

SHORT TERM AND LONG TERM EFFECTS LOCALLY AND NATIONALLY: THE
MOTON SCHOOL STRIKE

Caitlin Wiley
English 265: The Writing and Rhetoric of Citizenship
October 21, 2019

Moton High School was built in 1939 to provide an education to African American students during the time of “separate but equal” which was ruled in *Plessy V. Ferguson* in 1896. The school was never a nice place due to overcrowding and lack of space that was provided for the students. According to the Moton Museum website; “built to accommodate 180 students, the school had no gymnasium, no cafeteria, no science laboratories, and no athletic field.” Also in an attempt to have more room for classes, there were two tar paper shacks that were built in front of the school and when that was not enough space they would have class on the grass outside. Some of the classes even took place on the busses. These were incidents where the African American students were at a disadvantage to the white kids in the area. The white schools were much nicer and had everything that the students could want for the sake of their education and free space. They had the science labs and athletic fields along with nice gyms and equipment. The Moton School Strike took place in Farmville, Virginia in April 1951. One student decided to take matters into her own hands by starting a movement that would change the lives of many Americans, not just in her hometown, but across the United States. Barbara Johns was a sixteen-year-old student who attended Moton High School. She and other students came together and left the school on a strike until the school board complied and said that they would build a new school. They walked out holding signs that read “We Want A New School! Strike!” and "Down with tar-paper shacks." This caught the eye of many and soon Barbra Johns was moved from her hometown in Farmville Virginia to Montgomery Alabama. The move took place due to the frequency of death threats that she received and soon her family would join her in Alabama after their family home would mysteriously burn down.¹ Long term and short term effects

stemmed from this dramatic historical event were seen locally and nationally, such as lack of education and contributing to a court case that changed America.

With the schools in Prince Edward County being closed for many years this had a long term and short term effect on the small community. The short term effect of the schools being closed is that students had no access to public education for five years. This led to many children not returning to school upon reopening. Also, many private institutions opened soon after the closing of the schools but it was expensive and many students and their families could not afford it. The schools were designed primarily for white students which explain the cost but even then many white students could not afford to further their education and moved on to find jobs and start families. The long term effect is how detrimental this event was in many student's education. Many of these students continued on with their life and never pursued higher education or returned to the schools when they reopened because many would have graduated. This was disastrous for the community because it led to many individuals only being able to work low-level jobs which left many higher-level jobs open and opportunities for people who didn't already live in the community. Due to the lack of education, many students from this generation worked minimum wage jobs their entire life that lacked benefits such as insurance and retirement plans. The lack of insurance made it difficult to support their families. They also struggled when it came to helping their own children with their education since many of them never truly learned how to read and some did not know how to write. Many of the adults felt ashamed that they did not know how to read and kept it private among others. They struggled in their daily lives because of this and most of them never left the small community and remain here today. ²

Another effect of the Moton School Strike is that it had a hand in formulating the major court case that would soon change America, *Brown v. Board of Education*. The Moton School Strike helped this court case because it captured the eyes of two NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored people) lawyers whose names were Oliver W. Hill and Spottswood Robinson III. Upon arrival, they deemed that separate was not equal in Prince Edward County and since the NAACP was looking to challenge *Plessy V. Ferguson* this was a prime place to do it. They set the ball rolling by the NAACP having a meeting and, “ Executive Secretary Lester Banks informed parents and students of the organization's willingness to take on a legal case to end segregation”³ This court case also had many effects that stemmed from it. According to Tillerson-Brown; “ grassroots political organization formed a few months after Brown.” Many whites in these groups opposed this desegregation because they believed that the African American students were separated because they were not able to be as intelligent as the white students. Massive resistance was also another effect from this when it was declared by Harry F. Byrd in order to stop desegregation of the schools in Virginia after the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education*.⁴ Byrd was a huge supporter of segregated schools because he believed in the “Southern Manifesto” which was signed in 1956 in an attempt to stop the schools from integrating.⁵ In the end, *Brown v. Board of Education* would win and the schools would be forced to integrate and reopen their doors because of the supreme court's decision.

In conclusion, the Moton School Strike will always be known in history as a movement that helped to change the way Americans saw separate but equal. It also left many long term effects on Prince Edward County for the older generations and the generations to come after. If

the Moton School students had not walked out of class in April of 1951 they may have never encouraged others to fight the ruling “separate but equal”.

Bibliography

- Heinemann, Ronald L. "Moton School Strike and Prince Edward County School Closings." Encyclopedia Virginia. Accessed on Oct. 9, 2019.
https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/moton_school_strike_and_prince_edward_county_school_closings#start_entry
- Tillerson-Brown, Amy. Struggles for Educational Equity in Prince Edward County, VA: Resistance, Southern Manifesto Ideologies, and School Choice.
<file:///C:/Users/cwile/Downloads/article%20english.pdf>
- Titus, Jill Ogline. (University of North Carolina Press: 2011)
[,file:///C:/Users/cwile/Downloads/Brown's_Battleground_Students_Segregationists_and_....pdf](file:///C:/Users/cwile/Downloads/Brown's_Battleground_Students_Segregationists_and_....pdf)
- Virginia Museum of History & Culture. "Massive Resistance." Accessed Oct. 18, 2019.
<https://www.virginiahistory.org/collections-and-resources/virginia-history-explorer/civil-rights-movement-virginia/massive>

Endnotes

1. Ronald L. Heinemann. "Moton School Strike and Prince Edward County School Closings," Encyclopedia Virginia. Accessed on Oct. 9, 2019.
https://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/moton_school_strike_and_prince_edward_county_school_closings#start_entry
2. Jill Ogline Titus. *Brown's Battleground*. (University of North Carolina Press: 2011)
file:///C:/Users/cwile/Downloads/Brown's_Battleground_Students_Segregationists_and_....pdf
3. Ronald L. Heinemann. "Moton School Strike and Prince Edward County School Closings."
4. Amy Tillerson-Brown. *Struggles for Educational Equity in Prince Edward County, VA: Resistance, Southern Manifesto Ideologies, and School Choice*.
<file:///C:/Users/cwile/Downloads/article%20english.pdf>
5. Virginia Museum of History & Culture. "Massive Resistance." Accessed Oct. 18, 2019.
<https://www.virginiahistory.org/collections-and-resources/virginia-history-explorer/civil-rights-movement-virginia/massive>