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# Beeson Academy/Hattiesburg Prep: A History in Context

By Stuart Levin

While private schools were rare in Mississippi prior to the 1960s, multiple academies were established statewide during that turbulent decade.<sup>1</sup> Beeson Academy (later known as Hattiesburg Prep) was one of these schools, founded in 1965 under the banner of “quality education in a Christian atmosphere.” However, a closer look indicates that the school was in fact established as an integral component of a state-supported effort to counteract federal mandates on segregation. Beeson/Hattiesburg Prep’s subsequent trajectory and ultimate demise were also clearly intertwined with the contemporaneous racial environment.

Since Reconstruction, Mississippi’s white supremacist policies had been essentially immune from federal intervention until the 1954 United States Supreme Court decision *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* (*Brown I*) that segregated schools violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.<sup>2</sup> The following year in a case on implementation of the *Brown I* ruling, the Supreme Court ordered states to proceed desegregating schools “with all deliberate speed.” Mississippi’s leadership focused on the word “deliberate.” Governor Hugh White suggested a schedule that would postpone school desegregation “for ten or more years,” while state Attorney General (and future governor) James P. Coleman avowed that black Mississippians would not find cooperation within the white community moving forward on integration.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the reality on the ground was continued underfunding of schools

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Wolfe, “What is a Segregation Academy?” *Jackson Free Press*, December 17, 2014, <https://www.jacksonfreepress.com/news/2014/dec/17/what-segregation-academy/>.

<sup>2</sup> James W. Silver, “The Closed Society,” *The Journal of Southern History*, 30:1 (1964), 32.

<sup>3</sup> Charles Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All: The Battle over School Integration in Mississippi, 1870-1980* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 73.

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for black students in a state with a 42 percent black population.<sup>4</sup> As of 1962, the average per-pupil funding for Hattiesburg's African American students was barely one-half of the amount spent for whites.<sup>5</sup>

Citizens' Councils were formed by white businessmen and professionals in the aftermath of *Brown I*, with the intent to combat integration primarily through economic pressure. Black parents seeking to send their children to previously all-white schools faced loss of employment and denial of loans and mortgages in addition to repercussions in the community by having their names published in local newspapers.<sup>6</sup> By using non-violent means against civil rights activists, Citizens' Councils sought to ward off more extremist groups (particularly the Ku Klux Klan) that shared similar goals but had the potential of fomenting social unrest.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, which was created by the state legislature in 1956, served as a state-funded investigative organization to spy on civil rights activities and financially supported Citizens' Council initiatives through the mid-1960s.<sup>8</sup>

In Hattiesburg, attorney Dudley Conner became the first president of the Forrest County Citizens' Council. At the inaugural meeting in March 1956, Conner noted that the area may not yet have racial problems, "but you can be sure the NAACP will see we have such problems in the future. That is why we are having this meeting tonight." Observing that there were 485,000 black children in Mississippi versus 310,000 white children, guest speaker Earle Wingo added that "if we open the doors wide to them, educate them with our children, the whites would be in the minority. The situation would be intolerable . . . They wish to do away with all laws related to segregation, even those barring marriage between the races."<sup>9</sup> Citizens' Council member and Hattiesburg hardware store owner M. W. Hamilton later agreed that "the Citizens

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<sup>4</sup> 1960 *Census of Population: Advance Reports-General Population Characteristics-Mississippi* (U.S. Department of Commerce: Bureau of the Census), February 23, 1961, 2, [www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1960/pc-s1-supplementary-reports/pc-s1-52.pdf](http://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1960/pc-s1-supplementary-reports/pc-s1-52.pdf). The percentage of black population in Mississippi was the largest of any state in the nation.

<sup>5</sup> Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All*, 87.

<sup>6</sup> Neil McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-64* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1971).

<sup>7</sup> "The White Citizens Council," *MS Civil Rights Project*, accessed May 16, 2020, <https://mscivilrightsproject.org/hinds/organization-hinds/the-White-citizens-council/>.

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Rowe-Sims, "The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: An Agency History," *Mississippi History Now*, accessed May 16, 2020, <http://www.mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/articles/243/mississippi-sovereignty-commission-an-agency-history>.

<sup>9</sup> "Citizens Council Will Elect Officers April 3," *Hattiesburg American*, March 23, 1956, 1.

Council was basically set up to prevent integration of the schools and the general society.”<sup>10</sup>

The story of the first attempt of a black applicant to Mississippi Southern College (MSC)<sup>11</sup> in Hattiesburg demonstrates the commitment of both state government and the Citizens’ Council to oppose any integration in education. Clyde Kennard was a native of a rural area north of Hattiesburg, who returned to help on his mother’s farm following military service and undergraduate studies at the University of Chicago. Given the absence of any black colleges closer than Jackson, Kennard applied to MSC in 1955 in order to further his education locally at a comparable level. After an initial rejection, he reapplied three years later.<sup>12</sup> In a 1958 letter to the *Hattiesburg American*, Kennard expressed sympathy for both whites and blacks who preferred segregation, but also argued that if “we are ever to attain the goal of first class citizenship, we must do it through a closer association with the dominant (White) group.”<sup>13</sup>

The Sovereignty Commission collaborated with the Citizens’ Council on an investigation into Kennard’s past in order to find indiscretions that could provide a rationale to reject his application.<sup>14</sup> Former Hattiesburg Credit Bureau manager Sam Rees noted that “he was of the opinion that Kennard had no sense of responsibility in meeting his obligations” and “had possibly been receiving funds from the NAACP and had possibly been the so-called payoff man for other negroes [sic] in the Eatonville community.” The investigator commented that “he had nothing to back this opinion other than his belief.” Council president Conner told the Sovereignty Commission that he did not know Kennard, but that he had seen the black applicant’s recent letter to the *Hattiesburg American*. According to the investigator, Conner remarked that:

“if the State Sovereignty Commission wanted Kennard out of the community and out of the State just to let him know,

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<sup>10</sup> M.W. Hamilton, interview by Orley B. Caudill, Petal, MS, February 13, 1978, transcript, University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, Hattiesburg, MS, [https://digitalcollections.usm.edu/uncategorized/digitalFile\\_aa15b5b8-30e9-4d66-9b48-de0fdafafbb73/](https://digitalcollections.usm.edu/uncategorized/digitalFile_aa15b5b8-30e9-4d66-9b48-de0fdafafbb73/).

<sup>11</sup> Renamed the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) in 1962.

<sup>12</sup> William Sturkey, *Hattiesburg: An American City in Black and White* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019), 258-259.

<sup>13</sup> Clyde Kennard, “Letter to Editor: Mixing,” *Hattiesburg American*, December 6, 1958, 2-A.

<sup>14</sup> William Sturkey, *Hattiesburg: An American City in Black and White* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019), 259-260.

and he would see that this was taken care of. He claimed that no violence and no publicity would take place. He indicated that it would be handled by bringing economic pressure on the negroes.”<sup>15</sup>

Kennard declined to withdraw his application to MSC. After a meeting with MSC President William McCain, Kennard was arrested on a false charge of reckless driving. Subsequently Kennard, a teetotaler, was arraigned for illegally possessing whiskey. He was convicted on both charges, and later on another allegation of stealing \$25 in chicken feed from the local cooperative. Kennard died at age thirty-seven of stomach cancer, diagnosed while in the third year of his sentence at Parchman Penitentiary. Forty-six years later, an employee of the cooperative recanted the testimony that convicted Kennard.<sup>16</sup>

Although by 1960 the federal government had made minimal efforts to force the implementation of the *Brown I* decision, the potential of such intercession was a legitimate concern within the Mississippi power structure. In a 1960 letter to the *Hattiesburg American*, Kennard noted that “if the State should lead out with the smallest amount of integration, it would never have to worry about Federal intervention.”<sup>17</sup> Governor Ross Barnett counterattacked with a states’ rights argument, contending that the Tenth Amendment provided the right of self-determination to resist federal integrationist efforts.<sup>18</sup>

These opposing viewpoints soon collided in Oxford with James Meredith’s registration at the University of Mississippi in 1962.<sup>19</sup> The violent outcome demonstrated the capacity of the federal government to use its authority over the state of Mississippi to enforce a U.S. Supreme Court decision on integration. But it also further signaled the state’s commitment to block federal efforts advancing desegregation at

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<sup>15</sup> Zack J. Van Landingham, Clyde Kennard Report. December 17, 1958, 1-27-0-6-1-1-1 to 1-27-0-6-37-1-1, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission (MSSC), [http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital\\_archives/sovcom/result.php?image=images/png/cd01/001981.png&otherstuff=1|27|0|6|1|1|1932](http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/result.php?image=images/png/cd01/001981.png&otherstuff=1|27|0|6|1|1|1932).

<sup>16</sup> Sturkey, *Hattiesburg*, 260-263.

<sup>17</sup> Clyde Kennard, “Letter to Editor,” *Hattiesburg American*, January 26, 1960, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Gov. Ross R. Barnett. “A Statewide Address on Television and Radio to the People of Mississippi by Governor Ross R. Barnett, 7:30 PM,” September 13, 1962, 12-37-0-3-1-1-1 to 12-37-0-3-8-1-1, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, MSSC, [http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital\\_archives/sovcom/result.php?image=images/png/cd09/067684.png&otherstuff=12|37|0|3|5|1|1|66814](http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/result.php?image=images/png/cd09/067684.png&otherstuff=12|37|0|3|5|1|1|66814).

<sup>19</sup> “UM History of Integration James Meredith,” University of Mississippi, accessed May 16, 2020, <https://50years.olemiss.edu/james-meredith>.

all educational levels.

Tortuous administrative procedures under a pupil placement law were used to prevent black students from integrating Mississippi public schools. A federal district court dismissed the first public school desegregation suits in 1963 for not utilizing all of the administrative solutions provided under the placement law. This court decision was reversed in 1964 by the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals when it ruled that black students could directly petition school boards given that placement was done illegally by race. Court challenges continued while black students were engaged in desegregation efforts during Freedom Summer in 1964.<sup>20</sup>

Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act banned racial discrimination in any “program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” thereby threatening the elimination of federal funding.<sup>21</sup> This requirement gave the federal government some additional leverage in opposing segregated public education. As a result, limited integration of schools in Jackson (and separately in Biloxi and Leake County) occurred in the fall of 1964.<sup>22</sup> Following an appeal by black applicants to speed up the plan to initiate desegregation of the Jackson school system by September 1969, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals mandated that under Title VI “a good faith start requires designation of at least four grades for the 1965-66 school year.”<sup>23</sup>

Despite the glacial pace of Mississippi public school desegregation ten years after the *Brown I* ruling, the wall had been breached. In response, Citizens’ Councils and the state government changed tactics while retaining the strategic goal of segregated white schools. The Citizens’ Council leadership in Jackson stated that it “would be a trailblazer in providing schools to avoid integrated facilities.”<sup>24</sup> Local Citizens’ Councils had spent the previous decade building up organizational resources to promote segregation, obtaining private funding later supplemented by state subsidies that supported the creation of a network of white academies.

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<sup>20</sup> Patric J. Doherty, “Integration Now: A Study of Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education”, *Notre Dame Law Review* 45:3 (1970), 491, <https://scholarship.law.nd.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3021&context=ndlr>

<sup>21</sup> Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All*, 118.

<sup>22</sup> Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All*, 112. Also, see Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 174. In 1964-65, Mississippi had the lowest percentage nationally of African-American schoolchildren in integrated classrooms (0.020%).

<sup>23</sup> Doherty, “Integration Now,” 491.

<sup>24</sup> “Rights Backers Announce Plans for Freedom Party,” *Hattiesburg American*, July 20, 1964, 8.

Council School No. 1 in Jackson was established as a model academy. Citizens' Council influence within the Jackson business community led to loans of \$600,000 from two of the city's largest banks. The school's staff toured Prince Edward County in Virginia, where five years earlier the entire public educational system had been shut down and white private schools created in a campaign of massive resistance to desegregation.<sup>25</sup> In order to facilitate a broad network of segregation academies, the September 1964 edition of the Citizen Councils of America's monthly magazine, *The Citizen*, contained a nuts and bolts guide for white community leaders on "How to Start a Private School."<sup>26</sup>

Concurrently, the apparatus of state government in Mississippi was used to advance policies that limited implementation of public school integration while facilitating formation of private white academies. At the behest of the Citizens' Council leadership, the Legislature in 1964 passed Senate Bill 1501 "to encourage the education of all of the children of Mississippi" and "afford each individual freedom in choosing public or private schooling." In practice, this law was designed to encourage creation of state-supported white private academies through a Mississippi tuition grant program.<sup>27</sup>

In order to preserve federal funding by demonstrating compliance with the Civil Rights Act, most Mississippi districts proposed desegregation through the "freedom of choice" plan adopted by the state in 1965.<sup>28</sup> Under this plan parents of either race were permitted to send their children to previously segregated schools. Nonetheless, few blacks and virtually no whites did so. As the U.S. Civil Rights Commission noted, "White families almost invariably choose to have their children attend the predominantly white school and most Negro families chose to have their children attend the all-black school . . . Those few black families who choose to send their children to the predominantly white school can be—and are—singled out and subjected to pressure and abuse."<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, black principals were required to authorize student transfers to previously

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<sup>25</sup> Michael W. Fuquay, "Civil Rights and the Private School Movement in Mississippi, 1964-1971," *History of Education Quarterly*, 42:2 (2002), 163-165.

<sup>26</sup> *The Citizen*, September 1964, 1-21. Accessed June 13, 2020. [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/citizens\\_news/52/](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/citizens_news/52/).

<sup>27</sup> *Coffey v. State Educational Finance Commission*, 296 F. Supp. 1389 (S.D. Miss 1969), 2-3, <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/296/1389/1982533/>.

<sup>28</sup> Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 173-177.

<sup>29</sup> U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Washington D.C. *Federal Enforcement of School Desegregation Report*. September 11 1969, 14, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED035689.pdf>.

all-white schools, which could result in a reduction of their own staff if an excessive number of pupils requested such reassignment.<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, as the Commission report noted, freedom of choice plans “do not work.”<sup>31</sup>

“Freedom of choice” essentially functioned as a form of resistance to what Governor (and Hattiesburg native) Paul B. Johnson Jr. termed “a brazen effort of the Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) Department to gain absolute control over education.”<sup>32</sup> Though integration remained limited in nature, local Citizens’ Councils took the lead in re-creating segregated alternatives for white children.

On September 2, 1965, the Hattiesburg Public Schools integrated five of the eight previously all-white Hattiesburg elementary schools with a total of twenty-six black children. The compliance plan further stated that fifth through eighth grades would be desegregated in 1966-67, and the upper grades the following year.<sup>33</sup> In response, the Forrest County School Foundation was established as a non-profit entity under the auspices of the Citizens’ Council.

The September 1964 copy of *The Citizen* on “How to Start a Private School” served as a template for Hattiesburg’s new white private school. Formation of an educational corporation was advised with a charter of incorporation. *The Citizen* quoted Jackson School superintendent Dr. Kirby Walker’s comment that “racial differences increase with every passing year from the first through the twelfth grades, and integration at the high grades is far more damaging to the educational system than that at the lower grade.” New segregated schools were initially suggested at the elementary school level followed by addition of upper grades. Staffing was recommended through recruitment of recently retired public school teaching staff and principals. However, as *The Citizen* noted, if teachers come to the new private academy prior to retirement, “the legislature can provide for participation by private school teachers in the state teacher retirement system.” Use of free textbooks from the state was also encouraged.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Buzard-Boyett, Patricia Michelle, “Race and Justice in Mississippi’s Central Piney Woods, 1940-2010” (2011), *Dissertations*, 740, 560-561. <https://aquila.usm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1764&context=dissertations>.

<sup>31</sup> U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Washington D.C. *Federal Enforcement of School Desegregation Report*. September 11 1969, 15, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED035689.pdf>.

<sup>32</sup> Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All*, 122.

<sup>33</sup> “26 Negroes Choose to Integrate Here,” *Hattiesburg American*, September 2, 1965, 1.

<sup>34</sup> *The Citizen*, September 1964, 1-21.



The Forrest County School Foundation received one of the twenty-one charters issued for the creation of Mississippi private academies in 1964-65.<sup>35</sup> M. W. Hamilton was among the three Forrest County Citizens' Council officers named on the charter of incorporation,<sup>36</sup> and Sam Rees was one of the early members of the Foundation. In the summer of 1965, Foundation committee officer and Citizens' Council activist, Dr. G. A. Bynum,<sup>37</sup> requested that interested citizens complete a form published in the news section of the *Hattiesburg American*. Bynum noted that



Hattiesburg American, *October 11, 1966, 20.*

“if you wish your children and grandchildren to receive a quality education in a Christian, segregated environment, you should start now to help the Citizens' Council establish a private school system . . . tell all your neighbors

<sup>35</sup> “21 Private School Charters Issued Since June 22, '64,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, July 20, 1965, 1, 14.

<sup>36</sup> “Private School Officers and Directors are Named,” *Hattiesburg American*, July 31, 1965, 1.

<sup>37</sup> Bynum was a Mississippi College classmate and friend of William J. Simmons, the chief executive at the Citizens' Council's headquarters in Jackson. Simmons visited Hattiesburg on several occasions during school planning, acting as an unofficial consultant. William J. Simmons, interview by Orley B. Caudill, June 26, 1979, transcript, University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, Hattiesburg, MS, 75, [https://digitalcollections.usm.edu/uncategorized/digitalFile\\_804061a4-ab3f-4e45-bc98-6d271c92fd8f/](https://digitalcollections.usm.edu/uncategorized/digitalFile_804061a4-ab3f-4e45-bc98-6d271c92fd8f/).

about our plans for a private white school.”<sup>38</sup>

John A. Beeson moved to Hattiesburg in 1935 for a position as math chair in the public schools, eventually serving as junior high school principal through May of 1965.<sup>39</sup> His retirement was short-lived. In August that year, Beeson was named as head of the new school under the auspices of the Forrest County School Foundation.<sup>40</sup> Following small-scale integration in Hattiesburg the next month, twenty children registered immediately at the Forrest County Foundation School.<sup>41</sup> Thirteen days after the start of the 1965-1966 academic year in the Hattiesburg School District, the new Foundation School opened with three teachers for the first through sixth grades at a temporary site at 101 13th Avenue. Each teacher was responsible for two grades and all had prior experience in the public schools. Additionally, the school touted free textbooks courtesy of the state, and subsidies of \$185 per student.<sup>42</sup>

In April 1966, Hamilton revealed the Forrest County School Foundation’s proposal to start construction on a donated five-acre site off Highway 49 South, just southeast of the Paul B. Johnson estate.<sup>43</sup> This tract offered the possibility for eventual expansion to thirty-two acres. Three months later, progress on this site was highlighted at the annual leadership meeting of the Foundation. Plans for a capacity of 160 students in grades 1-8 were noted.<sup>44</sup> In the interim, the temporary location of the school changed to a ten-room duplex at 304 Water Street with monthly tuition of \$20 for the first child, \$15 for the second, and \$10 for additional children, all supplemented by the state grant.<sup>45</sup>

The basis for the Forrest County Foundation School was transparent – federal government intervention challenging the racial status quo. An article in the *Hattiesburg American* noted the founders’ concern about public education “rapidly deteriorating and becoming more and more controlled by the federal government.”<sup>46</sup> The September 1964 edition of

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<sup>38</sup> “Plan Private White School Here,” *Hattiesburg American*, June 22, 1965, 10.

<sup>39</sup> “Tribute to a Fine School Man,” *Hattiesburg American*, May 28, 1965, 4.

<sup>40</sup> “Beeson to Head Private School,” *Hattiesburg American*, August 16, 1965, 1.

<sup>41</sup> “20 Children Register for Private School,” *Hattiesburg American*, September 2, 1965, 1.

<sup>42</sup> “Private School Students and Parents Meet Tuesday,” *Hattiesburg American*, September 13, 1965, 9.

<sup>43</sup> “Private School Will Be Built,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, April 22, 1966, 6.

<sup>44</sup> “Building Progress Reported: Officers, Directors Elected,” *Hattiesburg American*, July 18, 1966, 10.

<sup>45</sup> “Private School to Hold Registration Aug 19-20,” *Hattiesburg American*, Aug 18, 1966, 13.

<sup>46</sup> “Beeson Academy Grows and So Do Its Kids,” *Hattiesburg American*, May 24, 1972, 8D.

*The Citizen* had termed the 1964 Civil Rights Act “a misuse of Federal power,” promoting private schools as the obvious alternative “until the conservative white majority can recapture national political power.”<sup>47</sup> At a Forrest County School Foundation banquet in August 1966, guest speaker W. R. Huddleston, principal of the Citizens’ Council School in Jackson, asserted that private schools were developed by people “who want to live their own lives and rear their own children in the way they see fit,” and were a “bright spot” against those who would challenge “our Southern civilization.” Another speaker at the dinner, Citizens’ Council educational consultant Medford Evans (referred to in the *Hattiesburg American* article as “Medgar Evans”) contended that:

“One of the tragedies of our time is the breaking down of the excellent system of education which had been built in this state. The educational level of Negroes in the South was higher than among Negroes anywhere else in the world under a segregated system, but it won’t work in the same classroom. You can’t have integration and education. It is too late to save the public school system. It is incumbent on us rather to find another way to save our children and the very process of education itself. Private schools are the hope of keeping the very light of civilization alive in the future.”<sup>48</sup>

The incongruous nature of the construction site adjacent to the black community of Palmers Crossing led to some break-ins and threats to burn down the school, necessitating regular patrols by board members.<sup>49</sup> However, the founders of Hattiesburg’s new private academy soon also faced the need to distinguish their endeavor from the more extreme right. On January 10, 1966, the home of Forrest County civil rights activist Vernon Dahmer was firebombed. Dahmer rescued his family from the inferno while facing a volley of gunfire, but succumbed to extensive burns the next day. Despite long-standing efforts by the power elite (including the Citizens’ Council) to constrict civil rights for blacks, the horror of Dahmer’s murder led to drastic change in the

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<sup>47</sup> *The Citizen*, September 1964, 2.

<sup>48</sup> “Strong Private Schools Called Answer to Integration Problem,” *Hattiesburg American*, August 16, 1966, 10.

<sup>49</sup> Based on internal communications within the school.

white community's approach. The local Chamber of Commerce held a special meeting to discuss injustices faced by the black population. Furthermore, the Chamber organized efforts to issue a reward for tips leading to detention of those responsible for the crime.<sup>50</sup>

Two days after the firebombing, a number of Mississippi residents were called to testify by the House Un-American Activities Committee regarding KKK intimidation of civil rights workers.<sup>51</sup> These witnesses maintained a united front, citing the Fifth Amendment to avoid self-incrimination. One of the witnesses, publicly identified as Mordaunt Hamilton, was asked whether he had sold guns to the Klan at his hardware store in downtown Hattiesburg. Hamilton declined to answer whether he even owned a hardware store. Hamilton further refused to respond to the chief investigator of the committee when questioned as to whether he had pulled a gun on Klan imperial wizard Sam Bowers and organizational leaders when he was not reimbursed for the sale of Klan robes.<sup>52</sup>

Hamilton was subsequently indicted as a co-conspirator in Dahmer's murder.<sup>53</sup> He was shunted aside from further involvement in the Foundation School once his Klan ties became evident.<sup>54</sup> While not admitting to any role in the Dahmer case, in a 1978 oral history Hamilton confirmed his connections to the Jones County Klan including a disclosure that he had sold guns to some of their members.<sup>55</sup>

The backlash within the city's power structure further incentivized the Foundation School leadership's desire to eschew any Klan ties. Several years after the Hamilton confrontation at the school board meeting, another Klan-influenced<sup>56</sup> Foundation committee member named Ben Gammel struck both headmaster David White and board member Charles H. Smith in the school building after his daughter was refused

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<sup>50</sup> Sturkey, *Hattiesburg*, 303-307

<sup>51</sup> "Beckwith, Accused Murderer, Is Silent on Klan Activity," *New York Times*, January 13, 1966, 13. One of the other witnesses was Byron De La Beckwith. After being tried without a conviction during the 1960s by two all-male, all-white juries for the 1963 murder of NAACP leader Medgar Evers, Beckwith eventually received a life sentence following a 1994 trial. See "Byron De La Beckwith Dies, Killer of Medgar Evers Was 80," *New York Times*, January 23, 2001, B6.

<sup>52</sup> "State Man Questioned About Weird Plans," *Hattiesburg American*, January 13, 1966, 1.

<sup>53</sup> M. W. Hamilton, interview by Orley B. Caudill, Petal, MS, February 13, 1978, transcript, USM-OH.

<sup>54</sup> There is no further mention of Hamilton in Beeson records after mid-1966. Based on private conversations, he was forced out of involvement.

<sup>55</sup> M. W. Hamilton, interview by Orley B. Caudill, Petal, MS, February 13, 1978, transcript, USM-OH.

<sup>56</sup> Based on communications within the school, David White noted Gammel's Klan ties.

registration.<sup>57</sup> Gammel was convicted of assault and battery<sup>58</sup> and died “unexpectedly” several weeks later at age fifty of unknown causes.<sup>59</sup>

The Foundation School moved to its permanent location for its third year of operation in September 1967,<sup>60</sup> and was renamed after recently retired Superintendent Beeson at the end of that school term. Beeson Academy joined the new Mississippi Private School Association (MPSA) and noted plans to encompass grades 1-12 by the 1970-1971 academic year.<sup>61</sup> In April 1969, Beeson dedicated its first permanent build-

Hattiesburg American, *December 9, 1966, 14.*

ing, which included a multipurpose auditorium, and then announced plans to construct science labs.<sup>62</sup>

Meanwhile in July 1966, a separate group unaffiliated with the Foundation had incorporated as Hattiesburg Academy, Inc., declaring its intention to create a first through seventh grade school. Established

<sup>57</sup> “Ben Gammel Fined \$1360, Placed Under Peace Bonds,” *Hattiesburg American*, September 5, 1969, 1, 6.

<sup>58</sup> “Ben Gammel Fined \$500 in Assault-Battery Case,” *Hattiesburg American*, December 3, 1969, 12.

<sup>59</sup> “Rites Tuesday for Ben Gammel,” *Hattiesburg American*, December 22, 1969, 1.

<sup>60</sup> “Foundation School to Open Monday,” *Hattiesburg American*, September 9, 1967, 7.

<sup>61</sup> “Foundation School is Named in Honor of J. A. Beeson, Retiring Superintendent,” *Hattiesburg American*, August 17, 1968, 9.

<sup>62</sup> “Dedication Ceremony Scheduled Sunday at Beeson Academy,” *Hattiesburg American*, April 11, 1969, 8.

under the leadership of Perry Waldvogel (a teacher and coach at Thames Junior High), this school was envisioned as a non-denominational Christian school based on Jackson Academy’s accelerated phonics curriculum model.<sup>63</sup> However, Hattiesburg Academy was unable to successfully compete for the same pool of students against a white private school with a more solid infrastructure. In order to strengthen the private school market, in 1969 both schools merged under the Beeson banner with the goal of accommodating approximately two hundred students.<sup>64</sup>

By the late 1960s, both state subsidies and federal tax-exempt status provided a strong financial footing for Mississippi private academies.

As of 1968, the maximum \$240 grant from the state of Mississippi covered 60 percent of the tuition at the Foundation School (and 53 percent at the former Hattiesburg Academy).<sup>65</sup>

In addition, *Bookplate, The Mississippi Story (elementary school textbook), Hattiesburg Academy*

text books were state-funded.<sup>66</sup>

Federal actions did lay the groundwork for further (though still minimal) integration in the state during the latter half of the 1960s. In 1964, Mississippi had both the lowest per pupil funding and average teacher salaries in the United States. While federal educational aid had previously been insignificant, President Lyndon Johnson’s “War on Poverty” included the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which greatly enhanced outlays to programs for low-income students. By 1967 this funding meant that nearly one-fifth of public

<sup>63</sup> “New Private School Planned Here,” *Hattiesburg American*, July 28, 1966, 1-2.  
<sup>64</sup> “Two Local Private Schools Merge,” *Hattiesburg American*, September 2, 1969, 1.  
<sup>65</sup> *Coffey v. State Educational Finance Commission*, 4-9.  
<sup>66</sup> “Hattiesburg Academy Features the 4 R’s,” *Hattiesburg American*, December 29, 1966, 17.

educational support came from the federal government, thereby giving the national government additional clout in the budgets of Mississippi school districts.<sup>67</sup>

Nonetheless, in the absence of widespread integration, the market for private schools statewide remained relatively limited. Freedom of choice plans had constrained desegregation within Mississippi public schools. During the 1968-69 school year, only 10.6 percent of black students in Forrest County were enrolled in white schools, and all of them lived in Hattiesburg (the separate county system surrounding the city had not submitted a compliance plan to HEW).<sup>68</sup> Less than 7 percent of black students statewide attended integrated schools. However, after fifteen years the state was forced to stop obstructing implementation of *Brown I*.

The U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education* issued on October 29, 1969, was a milestone impacting the structure of Mississippi elementary and secondary education. By overruling a lower district court judgement supporting continued use of freedom of choice plans, *Alexander* served as both the death knell for officially sanctioned segregated school systems and the catalyst for private school expansion. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black noted that:

“It has been 15 years since we declared in *Brown I* that a law which prevents a child from going to a public school because of his color violates the Equal Protection Clause. As the record conclusively shows, there are many places in this country where the schools are either “White” or “Negro” and not just schools for all children as the Constitution requires. In my opinion, there is no reason why such a wholesale deprivation of constitutional rights should be tolerated another minute. I fear that this long denial of constitutional rights is due in large part to the phrase “with all deliberate speed.” I would do away with that phrase completely.”<sup>69</sup>

School integration could no longer be deferred in the public schools through “freedom of choice.” This new situation created a chain reaction

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<sup>67</sup> Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All*, 118.

<sup>68</sup> Doherty, “Integration Now,” 498.

<sup>69</sup> Doherty, “Integration Now,” 505.

increasing the number of Mississippi private schools from 121 to 236, with a tripling of student enrollment between 1966 and 1970.<sup>70</sup>

In Hattiesburg, a biracial committee negotiated a compromise plan with HEW that would desegregate city schools at the secondary level in the fall of 1970, but retain single-race elementary schools.<sup>71</sup> Meanwhile, Forrest County was among the thirty-three school districts named in the *Alexander* decision, and a court-ordered integration plan was developed by HEW for implementation by January 1970. Each public school was mandated to have 80 percent white and 20 percent black students, consistent with the racial configuration of the county school district at the time.<sup>72</sup>

A group of white parents under the name Citizens for Local Control of Education (CLCE) rapidly emerged to oppose reorganizing the Forrest County schools. Resistance was strongest among families of fifth through seventh grade children who were to be bussed from their local school in Petal to Earl Travillion in the Palmers Crossing community thirteen miles away.



*Sacramento Bee, January 6, 1970, 21.*

While white students would have retained a three-to-one majority, many parents sought to express total opposition to integration.<sup>73</sup> CLCE’s one-day boycott in December 1969 resulted in 80 percent of white students staying home.<sup>74</sup> Some faculty and staff members at USM in addition to the editorial page of the *Hattiesburg American* encouraged support for the public schools, but CLCE was

<sup>70</sup> Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All*, 173.

<sup>71</sup> Buzard-Boyett, Patricia Michelle, “Race and Justice in Mississippi’s Central Piney Woods, 1940-2010,” 683.

<sup>72</sup> “County Schools to Reopen Wednesday,” *Hattiesburg American*, January 6, 1970, 1, 12.

<sup>73</sup> James Wooten, “A Protest by Parents,” *New York Times*, January 8, 1970, 1, 28.

<sup>74</sup> Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All*, 181-182.



well organized.<sup>75</sup> A January rally attracted some 1,000 protestors to downtown Hattiesburg in the bitter cold with signs stating “We want our schools back” and “Bury HEW in Mississippi mud.”<sup>76</sup>

A new plan was negotiated that allowed Petal to incorporate as a town and separate school district. However, this arrangement proposed busing white fifth through eighth grade students from two other Forrest County schools (Dixie and Central) to Earl Travillion. In another protest led by CLCE, students sat in empty classrooms at Dixie and Central Schools for several weeks with parents serving as chaperones in the absence of books or teachers.<sup>77</sup>

Shortly thereafter, over 600 of the approximately 4,300 white students in Forrest County (representing most of the Dixie and Central students) enrolled at either Beeson or one of the four new private Baptist schools. As of early January 1970, Beeson’s student population increased by at least seventy students.<sup>78</sup> Six weeks later, the Beeson board announced plans for a junior-senior high school, gym/auditorium, and football field to host 300 students with an eventual goal of twice that number.<sup>79</sup>

The first twenty seniors graduated from Beeson in 1971, and the school’s largest expansion came that same year. The initial 1970 Hattiesburg desegregation plan included integrated junior and senior high schools based on geographic districts while retaining racially identifiable elementary schools. But a majority of white students in the previously all-black (Rowan) high school zone did not appear there on opening day. In some cases, families in the previously all-white (Blair) high school zone became “legal guardians” for those assigned to Rowan.<sup>80</sup> The 1970-71 academic year was a turbulent one in the Hattiesburg public schools characterized by disciplinary issues in the face of racial turmoil.<sup>81</sup> During a mass walkout in March 1971, some 300 black high school students demonstrated against the lack of action on multiple provisions of the HEW compliance agreement, including appointment of a non-white representative on the school board, integration of faculty

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<sup>75</sup> Wooten, “A Protest by Parents,” *New York Times*, 1, 28.

<sup>76</sup> Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All*, 181-182.

<sup>77</sup> Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All*, 181-182.

<sup>78</sup> “County Schools to Reopen Wednesday,” *Hattiesburg American*, January 6, 1970, 1, 12.

<sup>79</sup> “Beeson Academy Announces Construction Plans,” *Hattiesburg American*, February 27, 1970, 7.

<sup>80</sup> Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All*, 190.

<sup>81</sup> Helen Nicholson and Miriam W. Vance, “Is School Desegregation Still a Good Idea?,” *The School Review* 84:3 (1976), 493-497.

on an equal basis and proportional representation of black students on school committees, the school newspaper, and pep squad.<sup>82</sup>

Several black members of the Hattiesburg district’s biracial committee subsequently requested modification of the plan to integrate all schools. While the adopted revision kept elementary schools racially distinct, in the fall of 1971 both eleventh and twelfth grades were consolidated into Blair and all tenth graders placed at Rowan. Both high schools would then be comprised of grades consistent with the system-wide racial breakdown. The overall racial makeup of students in the Hattiesburg school district flipped from 55 percent white and 45



*Hattiesburg map, City Engineering Dept, 1977 (USM Special Collections, Mississippiana Map Collection)*

<sup>82</sup> Buzard-Boyett, Patricia Michelle, “Race and Justice in Mississippi’s Central Piney Woods, 1940-2010,” 684-689.

percent black to the opposite between 1970 and 1971.<sup>83</sup>

Beeson's population jumped from 245 to 460 students in grades 1-12, primarily in response to integration within the Hattiesburg high schools. This increase was in line with national data showing a "racial tipping point" when local schools reached 25 to 35 percent minority population.<sup>84</sup> The majority of new students came from the upper grades in the relatively wealthier area of Hattiesburg immediately south of USM, which had been redistricted to Blair in 1970-71. Beeson grew to a staff of twenty-seven teachers, as well as an elementary supervisor, guidance



St. . STUDENTS—These two pictures show a time span of five years and illustrate the growth of Beeson Academy. When John Rayburn helped Tony Smith and his daughter Trina aboard the first Beeson bus in 1967, there were only 100 students in grades one through nine at the school. Looking on, left to right, are Steve and Jeff Smith, John Rayburn, Tim Smith and Martha and Elizabeth Rayburn. The picture at right, made last week, shows these same students five years later boarding one of the three Beeson buses. The school now boasts 410 students in grades one through 12.

Hattiesburg American, *May 24, 1972, 28.*

counselor, secretary, coach, assistant coach, and band/choral directors.<sup>85</sup>

Despite the school's expansion during this period, Beeson Academy's long-term financial viability was less clear. State funding was challenged in a class action suit filed by black students and their parents against the Mississippi Educational Finance Commission, which administered the state funding program for private nonsectarian schools. On January 29, 1969, the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Mississippi ruled that the grants violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment as they "tend in a determinative degree to perpetuate segregation" and therefore, "significantly encourage and involve the State in private discriminations."<sup>86</sup> In order to maintain state funding, the Mississippi legislature renamed the program as the

<sup>83</sup> Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All*, 189-190.

<sup>84</sup> Jeremy R. Porter, Frank M. Howell and Lynn M. Hempel, "Old Times are Not Forgotten: The Institutionalization of Segregationist Academies in the American South," *Social Problems*, 61:4 (2014), 584.

<sup>85</sup> "Beeson Academy Grows and So Do Its Kids," *Hattiesburg American*, May 24, 1972, 28.

<sup>86</sup> *Coffey v. State Educational Finance Commission*, 2-4.

provision of private school “loans” rather than “grants.”<sup>87</sup> However one year later these state tuition “loans” were banned by federal district judge Harold Cox.<sup>88</sup> Additionally in 1973, the U.S. Supreme Court prohibited the state of Mississippi from providing free textbooks to racially discriminatory schools.<sup>89</sup>

Furthermore, Beeson was one of eleven Mississippi private academies cut off from federal tax-exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) following a preliminary 1970 court ruling in *Green v. Connally* aimed at schools “which practice racial discrimination.”<sup>90</sup> Contributions to Beeson to help minimize tuition as well as large capital gifts such as books, buildings, and athletic fields would no longer be tax-deductible.<sup>91</sup> The philosophical divide between federal policy support for school integration and tax subsidies for segregated private academies was epitomized in the conclusion of the chief judge writing on behalf of the three-member *Green* panel. Judge Harold Leventhal noted that an organization engaged in activities contrary to public policy should not be assisted by federal tax exemption—“otherwise, for example, Fagin’s school for pickpockets would qualify as a charitable trust.”<sup>92</sup>

Forrest County School Foundation chair Bynum, who served on the MPSA executive board, responded that the IRS action would only encourage people to more fully support private schools. Bynum stated that “the people are sick and tired of being beneath the heel of the tyrant.”<sup>93</sup> At the 1970 MPSA annual meeting, keynote speaker Tom Anderson decried “pink brain-benders and Freudian frauds” avowing that “we will either get involved (through education) or we will be enslaved.”<sup>94</sup> While expressing confidence in their fight against federal intervention, Beeson’s leadership also stated their desire to graduate students who “learn to think for themselves, who understand and believe in the free enterprise systems, who learn to accept moral responsibilities to God and country, and who understand the greatest form of government ever conceived on

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<sup>87</sup> Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All*, 175.

<sup>88</sup> Buzard-Boyett, Patricia Michelle, “Race and Justice in Mississippi’s Central Piney Woods, 1940-2010,” 683.

<sup>89</sup> *Norwood v. Harrison*, 413 U.S. 455.

<sup>90</sup> “11 Miss. Private Schools Lose Tax-Exempt Status,” *Hattiesburg American*, August 19, 1970, 1.

<sup>91</sup> Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 230-231.

<sup>92</sup> *Green v. Connally*, 330 F. Supp. 1150 (D.D.C. 1971).

<sup>93</sup> “11 Miss. Private Schools Lose Tax-Exempt Status,” *Hattiesburg American*, August 19, 1970, 1.

<sup>94</sup> Billy Skelton, “Columnist Blasts Liberals at Private School Meeting,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, April 11, 1970, 7.

this earth, the Constitution of the United States of America.”<sup>95</sup>

The more conservative political atmosphere within the federal executive branch during the early 1970s raised the hope that this change would benefit segregation academies. As with other southern states, Mississippi had been dominated by the Democrats since the end of Reconstruction. The conflicts with both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations’ support of a civil rights agenda led to strong opposition by the state’s Democratic power structure. Sensing the political vacuum created for white southern Democrats, the Republican Party began to find common ground with segregationists.

There was an expectation that the Nixon administration would be more forgiving of Mississippi’s efforts to obstruct integration, including support of continued IRS tax exemption for racial discriminatory private schools. However, by 1970, President Nixon tilted toward a position of moderation, knowing that he could not outflank Alabama Governor George Wallace on the right in the event of a 1972 third party presidential challenge. After assessing several options on the issue, the White House ultimately backed the final *Green* decision removing tax exemption for segregated Mississippi private academies.<sup>96</sup>

These federal rulings created barriers to white families of lesser means. Beeson was unable to obtain a bank loan at a reasonable rate in order to construct a high school and a gym, instead passing on the cost through an additional assessment of \$500-\$1,000 per family for a building fund.<sup>97</sup> Internal conflicts soon became apparent as the constituency began to change from the predominantly blue-collar background of the founding families to a more affluent demographic.

Additionally, the maintenance of relatively segregated elementary schools in Hattiesburg suppressed the urgency among white families to search for private school options in the lower grades. For example, Thames Elementary essentially functioned as the equivalent of a white private school in a public system, with only a small complement of black students.<sup>98</sup> One other challenge was geographic. Beeson’s site at the southern edge of town proved increasingly problematic as Hattiesburg

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<sup>95</sup> “Beeson Academy Grows and So Do Its Kids,” *Hattiesburg American*, May 24, 1972, 8D.

<sup>96</sup> Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 229-231.

<sup>97</sup> “Beeson Academy Board Issues Policy Statement; Meeting Set,” *Hattiesburg American*, July 17, 1970, 1.

<sup>98</sup> Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All*, 190.

expanded toward the west.<sup>99</sup>

By the mid-1970s, Beeson also faced competition for the private school market in Hattiesburg from a newly established church-based school. In order to obtain state funding, private academies such as Beeson were established as nonsectarian academies though nominally Christian. Opposition to school desegregation within conservative Christian sects initially made this distinction irrelevant.

Divisions within the national Presbyterian movement reflected conflict over the theological view of racial issues among many white Christians in the South. The Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) had itself originated as a splinter group from the national movement during the Civil War over the issue of slavery. However by the 1960s, a more liberal faction of churches in the PCUS began to support racial equality, highlighting deep differences with Presbyterians in the Deep South. The cultural onslaught against “traditional values” over the previous decade had led to a backlash in Mississippi, leading to white religious leaders citing Scripture in defense of segregation. In a 1954 address to the Synod of Mississippi of the PCUS after the *Brown I* decision, Dr. G. T. Gillespie, president emeritus of Belhaven College, a private Christian school in Jackson, noted that “there would appear to be no reason for concluding that segregation is in conflict with the spirit and the teachings of Christ and the Apostles, and therefore un-Christian.”<sup>100</sup>

Conflict was inevitable as white religious leaders from other states (including many from the Presbyterian Church), came to Mississippi to engage in civil rights efforts.<sup>101</sup> One such initiative was the Delta Ministry under the auspices of the National Council of Churches, designed to promote community building, economic development, and racial understanding.<sup>102</sup> Reverend W. J. Stanway, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Hattiesburg and chairman of the Committee of Church Extension for the Synod of Mississippi, decried

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<sup>99</sup> “Hattiesburg Prep, Presbyterian Christian School Officials Deny Merger Considered,” *Hattiesburg American*, December 16, 1979, 1, 10.

<sup>100</sup> G. T. Gillespie, “A Christian View on Segregation” (1954). *Pamphlets and Broadsides*. 1, [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/citizens\\_pamph/1/](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/citizens_pamph/1/).

<sup>101</sup> The Presbyterian leader of the Hattiesburg Ministers Project (part of the Delta Ministry), Reverend Robert Beech, moved his family to Hattiesburg from Illinois. During his time in Hattiesburg, Beech was assaulted by M. W. Hamilton in his hardware store while trying to buy a stepladder. “State Man Questioned About Weird Plans,” *Hattiesburg American*, January 13, 1966, 4.

<sup>102</sup> “Delta Ministry,” *Mississippi Encyclopedia*, accessed November 14, 2020, <https://mississippiencyclopedia.org/entries/delta-ministry/>.

“the fact that the Delta Ministry is not performing a proper church related ministry; the Delta Ministry’s past activity has been related to dissension and conflict; the Delta Ministry’s creating of antagonism between classes of Negroes, and the absence in the Delta Ministry of primary emphasis on spiritual development.”<sup>103</sup>

Stanway led the opening prayer at the Beeson Academy building dedication in 1969.<sup>104</sup> Four years later the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) was created as conservative churches split off from the PCUS, with most Mississippi Presbyterian churches joining the PCA.<sup>105</sup>

The 1964 article on private school formation in *The Citizen* had bemoaned the federal courts striking down public school prayers and religious instruction as well as school segregation.<sup>106</sup> However, the alliance between white evangelical Protestant churches and the nonsectarian segregationist academy in Hattiesburg was threatened by the latter’s loss of federal tax exemption. Beeson’s interests began to diverge from those of this religious community in the school’s efforts to maintain its financial footing.

In June 1976, the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Runyon v. McCrary* prohibited all private schools nationally from discrimination based on race.<sup>107</sup> Several months later, the PCA-affiliated Bay Street Presbyterian Christian School was started in Hattiesburg with an initial student enrollment of twenty-three students and budget of \$20,000. Following the involvement of another PCA church two years later, the name of the school was changed to Presbyterian Christian School (PCS).<sup>108</sup> PCS hired no black faculty and did not issue a statement of nondiscrimination. Nonetheless, as a sectarian Christian institution established six years after desegregation, PCS (which had one minority student) was not considered a segregation academy in the same context as Beeson.

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<sup>103</sup> “Presbyterians Approve Church Extension Report,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 2, 1967. 2-157-2-40-1-1-1, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission (MSSC).

<sup>104</sup> “Dedication Ceremony Scheduled Sunday at Beeson Academy,” *Hattiesburg American*, April 11, 1969, 8.

<sup>105</sup> “Tobin Grant, “What Catalyst Started the Presbyterian Church in America? Racism,” *Religion News Service*, June 30, 2016.

<sup>106</sup> *The Citizen*, September 1964, 6.

<sup>107</sup> *Runyon v. McCrary*, 427 U.S. 160 (1976), <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/427/160/>

<sup>108</sup> Rachel Winstead, “Basements Below the Sanctuary: A Story of the Church School” (2020), *Honors Theses*. 1573, [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2589&context=hon\\_thesis](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2589&context=hon_thesis).

Although the IRS initiated an investigation for racially discriminatory practices in 1980, PCS never lost its tax-exempt status. By the following year, PCS had grown to 150 students with a budget of \$130,000.<sup>109</sup>

Simultaneously on a larger scale during the 1970s, Mississippi experienced a sea change in public opinion, reflecting an acceptance of the new facts on the ground within much of the white community. While the state was an extreme outlier in opposing implementation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, by 1980, 69 percent of Mississippians supported school desegregation versus 74 percent regionally and 86 percent nationwide.<sup>110</sup> This was certainly more likely to have been the case in areas without black majority populations, such as Hattiesburg. Moreover, as PCS became more established, it could not as easily be pigeonholed as a segregationist escape route. PCS had enrolled some minority students by the early 1980s, and the school's attorney (who was a member of one of the founding churches) had set up an integrated youth soccer program in Hattiesburg.<sup>111</sup>

In this context, Beeson was forced to reassess its mission. Ray Stevens assumed the leadership role at Beeson in 1975 and began a more college-oriented school focus. He had previously served a long period as headmaster at one of the state's earliest segregation academies in Jackson.<sup>112</sup> However, Stevens was removed from his position in 1978 as the Beeson Academy board again pivoted in its mission. This was reflected in changing the name to the Hattiesburg Preparatory Academy. Board chair Mackie Davis noted that this signaled a "firm decision" by the board to pursue a course focusing on academic excellence and forsaking its reputation as a refuge for segregationists.<sup>113</sup>

A more rigorous curriculum was instituted with a goal towards college preparation.<sup>114</sup> Part-time teachers were brought in from USM and William Carey College to teach specialty courses, and ACT scores were higher than the public schools during much of the 1970s. Davis had pointed to the hiring of "a new better qualified headmaster and the development of a model elementary physical education program with the help

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<sup>109</sup> Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 237-238.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 264-265.

<sup>112</sup> "Ray Stevens Named New Beeson Academy Headmaster," *Hattiesburg American*, April 27, 1975, 12.

<sup>113</sup> Gary Pettus, "Private School Will Survive," *Hattiesburg American*, January 17, 1980, 1, 6.

<sup>114</sup> "Hattiesburg Preparatory School Making Great Progress," *Hattiesburg American*, April 24, 1980, 43.



of a professional consultant as two recent steps taken in the progress of the school toward a status equivalent to Andover Academy, Baylor School, or McCallie School in the preparation of the whole child.”<sup>115</sup>

Nonetheless, the school was still popularly known as Beeson, and carried the weight of its legacy. In 1975, the IRS issued revised guidelines that tax-exempt institutions must adopt non-discriminatory policies in their charters and publish this information in the primary local newspaper.<sup>116</sup> In an attempt to regain tax-exempt status, a 1978 ad in the *Hattiesburg American* stated that “admission is open to qualified students on a non-discriminating basis.”<sup>117</sup>

Hattiesburg Prep admitted its first black student the following year in the face of what one trustee termed a “(change in) the constituency” of the school.<sup>118</sup> However, one Hattiesburg public high school student during that era recalled athletic events at which the opposing team was referred to as the “Beeson Bigots.”<sup>119</sup> A local college student who worked in the school as a part-time janitor concurred, remembering it

**Hattiesburg Preparatory School**  
Formerly **BEESON ACADEMY**

Dedicated to belief that a sound educational background is the strongest basis for continued freedom in the United States.

The Beeson Academy Board of Directors announces the formal change of the name of the institution to Hattiesburg Preparatory School. With the formal name change the school now announces its intent to remain on the road to careful preparation of better students from grades K through 12 to be mentally and physically superior in a competitive modern world.

Hattiesburg Preparatory School focuses on personal attention to individual student development with special programs in physical development, art and music. The middle and higher schools aim at rigorous standards for students seeking college admission.

Beeson Academy is now ready to go forward as Hattiesburg Preparatory School building a strong and exemplary future on its rich traditions.

GRADES K - 12	ELEMENTARY ENRICHMENT
FULLY ACCREDITED	ORDERLY ENVIRONMENT
COLLEGE PREPARATORY	FULL SPORTS PROGRAM
SMALL CLASSES	RELAXED ATMOSPHERE

Admission is open to qualified students on a non-discriminating basis.

644-3390 646-3390

*Hattiesburg American*, July 2, 1978, 8D.

<sup>115</sup> “Beeson Academy Changes Name to Hattiesburg Preparatory School,” *Hattiesburg American*, June 28, 1978, 31.

<sup>116</sup> Neal Devins, “Tax Exemptions for Racially Discriminatory Private Schools: A Legislative Proposal,” *Harvard Journal on Legislation* 20:153 (1983), 157, <https://scholarship.law.wm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1457&context=facpubs>.

<sup>117</sup> Hattiesburg Preparatory School formerly Beeson Academy,” *Hattiesburg American*, July 2, 1978, 8D.

<sup>118</sup> Gary Pettus, “Private School Will Survive,” *Hattiesburg American*, January 17, 1980, 1, 6.

<sup>119</sup> Andrew Wiest, personal communication, June 13, 2020.

as a “white-flight academy.”<sup>120</sup>

In response to several lawsuits by black plaintiffs regarding enforcement, IRS guidelines were subsequently tightened. In 1980, the federal court ruled that so-called “Paragraph (1) schools” covered by the *Green* decision (Mississippi private academies set up during the era of desegregation) had to go beyond the non-discrimination clause by providing statistical data. The injunction further stated that:

“the existence of conditions set forth in paragraph (1) herein raises an inference of present discrimination against blacks. Such inference may be overcome by evidence which clearly and convincingly reveals objective acts and declarations establishing that such is not proximately caused by such school’s policies and practices. Such evidence might include, but is not limited to, proof of active and vigorous recruitment programs to secure black students or teachers, including students’ grants in aid; or proof of meaningful public advertisements stressing the school’s open admissions policy; or proof of meaningful communication between the school and black groups and black leaders within the community concerning the school’s nondiscriminatory policies, and any other similar evidence calculated to show that the doors of the private school and all facilities and programs therein are indeed open to students or teachers of both the black and white races upon the same standard of admission or employment.”<sup>121</sup>

Hattiesburg Prep could not meet these criteria and remained hampered by financial challenges. The school community changed and enrollment dropped to approximately 180 from 400 just a few years prior. Board chair Davis noted discussions regarding sale of the school, which were quelled by headmaster Kenneth Rasmussen. There were rumors of the school’s closure as well as consideration of a merger with PCS.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Charles Bolton, personal communication, May 28, 2020.

<sup>121</sup> IRS Proc. 75-50, 1975-2 C.B. 587. Private School Update, <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-tege/cotopicn00.pdf>.

<sup>122</sup> Gary Pettus, “Hattiesburg Prep Board President Denies Plans Being Made to Close,” *Hattiesburg American*, December 15, 1979, 1.

Hattiesburg Prep did see a temporary increase in enrollment from 75 to 300 students in 1982 following consolidation by the neighboring Perry County schools in the face of a major loss of federal funding,<sup>123</sup> but enrollment declined again to 200 by 1985.<sup>124</sup> The \$1,000 tuition bill was prohibitive for many families, and the school continued to be subsidized by board members. However, this practice was ultimately unsustainable and after several years of financial losses, the Hattiesburg Preparatory School finally ceased operations in 1986.<sup>125</sup>

The demise of Hattiesburg Prep occurred in line with several other statewide trends. Public education benefited from significantly increased investment by Governor William Winter's Education Reform Act of 1982. Within four years, white students in public schools outscored their private school counterparts in standardized testing for the first time since 1970. Additionally, by 1986 the average public school teacher's salary was \$18,443 versus \$12,500 in MPSA academies. As Hattiesburg Municipal Separate School District superintendent Gordon Walker noted, "The reality of the situation is that private schools have a difficult time competing with public schools in the quality of the educational programs they can offer."<sup>126</sup>

Furthermore, Hattiesburg Prep faced other obstacles. As noted, the school's tenuous financial status was battered by competition from a strong church academy option (PCS). "White flight" occurred primarily westward to neighboring Lamar County, where the public schools developed a strong academic reputation.<sup>127</sup> During the mid-1980s several significant state industries (including agriculture, oil and gas, as well as manufacturing and timber) experienced decline, decreasing the ability of families to cover the cost of private schools.<sup>128</sup> Finally, Hattiesburg Prep's past also played a role in scuttling its future.

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<sup>123</sup> Reginald Stuart, "Mississippi Town Divided Over 2 Ousted Coaches," *New York Times*, April 8, 1982, D 19. The origins of this dispute were racially motivated, relating to dismissal of both a white and black coach after being mandated by the all-white school board to use white students in the starting basketball lineup.

<sup>124</sup> Kim Willis, "Hattiesburg Prep Plans to Shut Down," *Hattiesburg American*, June 12, 1986, 1.

<sup>125</sup> Susana Bellido, "Hattiesburg Prep Closes; Auction Set," *Hattiesburg American*, July 25, 1986, 1, 12.

<sup>126</sup> Hayes Johnson and Ruth Ingram, "Financial Woes, Dropping Enrollment Plague Private Schools," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, November 9, 1986, 1-2G.

<sup>127</sup> Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All*, 190.

<sup>128</sup> Hayes Johnson and Ruth Ingram, "Financial Woes, Dropping Enrollment Plague Private Schools," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, November 9, 1986, 1-2G.

The history of Mississippi private school academies created a cultural barrier that prevented successful recruitment of minority students. As state NAACP president Aaron Henry observed, “blacks perceive the academies as institutions of segregation. Blacks are used only as a conduit to secure federal funds” for obtaining tax-exempt status.<sup>129</sup> Board chair Davis added that, while Hattiesburg Prep was able to attract a small number of outstanding black students to improve its image, the effort was inadequate to rescue the school.<sup>130</sup> Ironically by the time Hattiesburg Prep wanted and needed African-American students, its origin story made such efforts futile.

While many additional Mississippi private academies have also since closed, others remain as “independent” schools. Within these schools the origin story is often a revisionist version, cloaked in the anodyne language adopted by Beeson Academy in the mid-1970s of “parents who were deeply concerned for the future intellectual and spiritual education of their children.”<sup>131</sup> The website of the Mid-South Association of Independent Schools (the MPSA’s successor organization) does not mention the role of the Citizens’ Council in its formation.<sup>132</sup>

This history has continued to influence the racial environment. In 1973, Dr. James Loewen at Tougaloo College presciently wrote that “Forty years from now, powerful Mississippians will exist throughout the state who have to rationalize that their attendance as children at such schools was a good thing, and they will surely do so by retaining racism in their view of the world.”<sup>133</sup> Nearly fifty years on as the entire

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<sup>129</sup> Ruth Ingram, “Perception of Racism Still Keeping Black Students Away from Academies,” *Jackson Clarion Ledger*, November 9, 1986, 1-2G.

<sup>130</sup> “Changes in State Put Private Schools in Bind,” *Hattiesburg American*, November 11, 1986, 3.

<sup>131</sup> Beeson Academy Handbook, 1976-1977. Also see multiple school websites including Jackson Prep <https://www.jacksonprep.net/about/history>, Pillow Academy [https://www.pillowacademy.com/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC\\_ID=1807360&type=d&pREC\\_ID=1973271](https://www.pillowacademy.com/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=1807360&type=d&pREC_ID=1973271) and Starkville Academy <https://www.starkvilleacademy.org/admissions/>-accessed January 17, 2021.

<sup>132</sup> Mid-South Association of Independent Schools website- accessed January 16, 2021, <https://newsite.msais.org/test/tangolofus.php>.

<sup>133</sup> James Loewen, “School Desegregation in Mississippi, *Tougaloo College*, August, 1973, <http://sundown.tougaloo.edu/content/LoewenMonographSCHDESEG.pdf>. Also see Phil McCausland, “‘Segregation Academy’ Attended by Cindy Hyde-Smith a Common Remnant of Mississippi’s Troubled History”, NBC News, November 25, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/segregation-academy-attended-cindy-hyde-smith-common-remnant-mississippi-s-n939866> and Ashton Pittman, “Biden Disbands Trump’s ‘Patriotic Education’ Committee That Included Ex-Gov. Bryant,” Mississippi Free Press, January 20, 2021, <https://www.mississippifreepress.org/8289/biden-disbands-trumps-patriotic-education-committee-that-included-ex-gov-bryant/>.

nation struggles with its racial legacy, the need for an honest reckoning could not be more evident.

*The author recognizes the initiative of Mississippi journalist Ellen Ann Fentress in creating the Academy Stories website to promote public reflection on the persisting impact of the South's academies on its past and present. The author appreciates the insights provided by Charles Bolton, former history chair at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) and current associate dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro; William Sturkey, assistant professor of history at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill; and Andrew Wiest, history professor at USM. Finally, this essay was inspired by a Mississippi History class assignment initiated at the suggestion of the late Dr. Kenneth McCarty, professor emeritus of history at USM and former editor of the Journal of Mississippi History.*