

5-2019

The Segregation, Integration, and Resegregation of High Schools in Jones County, Mississippi

Anna Morgan

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The University of Southern Mississippi

The Segregation, Integration, and Resegregation of High Schools in Jones County,
Mississippi

by

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A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment
of Honors Requirements

May 2019

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Abstract

There have been numerous works on segregation and desegregation in Mississippi schools. However, much of that research focuses on schools that are in cities, not rural areas. Jones County, Mississippi, a once rural area in southern Mississippi, has had an extensive record of racial segregation in their schools. “The Segregation, Integration, and Resegregation of High Schools in Jones County, Mississippi” focuses on effects of the integration of Jones County High Schools. Jones County fought a desperate fight to continue to segregate its students. With the eventual external integration of the high schools came internal segregation, which had lasting effects on the African American students who integrated these schools. Through interviews, African Americans describe their horrible experiences at the high schools and how they excelled through it. As time continued on, Jones County officials secured ways to resegregate themselves, which included the creation of private Christian schools and the all too familiar “white flight”. As African Americans were fighting to integrate themselves, whites were fighting just as hard to segregate themselves. This left Jones County High Schools in the predicament it still is in today.

Keywords: African American, Jones County, Laurel School District, Jones County School District, Segregation, Integration, Resegregation

Dedication

To the African Americans in Jones County who did not have a voice during integration.

Acknowledgements

I must acknowledge Dr. Max Grivno. Without his patience and understanding, I would have quit this project entirely. His constructive criticism has helped me become a better writer. He has challenged me to throw my all into this paper, and I hoped that I have accomplished what he has asked for. His passion for History has shaped how I look at History, and for this I am thankful.

I would also like to thank the Dr. Eric Platt. He was the first professor I had contact with when I entered the Honors College, and he has guided my work since. He was one of the first professors I introduced my honors topic to, and with his encouragement I actually accomplished my goal. There were many times that I felt like giving up, but he has always encouraged me to keep going. Thank you, Dr. Platt, for always letting me know to never give up no matter what.

Thank you to my mother for always believing that my light would never dim.

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INTRODUCTION

The United States Supreme Court's ruling in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) case “struck down racial segregation in public educational institutions (predominantly K-12 schools).”¹ However, in 1955, the Supreme Court reexamined the case and scrutinized the progress of racial integration nationwide. As whites deployed a range of strategies to thwart integration—from school equalization to outright intimidation and violence—the Supreme Court recognized that more forceful actions were needed. In 1955, the Supreme Court reinforced its 1954 ruling with harsher instruction: desegregate with “all deliberate speed.”² Even so, various states interpreted “all deliberate speed” via racially biased perspectives that allowed public officials to significantly slow down desegregation efforts. Likewise, many school districts created policies that hindered African-American enrollment in previously all-white schools. For example, the Mississippi legislature approved a “school choice” model that permitted white parents to “pick” which schools their children would attend instead of forcing white parents to send their children to district schools that fell within geographic limits based on home ownership.³ This ultimately left schools segregated, as white families chose to enroll their children in predominantly white schools. Compounding the continued segregation issue, African American parents and children were threatened or, in some cases, attacked if they tried to integrate white schools.⁴

¹ "History - Brown v. Board of Education Re-enactment," United States Courts. Accessed February 01, 2019. <https://www.uscourts.gov/educational-resources/educational-activities/history-brown-v-board-education-re-enactment>.

² Jim Chen, “With All Deliberate Speed: Brown II and Desegregation's Children,” *Law & Inequality: A Journal of Theory and Practice* 24, no.1 (2006): 3. <https://scholarship.law.umn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1071&context=lawineq>.

³ Charles C. Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All: The Battle over School Integration in Mississippi, 1870-1980* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 99.

⁴ *Ibid*, 116.

In Mississippi, these issues were particularly prominent because of the state's significant history of slavery, sharecropping, racial segregation, Klu Klux Klan involvement, and violent anti-Black activism. Therefore, school desegregation in Mississippi was particularly slow. Beatrice Alexander, an African American mother from Holmes County, Mississippi, filed suit against the state of Mississippi in 1969 because its legislatures and local school district officials had not yet integrated public schools in her home county.⁵ In the case of *Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education* (1969), the US Supreme Court ruled that more than enough time had elapsed (fifteen years since the original 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision) for school desegregation. As a result, the "all deliberate speed" principle was no longer valid. This meant that Mississippi schools, along with other southern segregated schools, had to integrate immediately or be sued in a court of law.

Soon after the 1969 *Alexander v. Holmes* decision, Mississippi state and school leaders integrated public schools. High schools were often sites of increased violence and racism towards African-American students and teachers.⁶ According to Brenda Walker in the *Jackson Free Press*, she was tricked into sitting in a freezing class at her Jackson high school by her white counterparts."⁷

Historians of integration in Mississippi have often studied cities, but rarely small towns. It is assumed that most resistance to integration came from large cities. However, rural counties such as Jones County faced just as much resistance to integration. During Mississippi's forced

⁵ Patric J. Doherty, "Integration Now: A Study of *Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education*," *Notre Dame Law Review* 45, no. 3 (1970): 493.

⁶ James W. Loewen, "School Desegregation in Mississippi," <http://sundown.tougaloo.edu/content/LoewenMonographSCHDESEG.pdf>, 60-61.

⁷ Arielle Dreher, "How Integration Failed in Jackson's Public Schools from 1969 to 2017," *Jackson Free Press* (Jackson, MS), November 15, 2017.

integration era, there were four Jones County high schools: RH. Watkins High School (hereafter referred to as Laurel High), Northeast Jones High School (hereafter referred to as Northeast Jones), South Jones High School (hereafter referred to as South Jones), and West Jones High School (hereafter referred to as West Jones). Although these schools were forced to fully integrate at the turn of the 1970s, white school administrators, teachers, and students were not forced to treat African American students and teachers with respect.

A former 1969 Northeast Jones student explained that their white counterparts treated black individuals harshly. Soon after forced integration, an African American Northeast Jones student was hung in the male student bathroom. Although he did not die, the experience was very traumatizing to the students that witnessed it. Likewise, a white male physically attacked the first African American cheerleader at Northeast Jones. Because of harsh treatment, African American students at Northeast Jones rioted. Racism towards black students on the part of white teachers was overt, as instructors purposefully failed to properly advise black students of requisite classes needed to graduate. As a result, many black students at Northeast Jones did not graduate. Similarly, at newly integrated Jones County schools, teachers formerly employed at segregated black schools were removed from their teaching posts and placed in such lower positions as bus drivers and janitors. Although the Supreme Court rid the nation of *de jure* segregation with its ruling in *Alexander v. Holmes*, *de facto* segregation remained.

As high school integration pressed on during the 1970s, white parents and educators reenrolled white students at predominantly white public high schools external to Jones County or at all-white private high schools such as Jones County's Laurel-based Presbyterian Christian School (presently known as Laurel Christian School and hereafter referred to as LPCS). Founded in 1982, LPCS's white administrators claimed that their academy "create[d] God-centered

education.”⁸ Indeed, the word of God became a championing force behind public high school white flight and private high school enrollment in Jones County, much as it did in many other urban and rural southern high schools. Mississippians used “religious literature, deacon meetings, bible classes to express their fear about integration and its consequences.”⁹ The word of God gave them encouragement to create schools where they were able to segregate individuals without actually using the word “segregation.” Many African American parents were not looking to send their children to private school; they only wanted their children to have a better education than the one that was allotted to them. Black parents could also not afford costly private high school education for their child, which meant private Jones County academies were essentially filled with white children. Private high schools, such as LPCS, became breeding grounds for opportunity hoarding. White high school students remained in a cultural vacuum surrounded by their white peers, which impressed upon them notions of racial superiority over their black counterparts in the public high schools.¹⁰

As white students continued to reenroll in either private high schools or predominantly white rural Jones County public high schools throughout the 1970s and well into the 1980s, the inner-city Jones County high school, Laurel High, became predominantly black. Such has been the case since the 1980s. The shift from Laurel School District high schools being racially mixed to predominantly/significant black is an example of resegregation. Predominantly black high schools are often affiliated with media reports about student violence, crime, and rule breaking.¹¹

⁸ "History," Laurel Christian School, <http://laurelchristian.org/about-us/history/>.

⁹ Carolyn Renée Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1975* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 2.

¹⁰ Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, and David G. Embrick, "“Every place has a ghetto...”: The Significance of Whites' Social and Residential Segregation," *Symbolic Interaction* 30, no. 3 (2007): 340-341.

¹¹ "Vigil Friday for Laurel native shot to death at nightclub," *Laurel Leader-Call* (Laurel, Mississippi), December 9, 2015.

Similarly, Laurel High School is publicly perceived to be an underachieving school characterized by student behavioral problems. Recent media headlines have been noted to begin with such statements as “Laurel High School Student Gunned Down.”¹² White flight itself has perpetuated the idea that a school full of African Americans is a locale for difficulties.

Considering historic elements of segregation, integration, and resegregation in Jones County Mississippi high schools, this study investigates racial tension between black students and their white counterparts. It also considers high school progression in Jones County (private and public) towards resegregation due to the 1970s/early 1980s white flight phenomenon. The evidence presented in this study illustrates pre- *Alexander v. Holmes* segregationist high school activities in Jones County, the tumultuous process of white high school integration at the aforementioned schools (Laurel High, Northeast Jones, Southeast Jones, and West Jones), and the resegregation of said high schools due to white flight. Although Laurel High School and the three high schools in Jones County were in different districts, when integrated, many African-American students faced not only discrimination, but also barriers to graduation. The reaction to high school integration prompted the development of LPCS, which perpetuated the idea of segregation through the use of desegregation itself field by Christian ideals. Subsequently, not even twenty years into racial integration, Jones County high schools were effectively resegregated—the majority of African American students enrolled at Laurel High while a significant percentage of the Jones County white high-school-aged population attended either private high schools or rural Jones County schools (Northeast Jones, South Jones, and West Jones).

¹² “LHS Student Gunned Down,” *Laurel Leader Call* (Laurel, Mississippi), October 16, 2016.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

While there is significant research concerning the desegregation of primary and secondary/high schools in rural Mississippi, this study addresses research concerning Jones County high school segregation, integration, and resegregation. Most research available focuses on high schools such as Petal High School (hereafter referred to as Petal High), Hattiesburg High School (hereafter referred to as Hattiesburg High), and Oak Grove High School (hereafter referred to as Oak Grove High). These schools are located in or near a south Mississippi city (Hattiesburg, Mississippi) famous for its role in Freedom Summer, the University of Southern Mississippi's integration struggles (as showcased via the troubled life and death of African American student Clyde Kennard), and south Mississippi education integration in general. Petal High and Oak Grove High are noteworthy because they were designed to provide an outlet for white individuals of Hattiesburg in the 1970s.¹³ Petal was a community in Forrest County before it became a separate town all together to rid itself of integration. *Alexander v. Holmes* would have forced grades five, six, and seven in the Petal community to attend Earl Travillion Attendance Center in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.¹⁴ Although the white students would have outnumbered the blacks if the students did integrate, the white parents protested and even refused to allow their children to switch. Eventually "officials in Forrest County worked the plans out so that the students in the Petal community stayed where they were at and not long after, Petal became its own city."¹⁵ Examples such as Petal explain the drastic measures whites were willing to take to keep their children separate.

¹³ Eric Platt, interview by Anna M. Morgan, February 17, 2019.

¹⁴ Bolton, 146.

¹⁵ Bolton, 146.

Jones County, known more for its Civil War history connected with Newton Knight's stand against the Confederate Army, is not as heavily considered in historical scholarship concerning Mississippi high school integration. Like many other southern states and affiliated county school districts, the segregation, integration, and resegregation of Jones County high schools further illustrates the historic and ongoing struggles regarding race and racism, continued white flight, and assumptions of school quality associated with racial dominance. Additionally, private high schools, such as LPCS, only created more racism because they subjected children to what was known as opportunity hoarding.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions address what happened after the Jones County High Schools were forced to integrate. This study investigates the following questions:

1. What was the reaction in the Laurel and Jones County School District to the *Alexander v. Holmes* decision?
2. What issues did African Americans face as they begin integration of predominantly white schools.
3. How did legislators react to the school integration?
4. What measures were taken to assure de facto segregation?
5. What were the lasting effects of the *Alexander v. Holmes* decision on the Laurel and Jones County School District?

METHODOLOGY

My research consisted of oral interviews of people who experienced Jones County high school segregation, desegregation, and resegregation. Archival document analysis was used to

further bolster findings presented in this study. Documents such as yearbooks and papers from the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) further enhanced this study. Oral history interviews lasted about an hour and were considerate of participant issues such as respondent fatigue and issue sensitivity.

LIMITATIONS

Limitations of the study may include lapses and changes in respondent memory pertaining to issues that occurred during the 1970s and 1980s. This period was difficult and relevant information may have been forgotten or repressed. Likewise, archival documents and MDE data may be limited due to preservation issues.

CHAPTER 1: The Beginning of Change

Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education (1969) caused an uproar in the State of Mississippi. The courts had ruled that Mississippi had no choice but to integrate all of its schools or face legal action. *Brown v. Board II* (1955) had convinced many officials in Mississippi that they would be able to keep schools segregated for as long as they wanted. The “all deliberate speed” clause in *Brown v. Board II* had officials in Mississippi assuming that they could get away with slow integration because the courts were allowing them to decide how fast they were going to integrate. In a final effort to keep schools segregated, some Mississippi school districts began “school equalization” programs. The goal of school equalization was, according to historian Charles C. Bolton, “to ensure a balanced distribution of resources between separate black and white schools.”¹⁶ Referring back to the *de jure* “separate but equal” ideology enforced by the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case and segregationist Jim Crow laws, Mississippi school districts hoped that school equalization plans would create dual school districts per county—one white and one black—and show the US Justice Department that the state was “equalizing” education for black students. This, it was planned, would keep white schools from desegregating. After *Brown v. Board*, some counties in Mississippi did away with school equalization. However, the Jones County School District was just getting started with school equalization at the time of *Brown v. Board*. Around the late 1950s, they reorganized Jones County’s black schools into a separate school system (Figure 2) made up of Shady Oak School and Roosevelt School (Figure 3). However, like with other school equalization plans in Mississippi, there were insufficient county “resources to pay for two modern school systems.”¹⁷ These new black

¹⁶ Charles C. Bolton, “Mississippi’s School Equalization Program, 1945-1954: “A Last Gasp to Try to Maintain a Segregated Educational System”” *The Journal of Southern History* 66, no:4 (200): 781.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 798.

schools were built to house grades one through twelve. Although these black schools were larger than previous African American-serving academies, there was still overcrowding. There was also insufficient funding to secure new resources for black students. As a result, used textbooks and other resources were handed down from white schools. What was supposed to be a racially separate but “equal” system was just another way to hinder African American education.

With the beginning of the 1964 school year, “Mississippi school districts desegregated their schools through the mechanism known as freedom of choice.”¹⁸ The concept of “freedom of choice” was created as a last-minute idea to show the federal government that Mississippi was willing to integrate. The idea behind freedom of choice was that if an African-American student wanted to go a predominantly white school, then they could do so. Likewise, if they wanted to remain at a black school, they were free to stay. School districts began writing up schemes that detailed when and how they were going to integrate their black and white schools. It was never all at once, and it was usually a few black children at a time. There were few in the Jones County School District who actually decided to attend the predominantly white high schools. One student, Joe Brown, attended Northeast Jones High School in 1968. According to Brown: “I went to Northeast because I lived in front of the school, and I was one of maybe eleven or twelve black students who attended the school.”¹⁹ Laurel School District, on the other hand, included R. H. Watkins High School (all-white) and Oak Park High School (all-black). Laurel School District leaders submitted freedom of choice plans in 1965, 1966, and 1967 that described how the district would desegregate each of its schools by grade.²⁰ Mississippi school district officials

¹⁸ Charles C. Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All: The Battle over School Integration in Mississippi, 1870-1980* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 99.

¹⁹ Joe Brown, interview by Anna M. Morgan, August 12, 2018.

²⁰ *A History of Desegregation Developments in Certain Mississippi School Districts*, ed. James H. McPhail (Hattiesburg: Hattiesburg, Mississippi School Study Council, University of Southern Mississippi, 1971), 64.

hoped that these desegregation plans would allow them to stay under the radar of the United States Justice Department. However, as James H. McPhail, editor of *A History of Desegregation Developments in Certain Mississippi School Districts*, explains, “on April 17th, 1970 the Justice Department notified the State Superintendent of Education of its intention to bring suit against the school districts of Mississippi if they did not fully desegregate by fall term of 1970.”²¹

After the notice from the Justice Department, many school districts began scrambling to create actual desegregation plans in the allotted amount of time. When school districts finally submitted their desegregation plans, all forms of external segregation vanished, but there was a rise in massive internal segregation. On paper, the schools appeared to be desegregated, but the emotions of whites at the school still ran high. When the newly integrated schools opened in Jones County in the fall of 1970, “this left black teachers more vulnerable to displacement than elsewhere.”²² School officials and parents did not want African-American teachers instructing white students.²³ Demoting African American instructors to lower positions was another tactic of school officials to express racial dominance. In an interview conducted in April of 2018, John Paul from Northeast Jones High School stated, “I will never forget seeing my principal from Mt. Olive High School become the bus driver at Northeast.”²⁴ Principals and teachers from all black schools were role models for African American students, and to see a role model fall from grace displayed the environment that black students were walking into. White school district leaders demeaned black schoolteachers and leaders. Officials disqualified black teachers from their jobs

²¹ Ibid., 68.

²² Deirdre Oakley, Jacob Stowell, and John R. Logan, "The Impact of Desegregation on Black Teachers in the Metropolis, 1970–2000," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32, no. 9 (2009): 1576-98.

²³ Bolton, *Hardest Deal*, 136.

²⁴ John Paul, interview by Anna M. Morgan, April 26, 2018.

by “abolishing tenure laws where there were high percentages of black teachers and dismissing the teachers without cause.”²⁵ These teachers were highly motivated individuals, but they were placed into a system that discriminated against them no matter how educated they were. They were subjected to harsh discrimination by not only their administrators but also their colleagues.

The African-American students at these schools fared much worse than the teachers. Many of these students were out of their element. They were used to going to a school full of students who looked and acted like them. In the fall of 1970, these students now had to face a different atmosphere. Many African American students did not understand why they were integrating. Many reported that they were fine with their previous schools and did not want to change schools. They had to go to school with and be taught by their white counterparts who did not want them there in the first place. Many of them faced racism as they walked the streets every day, and their black school was their only place for relief. As soon as these children stepped through the door, they faced trouble. Those that went to Northeast Jones faced physical abuse. John Paul stated, “Right after we integrated, a couple of us black guys walked into the bathroom to see a black man hanging from the ceiling by his neck.”²⁶ They had to hurriedly get him down before he suffocated. The first black cheerleader at Northeast Jones was physically assaulted. As soon as she found out she made it onto the team, “she was physically knocked out by a white male.”²⁷ The teachers mistreated the students as well. Mary Tyler stated, “The only reason I graduated was because I was lucky enough to take the right classes.”²⁸ The teachers and counselors at Northeast Jones never told the African-American American students what classes

²⁵ Oakley, Stowell, and Logan, 1576-98.

²⁶ John Paul, interview by Anna M. Morgan, April 26, 2018.

²⁷ John Paul, interview by Anna M. Morgan, April 26, 2018.

²⁸ Mary Tyler, interview by Anna. M. Morgan, April 27, 2018

they needed to graduate.²⁹ As a result, according to John Paul, some Jones County African-American students dropped out of high school during the 1970s. “I know numerous individuals who never received a high school diploma.”³⁰ These students did not have the credits to graduate and were not able to go back and finish. Although school was a priority, many of these students had other responsibilities that did not allow them to continue to pursue school after their fellow classmates had graduated. In 1972, after a long period of mistreatment, the African-American students at Northeast Jones High School decided walk out. Their protest was immediately met with resistance from white parents. It got so bad that the National Guard had to be called to restore order.³¹ Northeast Jones had some of the worst incidents of violence, although this was not the only place violence was happening. The African-American students at the other schools in Jones County experienced racism as well. For example, the black students who wanted to play baseball at West Jones were singled out. According to Travis Cooley, “The baseball coaches knew that African-American student worked on weekends, and they would always schedule tryouts when we would have to work.”³² Although they avoided physical abuse, these students never had a chance to show their potential on the field. Laurel High School was the only high school in the Laurel School District. This meant that all the African Americans and white students who lived in Laurel, Mississippi had to go there. The tension at Laurel High School was explosive. They had more fights than they did at Northeast Jones according to Mary Tyler.³³ The energy was high at these schools and the racism was even higher. Although the US Supreme

²⁹ Joe Brown, interview by Anna M. Morgan, August 12, 2018.

³⁰ John Paul, interview by Anna M. Morgan, April 26, 2018.

³¹ John Paul, interview by Anna M. Morgan, April 26, 2018.

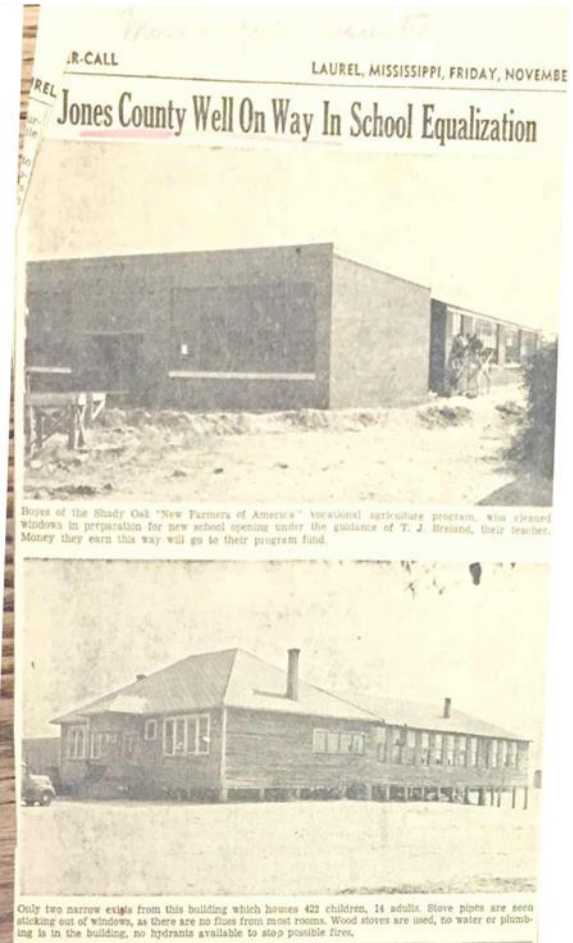
³² Travis Cooley, interview by Anna. M. Morgan, July 1, 2018

³³ Mary Tyler, interview by Anna. M. Morgan, April 27, 2018

Court affirmed *Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education (1969)* in an attempt to improve educational opportunities for all, African-American students were arguably treated worse at integrated schools than they had been at previously all-black-schools. Integrated schools were intended to create equality, but the treatment faced by African Americans turned a good idea into a bad experience.

Although Jones County started making progress in the 1950s with school equalization plans, their motives were racially motivated. Their only goal of school equalization was to keep the African-American students out of white schools. Even though African American parents had a choice, African-American students were still trapped at all black schools from fear of persecution by their white counterparts. After Beatrice Alexander sued, the Justice Department realized just how bad the racial situation in Mississippi was. Officials in Mississippi were not willing to compromise or allow for full integration of schools. By the beginning of 1970, the Justice department realized they had to intervene. When they ruled that all Mississippi schools needed to be integrated by the fall of 1970, Mississippi was thrown into a tailspin. Mississippi official began making consolidation plans without actually making plans to deal with the de facto segregation that came with the consolidation of schools. They threw African American children into territories without actually caring what would happen to them. When black students first stepped foot on the campuses of all white schools, they were immediately thrown into an environment that was bred to hate them. Black students were not only physically attacked; they were also subjected to unrealistic education practices by the individuals that were hired to teach them. They were left to their own demise beginning in the fall of 1970 until white parents began taking their children out of the schools and putting them into white academies.

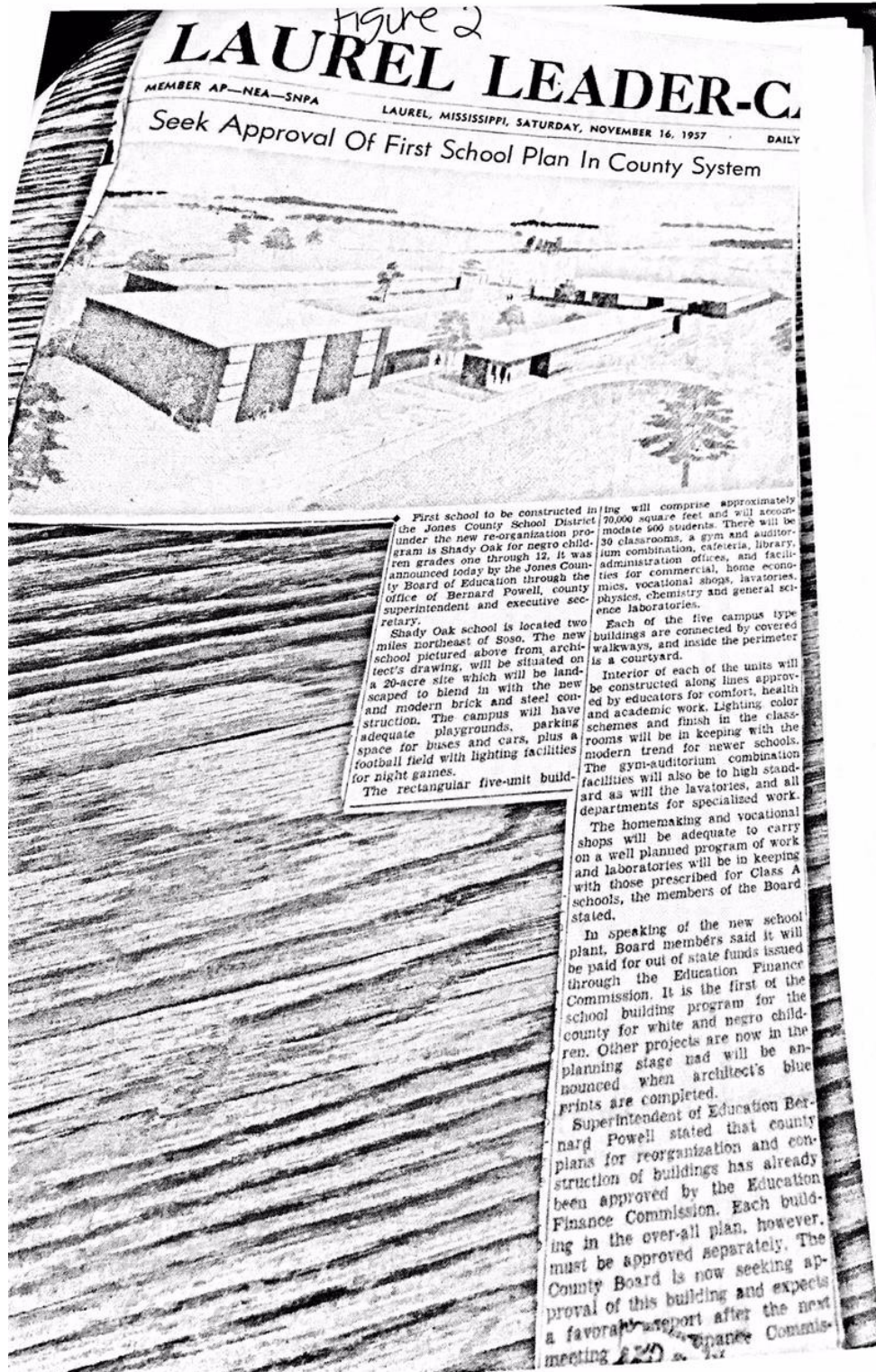
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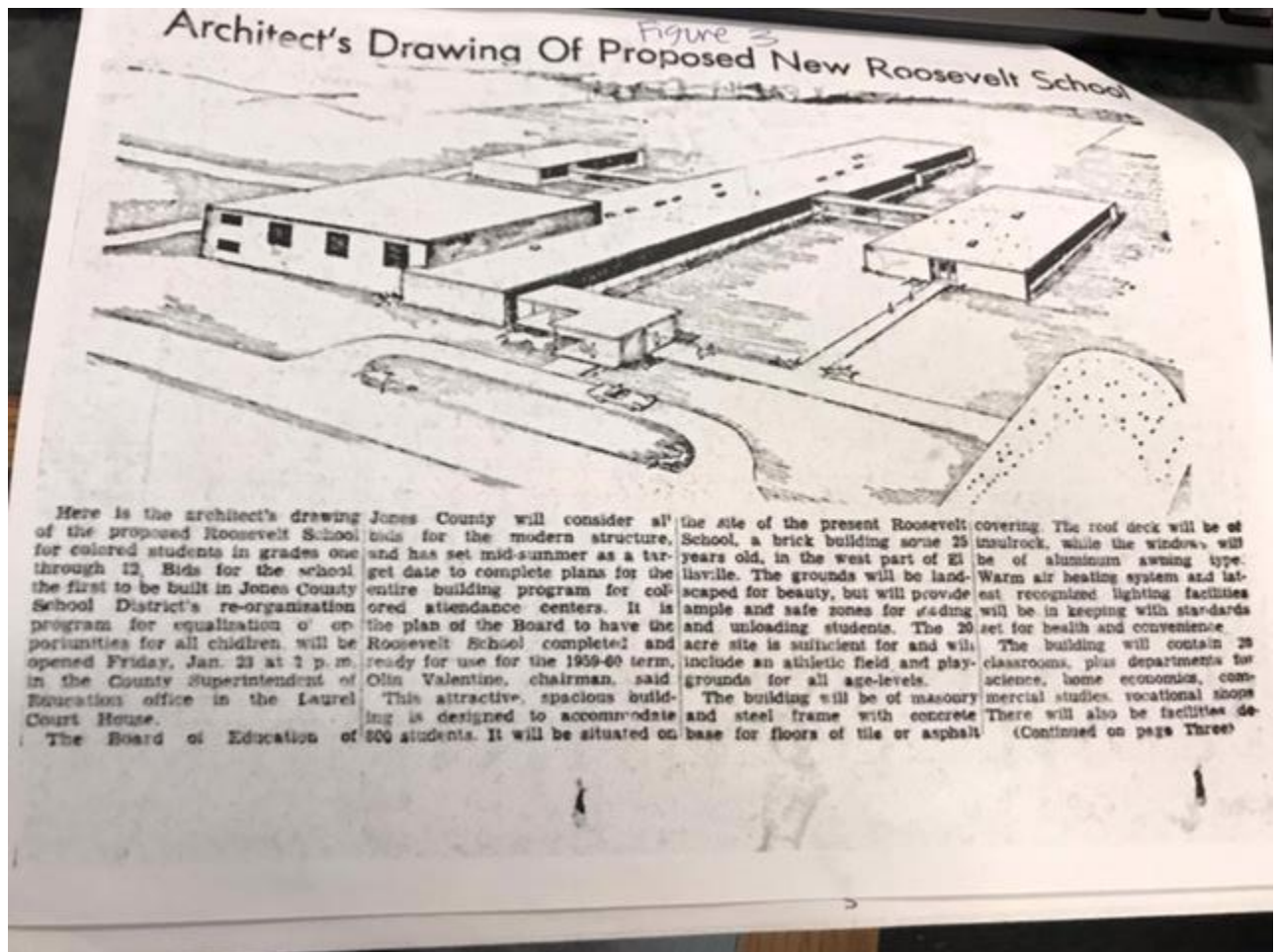
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³⁴ "Jones County Well on Way in School Equalization," *Laurel Leader Call* (Laurel, Mississippi), November 1957.

Figure 2



³⁵ "Seek Approval of First School Plan in County System," *Laurel Leader Call* (Laurel, Mississippi), November 16, 1957.



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Figure 3

³⁶ "Architect's drawing of Proposed New Roosevelt School," *Laurel Leader Call* (Laurel, Mississippi), 1957

CHAPTER 2: The Effect of Integration

As integration began in 1970, so too did the era of all-white private high schools. As soon as the schools integrated, white parents began searching for a way out. Since white parents and officials could no longer legally intimidate African American students and parents with threats of losing a job or their reputation, they decided to segregate themselves. There were already private schools in Mississippi, but integration doubled the creation of private schools. According to historian Charles Bolton, “Between 1966 and 1970, the number of private schools in the state rose from 121 to 236.”³⁷ These schools were developed as a way for white parents in Mississippi to avoid integration. Although private schools in Mississippi did not advertise themselves as segregated, they were understood by white parents to be “the only place pupils will be given a quality education in circumstances conducive to learning.”³⁸ *Brown v. Board* (1954) desegregated public institutions, but private institutions were free to accept or deny anyone they pleased. With this new surge of private schools, white public officials were doing anything they could to aid anyone who was willing to leave the public-school system. In Tunica, Mississippi, for example, officials told their students “that they were allowed to take their schools books with them and use them at whatever private school they chose after their Christmas Break.”³⁹ Although the decision to send children to private school was a must for some parents, those who could not afford a private school education were left scrambling to find a school for their child. Private schools cost money, and some parents needed assistance to send their students to these

³⁷ Charles C. Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All: The Battle over School Integration in Mississippi, 1870-1980* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 139.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 139.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 135.

schools.⁴⁰ A lot of parents put their students in the nearest private school or council school at their availability. Because a lot of these schools sprung up so fast, the teachers at these schools were sometimes not the most qualified.⁴¹ The idea for many parents was to get their kids as far away from integration as possible. White Mississippians were unable to change federal government rules, but they were able to control how they dealt with those rules. Rather than putting the quality of education first, many parents simply chose to segregate their children's education.

Jones County did not have its first private high school until 1982. According to the school website, the "Presbyterian Christian School (now called Laurel Christian School) was founded in 1982 as a cooperative effort of committed parents, teachers, and the First and Trinity Presbyterian Churches of Laurel."⁴² The idea behind Presbyterian Christian School was that it was a school based on "Christian Principles." For segregationists, "Christian Principles" often meant the idea that the Bible teaches segregation and that individuals should be kept apart.⁴³ God's word became a "saving grace" for segregationists. They were able to use certain verses in the Bible to distort the true meaning of what God was trying to say. The "Christianity defense" became a leading force for segregationists, and "the church pulsed with fear about integration and its consequences."⁴⁴ However, on the outside looking in, a Christian academy simply seemed like a school where children would have the chance to learn about the word of the Lord. If Christianity was the basis of the school, it elides the fact that the majority of students who attend

⁴⁰ Ibid,140.

⁴¹ Ibid,140.

⁴² "History," Laurel Christian School, <http://laurelchristian.org/about-us/history/>.

⁴³ Carolyn Renée Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1975* (New York: New York University Press, 2013),83.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 2.

the school were white. The name of the school itself suggests that the school catered to a certain group of individuals. According to the Pew Research Center, a majority of Presbyterians are white.⁴⁵ There are very few African Americans who were Presbyterians, and African Americans were unwilling to send their children to a school based on Presbyterian principles was unlikely to appeal to African Americans. Along with name, the private education came with a hefty price. Many African American parents could not afford to send their children to the school. Many African Americans were already struggling to get by. Unlike white individuals, they did not have churches and other organizations to help them afford a private education for children. This meant that Presbyterian Christian School was filled a majority of white students and teachers.

This left the students at Presbyterian Christian School with a particular mindset. Whites who grow up in all white settings develop a certain connection to their white counterparts known as a “white habitus.” According to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and David Embrick, a “white habitus is a mental lens and leads whites to avoid and exclude blacks from their social networks and institutions.”⁴⁶ When, at LPCS, white children’s interaction with one race perpetuated the idea that the white race was the only group of individuals that they should have a connection with. The children at Laurel Presbyterian Christian School only knew what they had been around all their life. They had only seen individuals who looked and acted like them. Their one chance that they had to integrate schools, they were either pulled out of the school or had already developed the idea that white individuals were the best race. They had been exposed to racism through their

⁴⁵ "Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project*, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.

⁴⁶ Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, and David G. Embrick, "'Every place has a ghetto...': The significance of whites' social and residential segregation," *Symbolic Interaction* 30, no. 3 (2007): 340-341.

schools both deliberately or indirectly.⁴⁷ When someone is exposed to a certain group of individuals, they began to develop their mannerisms. White children unintentionally began excluding African Americans from their environment, or they did not come into contact with them at all.⁴⁸ Even though integration was on the rise, the idea of hanging with someone they were not used to put white individuals out of their comfort zone, and many whites would create barriers that limited their interaction to blacks.⁴⁹ Their mental lens helped maintain their “isolation and exclusionary practices as natural and hence unproblematic.”⁵⁰ What is learned in schools has a profound effect on what a person takes with them as they go into the world. When these students gained the idea that they were better than everyone else, they lost their sense of being an individual. They began to fall into that category of whites who are unable to let go of hatred because of a skin color. When these students do decide to do something out of the norm, they are scrutinized because they are not like everyone else. What the students at Presbyterian Christian School did was develop the idea that they were better, and they eventually began to look for ways to separate and segregate the students that came after them.

With the beginning of the creation of all white private high schools came the idea of “opportunity hoarding.” Opportunity hoarding is “when a social group restricts admission to a rare resource, exercising control that requires out-group members to pay for access.”⁵¹ Whites

⁴⁷ “Race, Power and Policy: Dismantling Structural Racism” The Grassroots Policy Project, https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/race_power_policy_workbook.pdf, 15.

⁴⁸ Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, and David G. Embrick, 340-341.

⁴⁹ Goldsmith, Pat Rubio, "Learning apart, living apart: How the racial and ethnic segregation of schools and colleges perpetuates residential segregation." *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 6 (2010):1607.

⁵⁰ Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, and David G. Embrick, 340.

⁵¹ David J. Johns, “Disrupting Implicit Racial Bias and Other Forms of Discrimination to Improve Access, Achievement, and Wellness for Students of Color”, The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans, <https://sites.ed.gov/whieeaa/files/2016/10/Disrupting-Implicit-Bias-FINAL.pdf>.

began opportunity hoarding with the creation of private schools. The creation of these schools required paying money or being white. Many whites were able to afford private schools, while the ones who could not were sponsored by someone who was willing to help them pay for it. African Americans on the other hand were not financially stable enough to send their children to these for-profit institutions. This created a majority white school that allowed its students to gain the idea that they were better. With this came intentional and unintentional racism. These students began listening to their peers and developed the idea that they were the best of the best. They were unable to rid themselves of this when they interacted with people who do not share their identity. When something is unfamiliar to someone, they attack it instead of trying to figure out. This deterred many from going outside the norm which created a continually separated group of whites who were wanted to as minimal interaction with blacks as possible. This began the resegregation of public schools in Jones County.

CHAPTER 3: The Effect of Resegregation

The shift toward integration did not last very long. As soon as the late 1970s, a change occurred in the organizations of the high schools in Jones County. Charles Bolton notes that white flight happened in the late 1970s, and that it challenged the composition of the elementary schools in Laurel, Mississippi. Most of the elementary schools in Laurel were still majority white by 1970, because of the residential divisions. The preservation of the minds of children are a very important thing. According to the Child Care Resource Center, children began understanding how the world works from ages 5-8 years old.⁵² These children only saw mostly whites around them. As stated in chapter 2, when children are exposed to a certain race all their lives, they began to unproblematically only chose to associate with that race.⁵³ The parents of these white students had no problem with integration because they knew that no matter what, their students would only experience white culture. However, as time went on, African Americans begin to sue because their children were still not getting the best education. In the mid-1970s, white parents were put on notice that elementary schools would be integrated.⁵⁴ This caused an uproar because white parents realized that their children would have to grow up going to school with their black counterparts. If the elementary schools were integrated, then this would mean that white and black children would have to start at the same level. White elementary children would receive the same education, the same books, and have the same education as their black counterparts. Their children would have to experience a life were black children were treated “equally”. White and blacks in Laurel were separated by a railroad track.

⁵² "Ages & Stages Child Development," Child Care Resource Center, <https://www.ccrcca.org/parents/your-childrens-growth-and-development>.

⁵³ Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, and David G. Embrick, “‘Every place has a ghetto...’: The Significance of Whites' Social and Residential Segregation,” *Symbolic Interaction* 30, no. 3 (2007): 340-341.

⁵⁴ Bolton, *Hardest Deal*, 150.

After whites realized that the track would not separate the races anymore, it was time for them to find another place to go.

This change to the elementary schools began what was known as the white flight out of Laurel School District into Jones County School District. With this surge of energy, not only did the elementary schools in Laurel free themselves of white children, but so did the high school. Laurel High School had already desegregated; however, the white students at the desegregated high school had already developed their superiority complex from being at segregated schools for most of their life.⁵⁵ When integration happened at the high schools, African-American students were already thought of as second-rate citizens by those in at the school. They were discriminated against by whites from the minute they walked into the school. However, the shift in the exit of white students at the elementary schools created a shift at the high schools as well. By the end of 1970, Laurel Schools lost over eight hundred mostly white students.⁵⁶ The rural areas of Jones County became more manageable for those that lived in the city. In rural areas, individuals do not live close together. Whites were able to separate themselves from African Americans. Residential segregation is the bedrock upon which other forms of segregation are formed.⁵⁷ Moving into rural areas of Jones County meant whites were less likely to interact with someone who was not their race. The decision for white parents to settle into rural Jones County was an easy one. They moved into majority white neighborhoods or in secluded areas of Jones County where they had limited access to African Americans.⁵⁸ With this move came the switch

⁵⁵ Bolton, *Hardest Deal*, 150.

⁵⁶ Bolton, *Hardest Deal*, 150.

⁵⁷ Pat Rubio Goldsmith, "Learning Apart, Living Apart: How the Racial and Ethnic Segregation of Schools and Colleges Perpetuates Residential Segregation," *Teachers College Record* 112, no. 6 (2010): 1607.

⁵⁸ Salvatore Saporit and Deenesh Sohoni, "Coloring outside the Lines: Racial Segregation in Public Schools and Their Attendance Boundaries," *Sociology of Education* 79, no. 2 (2006): 83.

of children to the rural schools in Jones County. If they did not move to Jones County, “they would give guardianship of their children to relatives who did live in Jones County for school purposes.”⁵⁹ Jones County Schools went back to being majority white without having to kick out students. As the whites left Laurel, the blacks moved in.⁶⁰ African Americans developed better opportunities in Laurel, so they begin moving there. Companies like Howard Technology, Sanderson Farms, the sawmill plants, and other industrial plants in Laurel offered opportunities for African Americans to do better. With this shift, African Americans began sending their students to Laurel High School. As the black students entered, the white students continued to flee. South Jones, Northeast Jones, West Jones, and Laurel Christian held a majority of the white students, while Laurel began gathering a majority of the black students. By the late 1980s, “75 percent of students in Laurel School District were African Americans while 81 percent of whites went to Jones County Schools.”⁶¹ This was called the “white flight” by those who lived in Laurel. White individuals fled what was beginning to be an integration of African Americans into their lives in order to find secluded places where they did not have to deal with the changes that were happening in Jones County. This exodus caused a ripple effect where whites continually sent their children to Jones County Schools while blacks continually sent their children to Laurel City Schools. Eventually the divide was exposed in 1989, after Laurel and Jones County school districts were trying to consolidate into one big school.⁶² White parents protested the consolidation of these schools, and some were even revealed as giving guardianship

⁵⁹ Ronald Smothers, “Mississippi Schools Facing Move to Stem Resegregation Tide,” *The New York Times* (New York, New York), Sept 7, 1989.

⁶⁰ Bolton, *Hardest Deal*, 150.

⁶¹ Smothers, 1989.

⁶² Smothers, 1989.

of their children to relatives. Many whites did not want to consolidate the districts, because they did not want their children to mix with black children. This caused a firestorm. However, the consolidation of schools did not happen. More African Americans continued to go to Laurel while more and more whites continue to go to Jones County.

As the number of white students at Laurel High School dwindled, the school was left as a majority black institution. With that “majority black” label came a loss of resources and reputation. Schools that are predominantly African American “receive much less in per capita funding than those that are majority white.”⁶³ With this drop in funding came a drop in the educational resources received by African Americans. They were immediately put at a disadvantage compared to those at the county schools. African Americans were more likely to drop out of school because of these disadvantages.⁶⁴ Not only did the white flight have an effect on the racial barriers at Laurel High School, they had an effect on how Laurel High School is portrayed. When something happens at the school, it becomes plastered across the five o’clock news. If someone who has graduated from the school is arrested or murdered, the school is associated with that person. In 2015, Kenny Ray Smith was shot to death at a night club.⁶⁵ He graduated from Laurel High School in 1998, and the paper still managed to mention that he was a student at Laurel High School. Laurel High School is considered one of the lowest ranking schools in Jones County.⁶⁶ The school is associated with drugs, undereducated teachers, and unprepared students. Although the school has improved drastically over time, Laurel High has

⁶³ Joe R. Feagin, *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 217.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 217.

⁶⁵ “Vigil Friday for Laurel native shot to death at nightclub,” *Laurel Leader-Call* (Laurel, Mississippi), December 9, 2015.

⁶⁶ Kendall Green, "Laurel School District Making Changes to Improve Accountability Score," *WDAM*. (Laurel, MS), September 21, 2018.

always been thought of as an underdeveloped school. The negative connotations with Laurel High School created a difficult learning setting for the students.⁶⁷ When all a person hears is that their school is known for fighting and creating children who do not succeed, the school turns into that for them. The student at Laurel High School are some of the lowest performing students in Jones County. It has been in desperate need for teachers since the early 2000s.⁶⁸ Teachers are unwilling to apply to schools where the students are “uncontrollable”. When the schools integrated, Laurel High School was left with African American children who are seen as difficult, but in reality, are only black children who are unwanted.

According to the Mississippi Department of Education, when 2018 began, 702 African Americans attended Laurel High School, while only 20 white students attended the school (Figure 1). The high schools in Jones County hold 739 African Americans and 2,607 whites (Figures 2, 3, 4). The racial divide of 1970s offered change for whites in Laurel, Mississippi. It sparked a migration away from Laurel into Jones County. When they moved to rural Jones County they had less interaction with African Americans altogether. They also allowed relatives who lived in Jones County to claim their children through guardianship in order to secure that their children would be able to go to the schools in Jones County High Schools. More whites began coming to the county high schools than ever before. As they were leaving Laurel High School, blacks were integrating. As blacks integrated Laurel, its reputation took a sudden turn. As of the beginning of 2018, over 90 percent of students enrolled in Laurel High School are African Americans, and the same negative connotations about the school still apply to them.

⁶⁷ Feagin, 219.

⁶⁸ Ashley Jackson, "Teacher Shortages an Ongoing Problem in MS." *WDAM*. (Laurel, MS), September 21, 2018.

TABLES

Group Name	Group Number	Group Percent (%)
Female	398	51.09%
Male	381	48.91%
Asian	*	*
African American	702	90.12%
Hispanic or Latino	46	5.91%
White	20	2.57%
Two or More Races	*	*

Enrollment by Subgroup
Laurel High School (Figure 1)

Group Name	Group Number	Group Percent (%)
Female	514	48.26%
Male	551	51.74%
Asian	*	*
African American	200	18.78%
Hispanic or Latino	35	3.29%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	42	3.94%
White	766	71.92%
Two or More Races	17	1.60%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	*	*

Enrollment by Subgroup
Northeast Jones High School (Figure 2)

Group Name	Group Number	Group Percent (%)
Female	642	49.69%
Male	650	50.31%
Asian	*	*
African American	223	17.26%
Hispanic or Latino	79	6.11%
American Indian or Alaskan Native	*	*
White	956	73.99%
Two or More Races	22	1.70%

Enrollment by Subgroup
South Jones High School (Figure 3)

Group Name	Group Number	Group Percent (%)
Female	721	50.67%
Male	702	49.33%
Asian	12	0.84%
African American	316	22.21%
Hispanic or Latino	180	12.65%
White	891	62.61%
Two or More Races	24	1.69%

Enrollment by Subgroup
West Jones High School (Figure 4)

***Figures based on census by Mississippi Department of Education for years 2018-2019.**

CONCLUSION

African Americans have faced discrimination their entire lives; they have had to go through trials and tribulations to receive everything that they have. A big trial that many African Americans went through is the fight for their children to receive a better education. *Brown v. Board* (1954), desegregated schools in America, but the fight for African Americans was not over. Many whites in the South fought hard after *Brown v. Board* (1954) to keep their children away from African Americans. Many schools and officials in Mississippi took *Brown v. Board* (1954) with a grain of salt and continued to disregard the Supreme Court because of their “all deliberate speed” ruling. They “allowed” for freedom of choice and created plans for desegregation, but it was mainly a ruse to stay segregated. Only after *Alexander v. Holmes* (1969) did Mississippians realize that they might have to actually integrate their schools. As soon as this was realized, whites began the fight to resist everything that *Alexander v. Holmes* (1969) created.

Officials in the Laurel School District and the Jones County School District both created ways to stop the integration of their schools. However, neither way of desegregation could stop the ruling that *Alexander v. Holmes* (1969) brought down. With that one ruling, both school systems in Jones County were forced to integrate themselves. As soon as the schools integrated, there was trouble for African Americans in both school districts. Confronted with this nearly impossible situation, black students had to struggle to even graduate. With every school year that passed, African Americans faced detrimental situations that forced some of them to decide to not come back if they did not graduate. Fortunately, whites were not going to allow their children to attend these integrated schools for long.

Mississippi is the breeding ground for individuals who think the Bible is the answer for all of their problems. White Mississippians in Jones County, created Christian private academies that were overpriced and filled with white children. African Americans only wanted a better education for their children, not an expansive school that has a majority of its education focused on Christian education. What was created was a private school filled with a race of children who developed ideas based on who they were growing up around.

The shift to integration began with the private schools, but continued to change as white in Laurel began to make a shift to areas where they were no African Americans. This meant a move to rural Jones. With this shift in residence came a shift in the school systems. As whites moved out, African Americans moved in, which created another divide. This ultimately created the reverse of what the schools were before. Laurel was majority African American, and Jones County was majority white. As color lines shifted, so did the representations of the schools. Laurel began a decline which has had a profound effect on the way the school is treated. Jones County had been on an upward climb since resegregation and has continued since then. These schools have been treated differently by not only citizens in Jones County, but also by the government itself. Laurel has fought tooth and nail for every dollar that they receive from the state. When the school shifted, so did the representation of the schools.

“The Segregation, Integration, and Resegregation of High Schools in Jones County, Mississippi” sheds light on how segregation affected black Mississippians from the 1970s through the present. Different generations of African Americans have entered the walls of schools in Jones County, and they all have experienced the effect of *Alexander v. Holmes* (1969). They have shouldered the burden of feeling disliked, disadvantaged, and restricted because the

color of their skin. The effect of segregation continues to rear its head, and many children are still put at a disadvantage in Jones County.

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