overall average of 23.1 percent. The final group consisted of cities scattered throughout the state, most prominently Norfolk, Richmond, and Roanoke. Regular flows of business people, tourists, and students; "a more fluid social structure"; and a diluted sectional influence characterized this Virginia. Blacks comprised 26.1 percent of the cities' populations. From 1940 to 1950, the state population grew 23.9 percent. The middle ground and White Belt locales grew in similar proportions, while populations in the cities increased 35.9 percent. In contrast, the Black Belt inched up 1.1 percent.[28] Residents of these distinct Virginias—varying in population, industrial growth, and racial proportions—viewed issues of school desegregation through different prisms. Whites in areas of greater black population typically saw school desegregation as a more ominous threat to existing social, political, and economic relations than did their counterparts where black residents were few.

The legal scholar Michael Klarman explained:

Many southern whites—perhaps a majority outside of the Deep South—preferred token integration over school closures, but very few favored token integration over segregation. Thus, opinion polls on *Brown* revealed minimal support among southern whites, but referenda on school closures showed substantial white opposition. Consequently, until it became clear

that preserving segregation entailed school closures, moderate whites had every reason to allow massive resistance to run its course, as they, too, preferred to avoid desegregation. The difference between white "moderates" and "extremists" was in the costs they were prepared to bear to maintain segregation, not in their preference for it.[29]

Some communities might accept desegregation grudgingly, while others were willing to slash and burn to avoid it. The public school system stood first in the line of fire. In the mountainous western part of the state, with its low, sometimes nearly nonexistent black populations, the prospect of school desegregation did not seem terrifying. The same was true in some of the Washington suburbs, with their transient residents and typically less ingrained racial attitudes. In the Southside, a largely rural region with substantial black populations, school desegregation augured something revolutionary, culminating in a profound inversion of existing power relations and social customs.

The politics of segregation in Prince Edward were not difficult to uncover: for whites, segregation was the only acceptable position. Historically, the Commonwealth's practice of segregation appeared less vicious; white Virginians, Prince Edwardians included, opted for more refined ways of keeping people in line. In most instances, social shunning or the threat of economic reprisals would keep people in their "proper" place. Whites saw themselves as kind caretakers who were willing to bear the considerable burden of ensuring that blacks experienced progress separately from their white counterparts. In return, whites expected that blacks would not attempt to accelerate the slow, orderly pace of change that those in control oversaw.[30]

During the years of statewide massive resistance, Virginia veered from its longstanding tradition of granting localities maximum control over schools, instead dictating a singular policy: no integration anywhere. Virginia's stance of massive resistance was obtuse. Whereas other states, such as North Carolina, sought successfully to minimize integration to the greatest extent possible, its northern neighbor adopted a set of policies that sought openly to allow no breach in the wall of segregation. It was merely a matter of time before federal courts struck these laws down. When the Commonwealth bowed to legal reality and localities began to integrate on a token basis, Prince Edward forged its own path, closing all of its public schools. This legal strategy was considerably more elegant than Virginia's, posing a

perplexing question: Can a federal court force a locality to assess taxes for school operation against its will? Prince Edward did not defy court orders, and the county used the long gestation of the case to build up the segregated Prince Edward Academy, using taxpayer dollars until federal courts prohibited it from doing so. The county's strategic defense of segregation was clever, cold-blooded, and pernicious.

For four years, the federal government treated the closings as a legal matter, confining its objections to the courtroom. Throughout the South, the Kennedy administration proceeded gingerly in local civil rights matters, typically acting only when violence broke out. The incentive to tread lightly was obvious, as powerful Southerners in Congress carried inordinate influence in the success or failure of President Kennedy's other policy initiatives.[31] For black Prince Edwardians, this political consideration was difficult to appreciate as the educational abyss continued to expand. From the administration's perspective, a local decision to close schools was uncharted territory, and the consequences of the federal government running schools in Prince Edward were difficult to anticipate. Would other locales follow suit by closing schools, awaiting federally run schools for blacks while whites fled to private schools? The answer was anyone's guess. With its legal efforts at an apparent standstill, the Kennedy administration decided in 1963 that it could no longer tolerate closed schools and launched the Free Schools, privately funded and open to all.

Unraveling the Prince Edward Story

Journalists and scholars have accorded inadequate attention to the Prince Edward case, which lacked the essential ingredients of a standard civil rights story. Face-to-face confrontations in the streets, sometimes spiked with gruesome violence, lured pens and cameras to the Deep South. Rhetorical clashes in courtrooms, and the quiet suffering of locked-out children in the Upper South, provided little competition. The journalist R. C. Smith authored the sole book-length account of the closings, *They Closed Their Schools* (1965). This contemporaneous account, admirable for its detailed depiction of county life and politics, offers little in the way of broader analysis or, by definition, historical perspective. Smith pays cursory attention to the ways in which national and state politics affected the crisis in Prince Edward. Prominent overviews of the civil rights movement typically mention

the Prince Edward County case in passing, if at all. Taylor Branch's *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* ignores the school closings, despite its opening chapter on Vernon Johns, an influential preacher who spent large chunks of time in Prince Edward County, and whose niece spearheaded the 1951 student strike. Overviews of the civil rights movement by historians Harvard Sitkoff and Robert Weisbrot similarly neglect Prince Edward; the same is true of prominent sociological studies of the civil rights movement by Aldon Morris and Doug McAdam. Books that focus on the five locales covered in *Brown v. Board of Education* do, of course, include some discussion of Prince Edward. Richard Kluger's *Simple Justice* (1976) is the standard text in this genre. Like others of its kind, *Simple Justice* includes essential background on the legal case, but the narrative fades out with the 1955 *Brown II* decision. Raymond Wolters's *The Burden of Brown* (1984) includes a chapter that tracks the Prince Edward County story through the early 1980s, but it reads mainly as a defense of whites' reluctance to desegregate schools. A recent volume edited by Terence Hicks and Abul Pitre, *The Educational Lockout of African Americans in Prince Edward County, Virginia (1959–1964)*, provides some useful historical details and moving personal reflections on the closing years, but it does not offer a rigorous political analysis of the crisis in the county.[32]

Southern Stalemate plumbs the Prince Edward story more deeply. The first chapter sets the historical context for the distinctive styles of resistance to court-mandated school desegregation that emerged in Virginia and Prince Edward County following the *Brown* decision. In the county, as in the state, whites engaged in "managed race relations," generally nonviolent and friendly on the surface, but contingent upon blacks "knowing their place" and accepting white timetables for greater access to quality education and other services.[33] This approach began to lose viability in the 1940s as blacks became increasingly unwilling to wait patiently until whites were ready to act. The 1951 student strike, based in grievances that had festered for decades, shocked local whites. When the construction of a new high school failed to convince black Prince Edwardians to drop their desegregation lawsuit, angry whites insisted adamantly that they would avoid racial mixing in schools at all costs.

 Chapters 2 and 3 analyze Virginia's massive resistance to school desegregation pressures and the eventual collapse of the state's attempt to permit no school desegregation anywhere. The Commonwealth became the most intense state battleground over this issue, as the legalistic approach of Vir-

ginia's segregationist defenders ran headlong into the state NAACP, which boasted unusual strength and had a particularly deep bench of attorneys in Virginia. State politicians eager to show their segregationist credentials sacrificed realistic policy objectives—minimizing school integration—in their attempts to gain political advantage. Massive resistance in Virginia peaked in September 1958, when Governor Lindsay Almond closed nine schools in three locales under court orders to desegregate (Charlottesville, Norfolk, and Warren County). Adverse court rulings, coupled with wavering public support in some regions of the state, led to the collapse of massive resistance four months later, and the beginning of school desegregation in Virginia. In Southside Virginia, the largely rural, heavily black region of the state where Prince Edward is located, the commitment to segregation remained steadfast. Beginning in 1955, white political leaders in the county formulated plans to close public schools, replacing them with private schools for whites. In 1959, they put their plans into effect.

Chapter 4 examines how Prince Edwardians responded to the closure of public schools. Most whites enrolled at Prince Edward Academy. Some of the same segregationist whites who had launched the academy also offered to help create black private schools. Local blacks dismissed the proposal as a transparent attempt to undermine their court case, creating a blame-shifting rationale for whites: it was black parents, not white leaders, who were responsible for black children being out of school. Within the county, some black students attended "training centers" that were designed to provide some instruction and maintain morale, but which, intentionally, no one would mistake for schools. Other black students continued their education outside the county, through formal programs or informal arrangements. Even the most fortunate black students—those who were able to continue their education—had to endure painful separation from family and friends. Many Prince Edward blacks who stayed in the county never returned to the classroom after 1959. Chapter 5 assesses the role of the Kennedy administration, which adhered to a litigative strategy before spearheading the opening of the Free Schools in 1963. In joining the NAACP's side in court, and later creating the Free Schools, the Kennedy administration revealed its concern for Prince Edward blacks, tempered by its reluctance to antagonize powerful Southern politicians.

Chapter 6, the first of two main theoretical chapters, examines white justifications for the school closings. How did whites defend this action? Denying, for the most part, that the closings had anything to do with race,

white leaders asserted that they were standing up for constitutional princi-
ples of self-determination, asserting their rights as taxpayers, offering black
families educational opportunities—and doing all of these things without
violence or ill will. This narrative was virtually uncontested by rank-and-
file whites who had little to gain and much to lose—social and economic
reprisals, foregoing the opportunity to send their children to Prince Ed-
ward Academy—from objecting publicly to the closings. With one of the
county's top segregationists controlling the sole local newspaper, little pub-
lic debate ensued.

Chapter 7 explores the strengths and limitations of legal mobilization
strategies to forge social change. I examine the gap in the use of direct-
action techniques by Prince Edward blacks from 1951 to 1963, assessing
the obstacles that hindered the launch of a sustained protest campaign in
the county. Many black students and nearly all black teachers had left the
county, depriving the community of potential participants in direct action;
those who remained typically engaged in crisis management, seeking edu-
cation or other activities to occupy their children. Sustained economic boy-
cotts would have been a logistical nightmare, given the lack of alternative
shopping options. The polite, nonviolent approach to maintaining racial
inequality in the county and state reduced the possibility for widespread
media attention and early federal intervention. Moreover, the tactical op-
tions available to PEC blacks were constrained by the reality that direct
action proved far less successful in school desegregation disputes than in
other areas, such as desegregation of commercial establishments or public
transportation.

As revealed in chapter 8, the conflict in Prince Edward did not end with
the resumption of public education. While complying with the Supreme
Court mandate to reopen schools, the county board of supervisors revealed
their ongoing resistance by starving the public schools, earmarking two-
thirds of education funds for tuition grants to be used at the segregated
academy. (Federal courts eventually banned the use of tuition grants for use
in segregated private schools.) From 1965 to 1990, blacks and other public
school supporters worked tirelessly, and with some success, to rebuild the
school system. As a consequence, whites migrated in increasing numbers
to the public schools, a process of "integration in reverse" unique to Prince
Edward.

The concluding chapter examines recent efforts in the state and county
to make amends for the five years of closed schools. Initiatives have included
a $2 million state scholarship fund for people affected by school closings in

Prince Edward and other locales, as well as graduation ceremonies for lock-out victims in the county. I also analyze the ongoing impact of the closings on families and the community and examine the state of PEC schools today. The book ends with an exploration of the lessons of the Prince Edward saga, connecting it to current discussions about colorblind conservatism, school choice, the use of tax policy to lure affluent residents and marginalize poor ones, and strategies for activism.