

“THE BATTLE FOR FREEDOM BEGINS EVERY MORNING”: JOHN HERVEY
WHEELER, CIVIL RIGHTS, AND NEW SOUTH PROSPERITY

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
Department of History.

Chapel Hill
2014

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ABSTRACT

BRANDON KYRON LENZIE WINFORD: “The Battle for Freedom Begins Every Morning”: John Hervey Wheeler, Civil Rights, and New South Prosperity
(Under the direction of Dr. James L. Leloudis)

This dissertation examines the battle for racial and economic equality between the 1930s and 1960s through the life of banker-lawyer John Wheeler. It argues that Wheeler's New South prosperity vision consistently demanded full citizenship rights in order to obtain economic power for African Americans. More importantly, it served as a catalyst and an overall reminder to whites that the welfare of the entire region was forever bound to the economic plight of its black citizens. At the peak of his career, Wheeler was North Carolina's most prominent black leader and arguably the most influential civil rights figure in the South. He received presidential appointments under Kennedy and Johnson and was elected president of the Southern Regional Council, an organization that gained notoriety through meticulous research and publications about the movement. Wheeler was based in Durham where he became Mechanics and Farmers Bank president, which was one of the largest black-owned institutions in the country. He headed the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs, a powerful political organization in the state. In a career that spanned five decades, Wheeler shrewdly confronted racism, which placed blacks in a perpetual state of economic inferiority rooted in Jim Crow segregation.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Wheeler focused intently on equality of opportunity in education, employment, housing, politics, and public accommodations. A key component

became the idea of "freedom of movement," which he equated to unrestricted access to resources on the path to a completely integrated society; he also viewed this as critical to New South prosperity. As his access to political power increased, Wheeler compelled government agencies to hire qualified black professionals, while also pushing for their inclusion in policymaking decisions. He believed that blacks had to help implement non-discriminatory policies and be among the group charged with interpreting new laws. As a behind-the-scenes negotiator, he coordinated an expansive network of resources, which he effectively used to achieve many of his civil rights and economic objectives. By exploring Wheeler's unique sphere of black leadership, this work captures the larger relationship between black institution, their connections to political and economic power, and ultimately the "brokering" of the civil rights movement.

To
the loving memory of my sister La Fonda Rae Griffin (1974-2007) and my grandmother
Annie Bell Winford Heaggans (1924-2011)
and
my parents, Ray and Cynthia Winford

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To God be the Glory! This research project has been one of the most challenging, yet rewarding life experiences. I have many people to thank for helping me along this journey. First, thanks to my advisor, Jim Leloudis. We began sharing our research on North Carolina over “Friday Tea” at the Southern Historical Collection on the UNC campus. He has served as an excellent advisor and mentor while providing me with the best example of what it means to be a historian, with the responsibilities of juggling both professional and family obligations. In this role, he always calmed my anxieties about not having yet arrived at my “aha moment,” counseling me that it would come. Leloudis also modeled engaging teaching in the classroom. I hope to someday get a rousing applause from my students after delivering the final lecture of the spring semester as he did every time I was his teaching assistant. He guided me through the writing process but never asserted his overarching authority over my work. Instead, he prodded me with questions to help me work through my analysis. After fumbling through those questions countless times, “what’s the analytic point?” became my self-mantra for writing and revising my dissertation. He advised me to avoid putting my subject into a box and to understand that history did not happen as neatly as we tend to imagine. An important lesson was to trust my primary research and to consider writing as a “process” of intellectual discovery. To borrow a line from Leloudis, I’ll keep writing history “one word and one paragraph at a time.”

The history department's academic community is second to none. It is a great program with an extremely helpful and encouraging faculty and staff. A special thanks to the administrative staff (Violet Anderson, Joyce Loftin, Joy Jones, and Latisha Davis); one should never forget how vital these individuals are to any functioning academic department. My committee members are all extraordinary scholars and have been great sources of inspiration. I always give a metaphorical expression to explain to people how Jerma Jackson brilliantly complicates historical problems. I'll say, "you could be walking in one direction and she'll come out of nowhere and have you walk in the opposite one, or maybe encourage you to explore the unbeaten path." It always impresses me to find that the most prolific historians can turn out to be such good people with strong commitments to their students. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall is such the historian. Her vision and framework for understanding the past through oral history will ring throughout the profession for a long time to come. Crystal Feimster's best advice to me was to ground my narrative in place. I am honored to have had a fellow Iredell County native on my committee and even more inspired by the powerful example she has set for me and so many following in our footsteps. Reginald Hildebrand was probably the first UNC faculty member to offer me research advice as an undergraduate without hesitancy and during my graduate school experience he continued to encourage me to "press on." I also need to thank Heather Williams for extending an open ear and genuine encouragement as well. W. Fitzhugh Brundage shared a vast amount of primary material, which saved me countless hours of having to search through microfilmed newspapers. From Malinda Maynor Lowry, I've learned the importance of having a reciprocal relationship with the communities we study.

Thanks to my colleagues who shared advice, laughter, encouragement, and templates to help me make along the way. They are Will Griffin, Jennifer Dixon-McKnight, Chris Cameron, Josh Davis, Dwana Waugh, Tim Williams, Rob Ferguson, Hilary Green, Catherine Conner, and Julie Reed. I will always be indebted to UNC's MURAP program—James Coleman (faculty mentor), Rosa Perelmuter, Henry Frierson, Carla Slocum, Caroline Tyson, Sandy Darity, Aman Nadhiri, and Kennetta Hammond Perry. As an undergraduate, this program provided a generous summer research experience and helped me determine whether or not graduate school might be for me; the director even gave me summer employment during graduate school. Finally, thanks to Dr. Cookie Newsom and the Department of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs for exposing me to new ways of thinking about diversity in higher education.

Next, I would like to thank my professors and mentors at North Carolina Central University (Carlton Wilson, Jerry Gershenhorn, Freddie Parker, Jim Harper, Lydia Lindsey, Percy Murray, Lewis Suggs, Baiyina Muhammad, Renaldo Lawson, and Andre Vann). I consider them part of my extended “eagle” family. They taught me how to soar and at every level demonstrated their commitment to their students. Jerry Gershenhorn was a great thesis advisor and without fail continues to share his insights about the past with me. The late Sylvia M. Jacobs (1946-2013) introduced “her” students to the Association for the Study of African American Life and History and I am forever grateful! Hopefully, I can do my part in carrying on her legacy with that organization. I'm glad to add my name to the growing list of former history students with Ph.D. degrees.

It is impossible to complete such a major assignment without conducting archival research. I owe a huge thanks to the staff at the Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta

University Center, particularly Karen Jefferson for making the John Hervey Wheeler Collection accessible to me for research, the first to have that honor. Thanks also to Andrea Jackson, Kayin Shabazz, Stacy Jones, and Melvin Collier for providing a welcoming atmosphere to conduct archival research. The Southern Historical Collection at UNC is equally awesome—they gave me a job (I even had the luxury of being able to pull my own research materials from the shelves while I worked there). I'd especially like to thank Matt Turi, Laura Clark Brown, Tim West, Rachel Canada, Biff Hollingsworth, and Holly Smith; thanks also to the North Carolina Collection staff—especially Jason Tomberlin. The Lyndon B. Johnson Memorial Library and Museum provided me with a generous research fellowship to examine the LBJ presidential papers located in Austin, Texas. The Center for the Study of the American South also gave me research and travel funding. In Durham, I'd like to thank Lynn Richardson at the Durham County Library who is always a great resource, Catherine Bisplinghoff at the Durham School Board Administrative office, and the Rubenstein Manuscripts Department at Duke University. Behind every research project on black Durham is North Carolina Central University archivist Andre Vann; thanks for guiding me and preserving that history. Thanks to the staff at the Auburn Avenue Research Library in Atlanta, Georgia who found the one document that informed an important part of my research.

In our contemporary American society, the public school system gets overwhelmingly negative criticism. However, there is a group of educators and mentors that deserve my special thanks. From them I learned more than I could have ever imagined. They had high expectations for me and held me in such high regard. They are proof that when educators believe in the young minds they influence, the possibilities are endless. I

particularly want to thank my kindergarten teacher Mrs. McAlpine, the late Msgt. Henry Baker (NJROTC), Coach Napoleon "Brutt" Lowery (basketball coach), Stephen A. Mauney (basketball coach), Commander Mike Powden (NJROTC), Ms. Gail Hooper (6th grade English), Mrs. Goode (7th grade social studies), Ms. Lynch (8th grade English), Mr. Tim Smith (9th grade English), Mrs. Gardner (12th grade English), Coach Mike Carter (football), Mrs. Garland (1st grade), Mrs. Clement (3rd grade), Mrs. Howell (4th grade), Mrs. Woodring (7th grade math), Nancy Karriker (girls volleyball coach) and Eddie Karriker (football coach). I will forever admire all of them.

Finally, these words can only go so far in expressing my gratitude to my family and friends. They've had to sacrifice so much in the way of phone calls and celebrations during what has sometimes seemed like a lifetime. It goes without saying that I have some catching up to do but I could not have done it without their support, encouragement, and continuous bombardments of "when will you be finished?"(sigh) The answer is actually never! It's the end of one journey and the beginning of the next. To my wife Eboni (and fellow MURAPer '04)—love is a powerful expression and you've shown me that in ways you'll never understand. Through your love you've taught me about sacrifice, forgiveness, strength, commitment, trust, selflessness, kindness, perseverance, thoughtfulness, and compassion. I've become a better human being because of you. Thank you for being such a great friend to me even when I don't deserve it.

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INTRODUCTION

We have tomorrow Bright before us Like a flame. Yesterday, a night-gone thing, A Sun-down name. And dawn to-day Broad arch above the road we came. We March!

—“Youth” by Langston Hughes

The Battle for Freedom Begins Every Morning

—John Hervey Wheeler

In August 1964, Durham banker-lawyer John Hervey Wheeler (1908-1978) became the first African American delegate from North Carolina to attend the Democratic National Convention (DNC) in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Governor Terry Sanford, a progressive white moderate by that day's standards, appointed Wheeler earlier in the spring. During his 1960 gubernatorial campaign, Sanford promised a “New Day” in North Carolina where both blacks and whites would reap the full benefits of an improved educational system to prepare them, and the state itself, for a brighter economic future. Along with Wheeler, black funeral director C. S. Brown made the trip as an alternate delegate. John Sylvester “Shag” Stewart, Durham's second black city councilman, attended the convention as an invited guest of the North Carolina Democratic Executive Committee. The official delegates and alternates—about 120 African Americans overall—came from twenty-two states in what newspapers around the country reported as the largest group among blacks to attend a major party convention.¹ Wheeler's appointment came at an opportune time and in many ways represented an important ideal—black political power coming full-circle in his home state. In the previous two decades, he gained national prominence as a political and civil rights

¹“John H. Wheeler to be Among Southern Politicians at Confab,” *Carolina Time*, August 22, 1964; “First Negro Delegate,” *Carolina Times*, September 5, 1964.

activist fighting for racial and economic equality on behalf of black Americans.

In civil rights history, the 1964 DNC is remembered not so much for President Lyndon Baines Johnson's nomination alongside running-mate Hubert H. Humphrey, but for the controversy over state political representation. As John Wheeler planned to fulfill his obligations as a delegate from North Carolina, black delegates from Mississippi made their way to Atlantic City. In contrast to Wheeler, however, delegates from the latter group received no appointments from its white governor, nor did they represent the state's official delegation. They made their way to the convention as the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). The MFDP sent sixty-eight delegates to the national gathering with plans to unseat Mississippi's official all-white delegation. They billed themselves as the only democratically elected state representatives; the white delegates were selected because of a time-honored tradition that banned black Mississippians from the process altogether. The MFDP drove the over 1000-mile journey from the rural deep-South to Atlantic City's bustling urban setting—filled with the expectations of American democracy. The courageous black sharecropper Fannie Lou Hamer testified before the DNC's Credentials Committee in a heart-wrenching eight-minute speech. She powerfully recounted her political awakening while detailing the exploitive social, political, and economic conditions faced by blacks in her home state and across the New South.² By the time MFDP delegates left Atlantic City, they had different experiences with LBJ than did Wheeler who was deemed

²Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 84-85; Chana Kai Lee, "Anger, Memory, and Personal Power: Fannie Lou Hamer and Civil Rights Leadership" in Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin, eds. *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2001), 162-163; Earnest N. Bracey, *Fannie Lou Hamer: The Life of a Civil Rights Icon* (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland, 2011), 106; "Fannie Lou Hamer Testimony to the Democratic Party National Convention, 1964" in Brian Ward *The 1960s: a Documentary Reader* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 79-80.

more “respectable” and worthy of being included in the establishment. In the end, LBJ refused to unseat the all-white Mississippi delegation, instead the president relied on behind-the-scenes negotiations with the national civil rights leadership. They mapped out a deal so the MFDP would get two seats at the convention as a symbolic gesture for their efforts, which they summarily rejected on hard-line principles. As Hamer bitterly complained, “we didn’t come all this way for no two votes!”³

In an article profile, *Business Week* magazine described John Wheeler as “the most influential Negro leader in his state, among the three or four top Negroes in the South, and a man with substantial weight at the national level.”⁴ Wheeler’s leadership included several high-profile political appointments under the Kennedy and Johnson administrations during the 1960s. In 1961, John F. Kennedy appointed Wheeler to the President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity (PCEEO) chaired by then Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson. The PCEEO had the mammoth task to eliminate discrimination from government employment. In that capacity, Wheeler established a good working relationship with LBJ and the two became good friends. In 1963, Kennedy selected Wheeler for an appointment as the U. S. ambassador to Nigeria but the latter declined citing his increasing banking responsibilities. Once LBJ became president, Wheeler advised him on civil rights issues and helped draft legislation for the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In the same *Business Week* article, LBJ praised Wheeler for his “deep dedication to the cause of equal employment with a recognition of the need for effective methods.”⁵ By that time, Wheeler also held significant

³Ibid.

⁴“Banker with a mission: Successful Negro bank president, firm in pushing for both Negro advancement and North Carolina development, wins an influential role throughout South and in the nation,” *Business Week*, May 16, 1964.

standing among the national civil rights leadership. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. added to LBJ's comments by emphasizing Wheeler's "unwavering commitment to the cause of freedom and justice."⁶ In January 1964, Wheeler added to his standing as a major civil rights figure by becoming the first black president of the Southern Regional Council (SRC), an interracial, research-oriented organization based in Atlanta, Georgia. By decade's end, LBJ appointed Wheeler to an American delegation visiting the Republic of Germany to review progress under the Marshall Plan. In 1965, the president added Wheeler to the National Advisory Commission on Food and Fiber. In 1966, Wheeler traveled to Egypt, Syria, and Cyprus as a consultant and lecturer for the State Department. During LBJ's final year in office, he attached Wheeler's name as an incorporator for the National Housing Corporation. In addition, the chief executive seriously considered Wheeler's candidacy for an appointment as the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights in the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

There are a number of important questions at the core of this writing. First, what did it mean to be a black power-broker in the mid-twentieth century South? In what ways might a black business leader like John Wheeler have been instrumental in ensuring that African Americans like Fannie Hamer and other members of the MFDP had equal access to all of their rights as American citizens? What role did he play in the larger civil rights movement? What did the goals of the movement look like from the perspective of a black business leader with significant political and economic leverage at the local, state, and national level? How did he respond to major tactical shifts and turning points during the movement and did those

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

shifts deter him from pursuing the same set of objectives? Did he ever feel threatened by the possibilities of integration and the impact it could have on black institutions? What changes, if any, did Wheeler's involvement in the black freedom movement bring about that ultimately proved beneficial to blacks' demands for freedom?

This dissertation examines black leadership and the black freedom movement through the life John Hervey Wheeler. In his professional career Wheeler was a banker, lawyer, political and civil rights activist, civic leader, educator, and statesman. In his personal and private life he was a husband, father, son, brother, and uncle. It argues that Wheeler offered a concrete vision of New South prosperity, grounded in the determination to see that all African Americans obtained full citizenship with the ultimate aim of increased economic power. A central element in realizing that ideal was his belief in a completely integrated and open society, which he equated with the idea of "freedom of movement" for black Americans; he also held clear ideas about what the process of integration should entail. Thus, his vision fit within a larger framework of moving the entire South forward in very fundamental ways. More importantly, it kept to the forefront a larger conversation about the stakes involved for white Americans if states like North Carolina and the South as a region failed to eliminate racial segregation from the landscape. Finally, this vision of New South prosperity questioned the extent to which African Americans could fully participate in power sharing and helping to fashion a truly democratic American society.

Although typical descriptions placed on black business leaders during this period characterize them as too conservative, largely absent, or non-supportive, I argue that those assertions do not fully represent the broader perspective of black leadership during the movement. While historians have discussed the "behind-the-scenes" maneuvering of the

traditional black leadership, which overwhelmingly included black business leaders, they often describe those attempts as unsuccessful hindrances. This view does not detail the contributions that these leaders made to the movement. While black business leaders have been rightfully criticized for some of their approaches when handling issues affecting the black community, there have been few narratives from their perspective—and on their own terms—that have sought to fully explain the nature and fluidity involved in their positions during the movement. Closely examining this sphere of black leadership significantly alters and challenges widely held notions of apathy among black business leaders. During the civil rights movement many black business leaders used their key positions as officers or board members of several financial and educational institutions, philanthropic foundations, government funded agencies, and civil rights organizations to ensure that issues confronting blacks were seriously addressed “behind-closed-doors.” They inherited and carried forward the mantle of leadership from an older generation of leaders and then combined it with more assertive methods. From this standpoint, Wheeler represented a generational nexus in black leadership, but he also embraced a multiplicity of tactics to race relations to sustain the movement.⁷

⁷David T. Beito and Linda Royster Beito, *Black Maverick: T.R.M. Howard's Fight for Civil Rights and Economic Power* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), xi. These authors explain that local organizations started by black entrepreneurs served as a continuation of an established civil rights tradition which depended heavily on local leaders and their established networks. Furthermore, the survival of these local organizations laid the groundwork for later generations of civil rights activists. Similarly, I argue in my work on John Hervey Wheeler that the success of their business institutions provided many black business leaders in Durham, North Carolina with the necessary financial independence that allowed them to become deeply involved in community activism. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, they focused primarily on economic and educational equality for blacks. In the post-World War II era, they became increasingly concerned with black citizenship rights that also included social and political equality within the framework of “separate, but equal.” My particular emphasis on the role played by black business leaders in community activism stems largely from Walter B. Weare’s work *Black Business in the New South: A Social History of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1973). Weare makes the case that black businessmen in Durham, North Carolina fused a tradition of self-help, advocated by Booker T. Washington, as a way to improve conditions for blacks living in Durham. As conditions worsened

A PUBLIC SERVANT OF PEOPLE AND INSTITUTIONS

John Hervey Wheeler was rather tall at 5'10, slim, with a very light complexion. His father was mixed—the union of a black mother and white father. By most accounts, he often commanded a suave and debonair appearance and presence that showed his sophistication and “middle class respectability.”⁸ He was very reserved with a quiet and calm demeanor; he had a very soft-spoken voice and was also laid back and low-key.⁹ He had a clear mind and sound character that contributed significantly to his ability to demand respect from all members of his Durham community, both black and white. Many of his contemporaries described him as a statesman for his diplomatic approach to solving serious and complex societal problems. Wheeler also “ha[d] an uncanny ability to communicate with people...he combine[d] intellect and calm but great self assurance in his dealings with others...a universal reputation of ability to persuade those, especially those who do not wish to be

for African Americans during the Depression-era, blacks in Durham set-up the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs (1935), a local civil rights organization that was completely separate from their business institutions, to focus specifically on black citizenship. Although black business leaders controlled the DCNA, it nevertheless represented a way for the black masses to become involved in large-scale community activism.; While Weare's work focuses mainly on black businessmen, historian Leslie Brown's work *Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class, and Black Community Development in the Jim Crow South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), clarifies that black women in Durham in the first half of the twentieth century also contributed significantly to community activism and by the 1930s had helped make black Durham a forerunner in challenging Jim Crow segregation in North Carolina.; See also Juliette E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009). Walker provides a comprehensive analysis on the long-standing tradition of black business that extended from the shores of Africa and began well before African enslavement in the United States. Walker's argument opposes the idea that black business in America failed mainly because blacks had no tradition of business involvement. To the contrary, Walker maintains that black businesses did not reach the heights of their white counterparts because they lacked the government support that white businesses had from the beginning of the country's founding. Walker also maintains that despite the realities of economic discrimination, blacks contributed significantly to the entrepreneurial spirit that has characterized America, while at the same time improving the overall conditions of African Americans.

⁸Interview with Howard Lee by author, February 28, 2008; Interview with Vernon E. Jordan by author March 9, 2010.

⁹ “Tarheel of the Week – John Wheeler: Working Quietly for the Progress of Blacks,” *The News and Observer*, March 15, 1970; Letter from Hansen-Pruss (Duke Hospital physical) to Dr. Clyde Donnell (medical director at the North Carolina Mutual), April 18, 1952.

persuaded, of his position.”¹⁰ To some he was a man who had a striking ability to negotiate calmly and play a meditating role when conflicts pitted one side against the other. “He apparently never needs to justify himself, has no need to score a point in conversation merely to score a point, but concentrates on his object.”¹¹ He was an effective communicator who respected the opinions of others; he agreed to disagree and was “courteously diplomatic.”¹² He could remain objective and non-emotional when it came to making a particular point. At the same time, he always took a firm stance and explained his positions regarding certain matters exceptionally well.¹³

Wheeler was a “ ‘Renaissance Man,’ ” as one publication eulogized him and “an agent for change not only in the lives of black people, but, through them, the life of America.”¹⁴ By the time Wheeler died in 1978, his resume would have been impressive for anyone, white or black, as his professional responsibilities ran the gamut.¹⁵ Beyond being

¹⁰ Memorandum from John T. Abernathy to Terry Scanlon, October 14, 1963, Hugh H. and Mabel Smythe Papers, box 104/6, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, 3.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “ ‘The Battle for Freedom Begins Every Morning’: John Hervey Wheeler, 1908-1978,” *The Whetstone*, 3rd. quarter, 1978.

¹⁵ For brief biographical summaries of John Hervey Wheeler’s professional career see “John Hervey Wheeler Resume,” John Hervey Wheeler Biographical File, Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center Archives and Special Collections; “Obituary of John Hervey Wheeler,” July 8, 1978, Wheeler Biographical File; “Who’s Who Among the Trustees of Morehouse College,” *The Morehouse Alumnus*, November-December, 1944; “John H. Wheeler is Leader in Durham,” *The Oracle*, 1949; “John Hervey Wheeler, *Who’s Who in the South and Southwest*, (Chicago: The A. N. Marquis Company, 1952); “John Hervey Wheeler,” *Who’s Who in the South and Southwest*, (Chicago: Marquis-Who’s Who, 10th ed., 1967-68), 1014; “John Hervey Wheeler,” *Who’s Who Among Black Americans*, (Northbrook, Illinois: Who’s Who Among Black Americans, Inc., vol. 1, 1975/76,) 660; “John Hervey Wheeler,” *Paths Toward Freedom: A Biographical History of Blacks and Indians in North Carolina by Blacks and Indians* (Raleigh: Center for Urban Affairs, North Carolina State University, 1976), 195; “Great True Leader: John H. Wheeler dies at 70 in N.C.,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 22, 1978; “Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People 50th Anniversary

simply impressive, Wheeler's roles situated him within a local, state, regional, national, and international context. Wheeler's business career began in 1929, after he graduated summa cum laude from Morehouse College with an A. B. degree in accounting and finance. At that point, he came to work as a bank teller making \$60 a month for the Mechanics and Farmers Bank (M&F), one of the largest black-owned banks at the time.¹⁶ At M&F, Wheeler entered an environment of "black business activism." For him, this meant that the financial institution also served as a training-ground in black leadership as his immediate supervisors at the bank were also well-known community leaders. Wheeler was especially guided and influenced by the bank's executives and board members, particularly men such as Charles Clinton Spaulding, Stanford L. Warren, William Gaston Pearson, Edward Richard Merrick, and Richard Lewis McDougald. McDougald, in particular, had a strong impact on Wheeler's development as a community activist. When Wheeler came to Durham, McDougald was the bank's thirty-three year-old cashier and vice president whose business motto was "take care of the community and the community will take care of you." For Wheeler, the bank became more than just a financial institution; it was also a stepping-stone for him to battle against racial inequality.¹⁷

Program Booklet," August 10, 1985; "John H. Wheeler," *Kaiser Index to Black Resources 1948-1986* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1992), vol. 5, 335.

¹⁶ "Decision Led to Banking," *Durham Morning Herald*, August 2, 1953; "Wheeler: His Commitments Go Far Beyond His Bank," *The Carolina Financial Times*, February 9, 1976; "Durham Banker Dies at Age 70," *Durham Morning Herald*, July 7, 1978; "Banker John Wheeler Dies," *Charlotte Observer*, July 7, 1978; "Reflections-John Hervey Wheeler: A Life of Service," Atlanta University Charter Day Convocation Program, October 13, 1978, 3; "John Hervey Wheeler," *African American National Biography*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, eds. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 229.

¹⁷ Walter B. Weare, "John Hervey Wheeler," *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*, Vol. 6, T-Z (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), <http://ncpedia.org/biography/wheeler-john-hervey>, accessed 4-14-12; "A Banker who Believes in Investing in One's Community: R. L. McDougald of the Mechanics and Farmers bank Believes 'If You Take Care of Your Community, the Community Will Take Care of You,' " *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 9, 1929.

In 1933, John Wheeler also began working for the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company (NCM), a sister institution to M&F and the largest black-owned insurance company in the country, as a member of its securities investment committee. From there, he advanced through the M&F ranks becoming assistant cashier in 1939 and cashier in 1940; in 1944, he became the bank's vice president. In September 1950, Wheeler was elected president of the black National Negro Bankers Association (NNBA), the counterpart to the white American Bankers' Association; he was again elected to a second term in 1951. The NNBA was established in 1927 to promote the interests of black-owned banks in regulatory banking policies. In 1952, following the death of C. C. Spaulding, who was at that time the president of M&F and NCM, Wheeler became the bank's president and the country's youngest black bank president at forty-four. Not only that, his election to the M&F presidency also solidified his position as a black power-broker in Durham, in North Carolina and in the New South.¹⁸

While serving as M&F president from 1952 to 1978, John Wheeler carried the company's banner as a community bank while also expanding its reach. He used the banking field to break down artificial barriers in order to open up total markets to black businesses and to create competition with white businesses to compel them to extend their policies to blacks. Under Wheeler's leadership, M&F went from operating branches in just two cities (Durham and Raleigh), to also having a branch in Charlotte and later Winston-Salem. During his tenure as president, the bank's assets went from just over \$5 million when he took

¹⁸ "Decision Led to Banking," *Durham Morning Herald*, August 2, 1953; "John Hervey Wheeler," *African American National Biography*, 230; "Wheeler Elected President of Bankers' Association," *Baltimore Afro-American*, September 30, 1950; "Bankers Elect Wheeler at 24th Convention: Called Contributors to Democracy in U.S.," *Baltimore Afro-American*, October 6, 1951.

over in 1952, to \$15 million in 1964, \$21.5 million in 1970, and reached \$41 million by 1976.¹⁹ Through Wheeler's leadership during this period, M&F was out-front in providing loans for blacks to buy homes, and it also helped finance low-income housing. As a result of M&F's success in lending to blacks, white banks were forced to expand their lending policies to black borrowers. In 1966, Wheeler became president of the Low-Income Housing Development Corporation (LHDC), a group founded to help finance housing for low-income families. By 1970, the LHDC could claim that it had assisted in building some 1,500 homes for low-income families. In addition to working for and serving on the boards at M&F and NCM, Wheeler also served on the board of directors at several other black businesses, most notably the Mutual Building and Loan Association (later the Mutual Community Savings Bank), the Bankers Fire Insurance Company, the Southern Fidelity Mutual Insurance Company (all in Durham and associated with M&F and NCM), and the Hammocks Beach Corporation (Raleigh).²⁰

While banking provided John Wheeler with an outlet to challenge racial inequality from a strictly economic standpoint, as a political and civil rights activist, he worked through several organizations to deal with education, employment and job training opportunities, housing, voting rights, and public accommodations. At the same time, his expertise as a banker and his grasp on how blacks' economic position was greatly hampered by restrictive

¹⁹“Tarheel of the Week – John Wheeler: Working Quietly for the Progress of Blacks,” *The News and Observer*, March 15, 1970; “Wheeler: His Commitments Go Far Beyond His Bank,” *The Carolina Financial Times*, February 9, 1976; Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York: Random House, 1965), 300.

²⁰“Durham Banker Dies at Age 70,” *Durham Morning Herald*, July 7, 1978 ; “ ‘The Battle for Freedom Begins Every Morning: John Hervey Wheeler, 1908-1978,” *The Whetstone*, third quarter, 1978; Recommendation letter from Stanford L. Warren Board of Trustees to the Jury on Citation of Trustees, March 12, 1952, 4; “Reflections-John Hervey Wheeler: A Life of Service,” Atlanta University Charter Day Convocation Program, October 13, 1978, 3.

citizenship rights always permeated his thinking and served as a common thread at every turn. Civil rights leader and past National Urban League (NUL) executive director Vernon Jordan explained that, “In the true definition of the word, John Wheeler...was an activist.”²¹ A prime example of this activist spirit came via Wheeler's association with the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs (DCNA), the most important political and civil rights organization with which he worked.

The DCNA was organized in 1935 by the city's African American leaders. The organization's main function was to help blacks in Durham challenge racial discrimination through its five subcommittees: political, education, economic, civic, and religious and social welfare. On the political-front, the DCNA and its leadership had great success by helping to increase black voter registration and turnout. During the 1940s, the DCNA began candidate endorsements, whereby its slate of candidates usually received overwhelming voter support in black voting precincts, which meant the margin of victory during close elections.

Additionally, the DCNA pressed hard for equity in education, continuously lobbying the city and county school boards to add black representation and to improve black educational facilities and curriculum. Between 1943 and 1957, Wheeler led the DCNA's education sub-committee, the arm responsible for challenging Durham's unfair educational system; in 1957, he became the organization's chairman.²² As a civil rights lawyer working through the DCNA and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), John Wheeler daringly pushed for black educational equality, first within the

²¹Interview with Vernon E. Jordan by author March 9, 2010.

²²“ ‘The Battle for Freedom Begins Every Morning: John Hervey Wheeler, 1908-1978,’ *The Whetstone*, third quarter, 1978; “Durham Banker Dies at Age 70,” *Durham Morning Herald*, July 7, 1978; Walter B. Weare, “John Hervey Wheeler,” *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*.

“separate but equal” system and then for school desegregation, especially once the United States Supreme Court handed down its landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision. Wheeler explained that his decision to go to law school happened as “I decided that law and accounting would make a good combination for a banker so I started attending night school at N.C. Central University” in 1943.²³ He graduated from law school in 1947 with an LL. B. degree and passed the North Carolina state bar exam later that summer. Despite attending law school primarily to sharpen his skills as a banker, Wheeler effectively used his law degree as weapon to legally challenge North Carolina’s unequal educational system. In 1949, he initiated legal action against the Durham City School Board. In that case, *Blue v. Durham* (1951), he argued the state’s first successful school equalization case in U. S. Middle District Court. At the same time, Wheeler was also involved in helping black law students gain admission to the University of North Carolina Law School in 1951.²⁴

It was during the 1950s that John Wheeler really gained prominence as a spokesman for black rights across the state, often speaking before the state legislature and other local, state, and national groups in order to force school desegregation. In February 1955, and again in 1956, he went before the state legislature to ask the group not to leave school desegregation solely in the hands of local school boards. That same year, he was admitted to argue before the U. S. Supreme Court in the case *University of North Carolina v. Frasier*

²³“Wheeler: His Commitments Go Far Beyond His Bank,” *The Carolina Financial Times*, February 9, 1976; “Decision Led to Banking, *Durham Morning Herald*, August 2, 1953.

²⁴ “Decision Led to Banking,” *Durham Morning Herald*, August 2, 1953; “Tarheel of the Week – John Wheeler: Working Quietly for the Progress of Blacks,” *The News and Observer*, March 15, 1970; “Durham Banker Dies at Age 70,” *Durham Morning Herald*, July 7, 1978; “Banker John Wheeler Dies,” *Charlotte Observer*, July 7, 1978; “John Hervey Wheeler,” *Greensboro Daily News*, July 10, 1978; “Reflections-John Hervey Wheeler: A Life of Service,” Atlanta University Charter Day Convocation Program, October 13, 1978, 3; “John Hervey Wheeler,” *African American National Biography*, 230.

(1956) where he and other Durham lawyers won a victory over UNC, which resulted in the admittance of the school's first three black undergraduates. By battling the local school board between the 1950s and 1960s, Wheeler continued to press for black educational equality as a lifetime NAACP member, and lawyer for the DCNA and the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund (LDF). In his battle for school desegregation, and the larger goal of integration, Wheeler increasingly attached his education agenda to economics, regularly making the argument that school segregation not only kept blacks from accessing their first-class citizenship rights, but it also kept North Carolina back as a whole economically.²⁵

John Wheeler's prominence, which stemmed from his political and civil rights activism, also took on regional and national significance with his membership on the Commission on Race and Housing from 1956 to 1958 and with the SRC, an organization that continued the work of the liberal, yet paternalistic Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC). The SRC formed during World War II with a 1942 conference in Durham but officially began in 1944. From the SRC's beginnings, Wheeler joined as a board member and vice president with the organization. His leadership with SRC increased significantly during the 1950s as the organization came out against Jim Crow segregation. Moreover, SRC made it a point to examine and study the school desegregation issue once *Brown* was handed down, regularly publicizing national developments and its own findings in its *New South* magazine. It was through SRC that Wheeler also pounded his message that North

²⁵“Tarheel of the Week – John Wheeler: Working Quietly for the Progress of Blacks,” *The News and Observer*, March 15, 1970; “Banker John Wheeler Dies,” *Charlotte Observer*, July 7, 1978; “John Hervey Wheeler,” *Greensboro Daily News*, July 10, 1978; “John Hervey Wheeler,” *African American National Biography*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, eds. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 230.

Carolina and the South's failure to remove segregation from its social fabric would continue to reap devastating consequences on the economy of the state and region. Wheeler held the position of treasurer with the North Carolina Council on Human Relations (NCCHR), the state's SRC branch from 1955 to 1961. He began his tenure on SRC's executive committee in 1958 and became executive committee chairman in 1961. In 1964, Wheeler became SRC's president.²⁶

According to Vernon E. Jordan, executive director of SRC's Voter Education Project (VEP) during the mid-1960s, Wheeler "saw the Southern Regional Council as a forum, an instrument to bring about change in the South." Jordan also reflected on Wheeler's interest in the SRC: "I think in this order he liked the Southern Regional Council, number one it was interracial—number two it was an organization based in research and the research that it did, it dispensed it throughout the South and it helped people think about the issues in ways that they had not thought about issues before." "John Wheeler," continued Jordan, "who was both a lawyer and a banker...understood that if you were going to be an advocate, you had to have information, and your information had to be accurate and right...[and] this advocacy and research by the Council had impact."²⁷

Speaking specifically about the civil rights movement during the 1960s, Jordan opined, "in John Hervey Wheeler's case, he was *in it* and knew all about it, and helped [it] and encouraged [it] and inspired [it]. There are some instances where some black businessmen worried about how it would affect their businesses. But John Hervey Wheeler cared very deeply—he also understood the value of politics, voter registration, and

²⁶"John Hervey Wheeler," *African American National Biography*, 230.

²⁷Interview with Vernon E. Jordan by author, March 9, 2010.

citizenship education and getting out the vote.”²⁸ It was through SRC that Wheeler helped coordinate national voter registration campaigns down to the local level. It was through SRC that he had a hand in lobbying for national public policy changes and appealed for more federal judicial appointments for blacks in the South. It was through SRC, among other groups, that he came in contact with various philanthropic foundations and their officers.

John Wheeler also became a leader in the North Carolina Democratic Party where, in 1964, Governor Sanford appointed him as the state’s first black at-large delegate to the DNC; in 1968, he again went to the national convention as a delegate from the state. Wheeler later became the assistant treasurer and then finance director for the state party as well.²⁹ Perhaps Wheeler’s most important gubernatorial appointment during the Sanford administration was his selection to the board of directors for the North Carolina Fund, an anti-poverty agency established by Sanford in 1963 to tackle the state’s most oppressive problems stemming from poverty—or more accurately—the state’s unjust labor system.³⁰ Although the North Carolina Fund officially ended in 1968, in Wheeler’s last decade of life he continued to strive toward the ultimate goal of erasing poverty and pushed the state’s Democratic Party to acknowledge

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹“Tarheel of the Week – John Wheeler: Working Quietly for the Progress of Blacks,” *The News and Observer*, March 15, 1970; “Civil Rights Leader Dies in Durham,” *Raleigh News and Observer*, July 7, 1978; “Banker John Wheeler Dies,” *Charlotte Observer*, July 7, 1978; “Rights Figure Wheeler dies,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 7, 1978; “J. H. Wheeler, Lawyer, Banker Advised LBJ on Civil Rights Bill,” *Washington Post*, July 8, 1978; “John H. Wheeler, Political Leader,” *New York Times*, July 8, 1978.

³⁰“Banker with a mission: Successful Negro bank president, firm in pushing for both Negro advancement and North Carolina development, wins an influential role throughout South and in the nation,” *Business Week*, May 16, 1964; Robert R. Korstad and James L. Leloudis, “Citizen Soldiers: The North Carolina Volunteers and the War on Poverty,” *Law and Contemporary Problems*, Vol. 62, No. 4, 1999, 178.

its black support base to ensure that blacks received equal opportunities in all facets of American society.³¹

In some ways, Wheeler became a teacher who could articulate the concerns and perspectives of African Americans to whites so he could get them to truly understand the black community from a cultural and social perspective and vice versa. He had a way of connecting with people fundamentally at all levels. In 1963, Governor Sanford had this to say about Wheeler's value as a teacher: " 'the most effective thing we can do for civil rights in North Carolina is simply bring people in, forty at a time, to listen to John H. Wheeler.' " ³² North Carolina Fund executive director George Esser remembered that his perspective on issues of race also increased dramatically while working for the Fund. He especially gained privileged insight from Wheeler as he was "one of his [Esser's] most important teachers." It was "at John Wheeler's feet," explained Esser that "I learned a lot about black people—what they were thinking and what they were doing. I would go down to the bank and John would talk to me for an hour at a time, telling me about experiences he had had. He was a great man. By listening to him, I think I got to understand the black community as well as anybody in the state." Esser pointed out that Wheeler served as "a prime and effective teacher for me."³³ Wheeler used his relationships with people to form strong institutional and organizational networks, which ultimately made it easier for him to facilitate his larger civil rights and economic agenda.

³¹"Tarheel of the Week – John Wheeler: Working Quietly for the Progress of Blacks," *The News and Observer*, March 15, 1970.

³² Memorandum from John T. Abernathy to Terry Scanlon, October 14, 1963, Hugh H. and Mabel Smythe Papers, box 104/6, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 2-3.

³³George H. Esser with Rah Bickley, *My Years at the North Carolina Fund, 1963-1970: an Oral History* (Charleston: Booksurge Publishing, 2007), 4.

During the 1960s, John Wheeler's economic agenda focused on battling to remove employment discrimination. Nowhere was this more evident than his efforts in working with the federal government, and he used a number of presidential appointments in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations from 1961 to 1968 to do so. In his work with the PCEEO Wheeler said he "got to work a great deal with Johnson," and the two became good friends.³⁴ During his tenure on the PCEEO, Wheeler was extremely vocal in expressing his opinions to the mostly white PCEEO. As Wheeler himself pointed out, "I never had hesitancy about expressing strong views, to which Mr. Johnson was usually receptive."³⁵

In an international context, John Wheeler was also a statesman and frequently represented the U. S. abroad. In December 1959, Wheeler became a member of the privately funded United States-South Africa Leader Exchange Program (US-SALEP) and as a fellow, he traveled to apartheid South Africa for one month. The US-SA Leadership Exchange Program was designed to "further the individual's professional growth...to contribute to the intellectual and material well-being of institutions in the host country...and to promote better understanding and cooperation between the peoples of the United States and South Africa."³⁶ The devastating effects of South Africa's segregated system were not lost on Wheeler as he

³⁴"Tarheel of the Week – John Wheeler: Working Quietly for the Progress of Blacks," *The News and Observer*, March 15, 1970; "Durham Banker Dies at Age 70," *Durham Morning Herald*, July 7, 1978; "Civil Rights Leader Dies in Durham," *Raleigh News and Observer*, July 7, 1978; "Rights Figure Wheeler Dies," *Chicago Tribune*, July 7, 1978; "J. H. Wheeler, Lawyer, Banker Advised LBJ on Civil Rights Bill," *Washington Post*, July 8, 1978; "John H. Wheeler, Black banker and Active in N.C. Politics," *The Baltimore Sun*, July 8, 1978; "John H. Wheeler, Political Leader," *New York Times*, July 8, 1978; Walter B. Weare, "John Hervey Wheeler," *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography*; "John Hervey Wheeler," *African American National Biography*, 230.

³⁵"Banker with a mission: Successful Negro bank president, firm in pushing for both Negro advancement and North Carolina development, wins an influential role throughout South and in the nation," *Business Week*, May 16, 1964.

³⁶Frank S. Loescher, "History of the United States-South Africa Leader Exchange Program," June 28, 1966, folder US-SA Leadership Exchange Program 1960-1966 (7 of 20), Wheeler Papers, 1.

outlined them in “Apartheid Implemented by Education in South Africa,” which he published in the *Journal of Negro Education* in 1961; he continued as a board member with the program. In the spring of 1963, Wheeler traveled to the International Trade Fair in Tripoli as the personal representative of former North Carolina governor and then secretary of commerce Luther H. Hodges where he left a favorable impression by articulating the American businessman’s responsibilities abroad. That fall, Wheeler had a rare opportunity to become the U.S. ambassador to Nigeria, a fledgling African country that gained its independence in 1960. Wheeler turned down the assignment because M&F had recently opened a new branch in Charlotte, and he felt the bank needed his special attention for the next few years.³⁷

The ambassador post was extremely important, as John T. Abernathy explained, because “[with] the appointment of a ranking Negro there would be proof positive of the [Kennedy] Administration’s faith in civil rights – and we can’t deny the latent, sometimes active Negro interest in Africa...Embassy Laos thus has an importance to the Negro movement which other posts don’t have.”³⁸ Abernathy did not want to accept Wheeler’s rejection and asked White House aide Terry Scanlon, “Does not that which exists have an obligation to their country as well as to their race?”³⁹ He urged Scanlon to call Wheeler from

³⁷“John H. Wheeler Arrives in Union of South Africa,” *Atlanta World*, December 9, 1959; Memorandum from John T. Abernathy to Terry Scanlon, October 14, 1963, Hugh H. and Mabel Smythe Papers, box 104/6, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 3; “Durham Banker Dies at Age 70,” *Durham Morning Herald*, July 7, 1978.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 1.

³⁹Memorandum from John T. Abernathy to Terry Scanlon, October 14, 1963, Hugh H. and Mabel Smythe Papers, box 104/6, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 1; “ ‘The Battle for Freedom Begins Every Morning: John Hervey Wheeler, 1908-1978,’ *The Whetstone*, third quarter, 1978.

a White House phone to “ask...Wheeler to serve his country in time of need.”⁴⁰ Wheeler’s decision to turn down the appointment may have also been his rejection of political expediency, as Abernathy confirmed, “it has been proposed that an outstanding Negro be sent there, in part for domestic reasons.”⁴¹

Although John Wheeler never physically taught in a classroom, he was nevertheless an educator—a leader in black higher education in the South. He had a keen sense of American history, which always informed his thinking and critical observations. In 1935, Wheeler joined the board of trustees at his alma mater Morehouse College in addition to Atlanta University, which by that time were both affiliated institutions as part of the newly created Atlanta University System. The AU System was designed to relieve some of the financial burdens of the black educational institutions in Atlanta, which also enabled them to consolidate their resources. Atlanta University became the only graduate school and the others—Morehouse, Morris-Brown, Spelman, Clark, and the Interdenominational Theological Seminary—all went on to have undergraduate-only institutions. John Hope was Morehouse’s president during Wheeler’s student days and then became president of the AU System and hand-picked Wheeler for the appointment.⁴² Wheeler’s tenure on the boards at both schools lasted from 1935 until his death in 1978. He had a near-perfect attendance record when it came to at-large and sub-committee meetings. During his service as a board member at Atlanta University in particular, Wheeler remained steadfast in his support of all

⁴⁰ Memorandum from John T. Abernathy to Terry Scanlon, October 14, 1963, Hugh H. and Mabel Smythe Papers, box 104/6, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, 1.

⁴¹Ibid., 2.

⁴²“Reflections-John Hervey Wheeler: A Life of Service,” Atlanta University Charter Day Convocation Program, October 13, 1978, 3.

university initiatives, including the school's academic journals, and he was instrumental in helping to set-up both its library school and majors in education and business administration. Additionally, he raised private funds as well as extended his personal resources to see that both schools grew their campuses by constructing new building facilities.⁴³

John Wheeler's civic leadership in Durham was all-encompassing as well. He joined the board of trustees at Stanford L. Warren Library in 1931.⁴⁴ Wheeler also became the first black member on the Durham Recreation Commission during the 1940s. He became a member of the Durham Redevelopment Commission (DRC) in 1958, where he later served as chairman. The DRC was responsible for overseeing Durham's urban renewal program, which had devastating consequences on Hayti, the city's largest black section. Wheeler also served on the board of directors at Lincoln Hospital. He sang in the men's choir and was the treasurer at Saint Joseph's African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Wheeler was active on the board of directors for the Durham City-County Library as well as the board of trustees and treasurer for the John Avery Boys Club. He was also involved with the United Fund of Durham, the National Council of Churches, and was president of the 4-H Club Foundation of North Carolina, Incorporated based in Greensboro. Additionally, Wheeler also held memberships in several fraternal organizations, including the Beta Phi Chapter of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity and was a 32° Mason and Shriner.⁴⁵ Throughout his life, Wheeler was an

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Recommendation letter from Stanford L. Warren Board of Trustees to the Jury on Citation of Trustees, March 12, 1952, 3; "John Hervey Wheeler," *African American National Biography*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, eds. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 230.

⁴⁵"The Battle for Freedom Begins Every Morning: John Hervey Wheeler, 1908-1978," *The Whetstone*, third quarter, 1978; Recommendation letter from Stanford L. Warren Board of Trustees to the Jury on Citation of Trustees, March 12, 1952, 4; "J. H. Wheeler, Lawyer, Banker Advised LBJ on Civil Rights Bill, *Washington Post*, July 8, 1978.

accomplished musician and tennis player; he was also a humanitarian and philanthropist, always willing to give his time, energy, intellectual gifts, and financial resources.

JOHN HERVEY WHEELER SPEAKS FOR THE NEGRO!

In his 1965 work *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, American poet laureate Robert Penn Warren wrote, “Mr. [John] Wheeler knows the nature of institutions. He knows how the machinery works.”⁴⁶ Warren published *Who Speaks for the Negro?* after recording extensive interviews in 1964 with a cross-section of forty-three African American civil rights leaders, Wheeler among them.⁴⁷ The conversations were what Warren described as his attempt to “find out something, first hand, about the people, some of them anyway, who are making the Negro Revolution what it is—one of the dramatic events of the American story.”⁴⁸ In *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, Warren primarily allowed the interviews to drive his narrative, while also providing context along with his own impressions of the interviewees and the general tone during his conversations with them.

⁴⁶Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?* (New York: Random House, 1965), 301.

⁴⁷Most of these oral interviews can be found digitally accessed online at: <http://libguides.uky.edu/content.php?pid=165117&sid=1486057>, the Robert Penn Warren Civil Rights Oral History Project, #OHRPWCR, in the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky; interviews are also associated with the Robert Penn Warren Papers, 1916-1967, #78M1, also at the University of Kentucky; All of these oral interviews can also be digitally accessed online at “Robert Penn Warren’s *Who Speaks for the Negro?*: an Archival Collection” at: <http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/>; A complete list of other interviewees include: Richard Gunn, Milton A. Galamison, Martin Luther King, Jr., James M. Lawson, Malcolm X, William Stuart Nelson, James Baldwin, Carroll G. Barber, Ezell A. Blair, Jean Wheeler, Stokely Carmichael, Lucy Thorton, Joe Carter, James Forman, James L. Farmer, Jr., Kenneth Bancroft Clark, Vernon E. Jordan, Adam Clayton Powell, William Hastie, Carl T. Rowan, Bayard Rustin, Kelly Smith, William Stringfellow, Ruth Turner, Wyatt Walker, Roy Wilkins, Claire Harvey, Robert Collins, Lolis Elie, Nils Douglas, Felton G. Clark, Richard Murphy, Gilbert Moses, Aaron Henry, Robert Parris Moses, Toogaloo Students, Ralph Ellison, Stephen Wright, Avon Williams, Andrew Young, Stokely Carmichael [Kwame Toure], Whitney Young, Wiley A. Branton, Montgomery King, Jackson College Students, Neil Goldschmidt, and Charles Evers.

⁴⁸ Robert Penn Warren, *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, Forward, 2.

In his section on Wheeler, included in chapter four, “Leadership from the Periphery,” Warren concluded:

John Hervey Wheeler trusts in the reordering of society – by whacking away at the periphery – because he believes in the possibilities of the society. He understands institutions, and because he understands them he is a ‘success.’ As a success he understands the long process of change, the fact that the success of a Negro insurance company draws white insurance companies to compete for the Negro policy and therefore affects the structure of society. The fact that a Negro bank is there to make loans means that white banks will liberalize their policy of loans to Negroes. He sees the precise limits of the campaign for civil rights, but also the precise gains...He understands institutions, and because he understands them he knows how to whack away at them. Success is one of the things you whack with.⁴⁹

Warren’s assessment was correct and in-line with how Wheeler viewed his individual role and responsibility in American society. He made the most out of various institutional resources in order to break down what he described as those “artificial barriers which [kept] [blacks] away from the total market.”⁵⁰ This is what Wheeler’s life reveals about the broader themes of the civil rights movement and why his story is so compelling.

The actual exchange between Warren and Wheeler, conducted in June 1964, is even more revealing. Indeed, one is struck by how Wheeler understood and defined civil rights for himself, which provides the framework for understanding how and why he confronted racial injustice in the way that he did. As Wheeler explained to Warren:

Well, we’ve got a long way to go before a Negro boy or girl or man or woman has the same open invitation to industry and to industrial employment or to training or to promotion advantages that a white person would have. This is what integration

⁴⁹Ibid., 304.

⁵⁰Interview with John Hervey Wheeler by Robert Penn Warren, June 30, 1964, original interview transcript can be accessed online at “Robert Penn Warren’s *Who Speaks for the Negro?*: an Archival Collection,” http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/sites/default/files/RPW_reel_3.T.H.%20Wheeler.pgs_968-1001.doc.pdf, 2; audio version also available through “Robert Penn Warren’s *Who Speaks for the Negro?*: an Archival Collection,” <http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/interview/john-hervey-wheeler>.

would mean to me, that the freedom of movement in the society would be complete. We've been whacking away at the periphery of it.⁵¹

Wheeler continued:

We've gotten the travel business straightened out some time ago, so far as public carriers are concerned, and the dining cars and the sleeping cars and now the hotels and restaurants. This establishes the physical movement. But there's also got to be a freedom of movement in all facets of the society. This means if a man is good enough he goes right on to the top.⁵²

John Wheeler connected blacks' battle for civil rights to obtaining "freedom of movement," or a fully integrated society. He championed true integration as the most effective way to accomplish this ultimate objective. He explained that until blacks received freedom of movement in all areas of American society—in a physical and practical sense—then they had no real freedom. In other words, "freedom of movement," or a fully integrated society could only be achieved if implemented in a way that was both beneficial and fair to African Americans and black institutions in general. On this point, Wheeler disagreed with the assertion, from both blacks and whites, that black institutions wanted to perpetuate segregation because it "has meant a protective market."⁵³ In this way, Wheeler was also against tokenism to the extent that once an African American gained an inside position with a white institution, they had to have their "thinking straight."⁵⁴ This meant "somebody has got to get in and see how it's done so you can't give them the runaround any more... This is not a

⁵¹Ibid., 19.

⁵²Interview with John Hervey Wheeler by Robert Penn Warren, June 30, 1964, original interview transcript can be accessed online at "Robert Penn Warren's *Who Speaks for the Negro?:* an Archival Collection," http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/sites/default/files/RPW.reel_3.T.H.%20Wheeler.pgs_.968-1001.doc.pdf, 19-20; audio version also available through "Robert Penn Warren's *Who Speaks for the Negro?:* an Archival Collection," <http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/interview/john-hervey-wheeler>.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid., 18.

selfish reason...and once he gets in he's got to have the guts to make the demands and say to the other fellows, now come on, I'll support you because I know what they're doing in terms of qualifications of other people who are no better than you are. If he's that kind of man, all right. If he's going to get in and thumb his nose at the rest, I wouldn't think well of him."⁵⁵

John Hervey Wheeler's vision for American society and New South prosperity was quite clear, and as he told a reporter in 1953, "I started off life even."⁵⁶ In his later years, Wheeler outlined what he had to do because of this: "I just try to work for other people. That's been my major effort."⁵⁷ He fought for fairness on behalf of all Americans. On a fundamental level, Wheeler's faith in American democracy fueled his desire for all Americans to share in this ideal, as he "assumed all along that all of the people are alike essentially. There's no basic difference between people because of race. If you can speak the same language you then are completely on the same base."⁵⁸ Wheeler worked on behalf of people and institutions, and he led by example, putting the good of the public above his own self interests. His permanent motto was "The Battle for Freedom Begins Every Morning," which meant that fighting against racial injustice was a difficult and continuous struggle that was, in many ways, never finished. It implies that every aspect of the black freedom movement was part of a larger goal that could not be won overnight. That "long process of change" as Robert Penn Warren described it, or "whacking away at the periphery" as

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶"Decision Led to Banking," *Durham Morning Herald*, August 2, 1953.

⁵⁷"Tarheel of the Week – John Wheeler: Working Quietly for the Progress of Blacks," *The News and Observer*, March 15, 1970; "Civil Rights Leader Dies in Durham," *Raleigh News and Observer*, July 7, 1978.

⁵⁸Ibid.

Wheeler explained, or “Long Civil Rights Movement” as historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall argues, called for a serious, *lifelong*, commitment.⁵⁹

This life story is first and foremost a public biography of a figure whose contributions and accomplishments were so broad and immense that they far exceed the scope of these pages. As such, it does not seek, nor does it attempt, to tell the entire life story of an individual engaged in so many activities. While this biographical narrative is particularly concerned with Wheeler’s civil rights activism between the 1940s and 1960s, his entire career spanned from the 1930s through the 1970s. The story’s major thrust begins in the 1930s, builds momentum during the 1940s, and reaches high impact during the 1950s and 1960s when Wheeler’s influence across the country would have been at its peak. On that same note, while it is not my objective to provide insight into every avenue of Wheeler’s life interests, at various moments I will touch on significant aspects of his personal and private life to give the reader a more complete depiction of the man. While there is much interest in all facets of Wheeler’s activities, in many instances details about other aspects of his life and

⁵⁹ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past” *The Journal of American History* Vol. 91, Issue 4, <http://www.historycooperative.org/cgi-bin/printpage.cgi>; In her essay, Hall argues that the “truer story—the story of a ‘long civil rights movement’ [is one that] took root in the liberal and radical milieu of the late 1930s, was intimately tied to the ‘rise and fall of the New Deal Order,’ accelerated during World War II, stretched far beyond the South, was continuously and ferociously contested, and in the 1960s and 1970s inspired a ‘movement of movements’ that ‘def[ies] any narrative of collapse.’ ”(p. 2) Hall also contends that a central element in exploring a “Long Civil Rights Movement,” depends heavily on understanding the movement’s continuous emphasis on economic inequality; Dennis C. Dickerson, *Militant Mediator: Whitney M. Young, Jr.* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1998), 1-6. Dickerson provides a useful framework for understanding the unique position that some black leaders had during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. He explains that the mediating or middle ground role played by individuals such as Whitney Young proved significant in helping whites and blacks understand each other’s perspective. For Young that role often involved being a “militant mediator” and courting white institutions for their financial support of the National Urban League. While John Wheeler played a similar role as Young, he did not have the same obligations and dependence on white philanthropic foundations and government funded agencies in the same way as Young. Wheeler did seek to utilize those resources, but operated on his own terms; Raymond Gavins, *The Perils and Prospects of Southern Black Leadership: Gordon Blaine Hancock, 1884-1970* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1977), ix. Through the life of Gordon Hancock, Gavins explains the unique position of

in some cases his local community leadership, which was grounded in Durham will be missing from these pages as well.⁶⁰

This dissertation is arranged both chronologically and thematically in seven chapters. Chapter one explores John Wheeler's family background in the decades after emancipation and particularly highlights his parents' educational accomplishments, which put them on the path to middle class respectability in the early part of the twentieth century. It also underscores how the Wheeler family's middle class status and economic independence provided John Hervey and his siblings with a level of privilege most black Americans did not enjoy. Chapter two explores Wheeler's move to Durham, North Carolina after college and outlines the establishment and growth of the black Mechanics and Farmers Bank between 1908 and 1929. The chapter is also situated within the context of the Great Depression and points to how Durham's black businessmen served as stalwart community leaders and the ways in which the bank and community provided a training-ground for Wheeler's development as a black business activist. I argue that this was especially true after 1935 with the formation of the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs, an organization that provided the city's black community with an outlet to agitate more assertively and collectively for full citizenship.

black moderate leaders in the South, especially during and post-World War II. He maintains that these leaders forged a new path for race relations, especially between black moderates and white liberals in the South. Gavins maintains that black moderates in the generations before the direct action phase of the civil rights movement laid the groundwork for black leaders such as John Wheeler who were not conservative or accommodating to whites, but were willing to work within the white power-structure and at the same time push a more aggressive agenda than did their predecessors; See also Henry L. Suggs, *P. B. Young Newspaperman: Race, Politics, and Journalism in the New South* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988), ix-x.

⁶⁰Ibid.

Chapter three explores the pivotal impact that World War II had on African Americans living in Durham and throughout North Carolina and the South. It argues that Wheeler's activism both during and after the war emphasized his belief in educational equality as the most essential ingredient toward the expansion of economic opportunities for black Americans. It was at the end of World War II when he first articulated his vision of New South prosperity and saw the period as a critical juncture for states like North Carolina and the South as a whole to remove the problem of racial segregation from their social fabric. This would then allow black Americans to take part in the benefits of full citizenship and postwar prosperity so that they could help buildup their beloved Southland from a position of economic strength. The chapter also shows how Wheeler embraced legal tactics to challenge Durham's unjust educational system, which had effectively stifled black school children from learning the skills needed to obtain better employment opportunities once they graduated. Chapter four explores the efforts of Wheeler and other African Americans in seeking immediate school desegregation directly following the *Brown* decision. I argue that while white local and state leaders devised creative laws to forestall desegregation, from the moment *Brown* was handed down black leaders immediately worked toward its compliance and took a variety of proactive measures to publicize their desires for implementation. In doing so, Wheeler became a leading critic of the laws enacted in *Brown's* aftermath and likened those measures to economic suicide.

Chapter five explores Wheeler's activism during the direct action phase of the civil rights movement. It pushes us to consider how a black businessman in John Wheeler's position could serve not as an obstacle to, but a steadfast advocate of, non-violent direct action during the 1960s. I argue that despite the emergence of student-centered leadership

with the sit-in movement in 1960, Wheeler did not take a sidelines position. Instead, he continued to operate behind-the-scenes while also publicly and privately lending his support to student activism. In fact, Wheeler had already accepted direct action as a strategy and as a way to compel inflexible white leaders at the local and state level to address black grievances in earnest. Chapter six explores Wheeler's civil rights leadership and impact on the movement beyond Durham and the state of North Carolina. During these years, he utilized his increasing political influence regionally and nationally to directly confront public policies related to discrimination in employment and voting rights for African Americans. Not only that, but Wheeler vigorously championed the inclusion of blacks in high-level decision-making positions and condemned government agencies for their own failures in implementing new employment policies as mandated by the federal government.

Chapter seven, the dissertation's final piece, explores and highlights the limitations of black leadership during the 1960s. It focuses on urban renewal and poverty in North Carolina in the context of LBJ's Great Society. I seek to offer a counter narrative by arguing that despite the unfortunate realities of urban renewal in places like Durham, Wheeler's support for the federally-funded redevelopment program fit within his own framework of how best to implement the gains already being won by the civil rights movement. Wheeler and other leaders were hopeful that urban renewal would ultimately guarantee an open society unhampered by racial and economic inequality where African Americans could finally enjoy American democracy.

CHAPTER 1

“I STARTED OFF LIFE EVEN”: FAMILY, MOREHOUSE COLLEGE, AND MIDDLE-CLASS RESPECTABILITY, 1865-1929

...*Trust God*—trust him for success, for support, for life. If in this way you will trust God, he by his word, by his Spirit and by his providence, will lead you into the highest usefulness of which, in your day and generation, you are capable.⁶¹

—John G. Fee, 1891

John *Hervey* Wheeler was born on New Year's Day 1908 to Margaret Hervey and John *Leonidas* Wheeler on the campus of Kittrell College in rural Vance County, North Carolina. At the time, John Hervey's father was in his fourth year as president of the small African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church school founded in 1886. In addition to their first child, 1908 in general represented new beginnings and transition for the Wheelers. In the previous decade, they made their home in Kittrell—about 37 miles north of Raleigh. By that summer, the family left for Durham, an industrial New South city with a considerable African American community, where John Leonidas had a new job in a new profession altogether. In only a generation removed from slavery, through a vision of racial uplift, self-help, and self improvement, the Wheelers managed to achieve blacks' hopes and aspirations for freedom rooted in educational attainment. In the forty-three year period after black emancipation in 1865, that postwar vision was also guided by principles of responsibility and respectability.

⁶¹John G. Fee, *Autobiography of John G. Fee* (Chicago: National Christian Association, 1891), 5.

UP FROM KENTUCKY

The Wheelers' generational story begins with John Hervey's parents, who came from Nicholasville, Kentucky located in the central part of the state. John Leonidas was born to freedom's first generation on July 8, 1869, only a few years after the Civil War. John Hervey's paternal grandmother Pheobe Wheeler raised John Leonidas on her own; she and her parents Lucius and Winnie Wheeler had been former slaves in Jessamine County. During the Civil War, Camp Nelson—located a few miles from Nicholasville—became a Union-controlled military camp for newly recruited black soldiers. It soon became a safe haven for their families and other refugees who came to escape slavery.⁶² John Hervey's father had mixed ancestry, reportedly the result of an intimate relationship between his mother and her former slave owner. Although Wheeler never knew his paternal grandfather, a family narrative handed down to him explained that his grandfather was a white plantation owner with the surname Willis. The story also held that his grandfather ran a bank in Nicholasville, a point that parallels John Hervey's later career as a banker. The Willis family actually owned John Hervey's relatives during slavery, but upon emancipation all of the slaves on the plantation selected the surname Wheeler; changing their names became the first act ex-slaves performed to declare their freedom.⁶³

If the family story passed down to John Hervey is true, then his paternal grandfather was a white man named John A. Willis. Willis was originally from Green County, Kentucky

⁶²Marion B. Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky: From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891, Vol. 1* (Kentucky Historical Society, 1992), 154-163.

⁶³Obituary of John Hervey Wheeler, John Hervey Wheeler Vertical File, Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center, Atlanta, Georgia; A. B. Caldwell, ed., *History of American Negroes and His Institutions, Georgia Edition* (A. B. Caldwell Publishing Company, 1917), 229-231; John Hervey Wheeler interview by August Meier, 1960, Durham, NC, notes, box 139, August Meier Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 2; Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), chapter 6.

and moved to Nicholasville with his father, W. T. Willis in 1844. Once in Nicholasville, John became a teacher in the Jessamine County schools and was later an assistant at Bethel Academy. The Willis family became prominent in Jessamine County and both men served in the Second Kentucky Regiment during the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), where W. T. Willis died during the Battle of Buena Vista in 1847.⁶⁴ John Willis left his teaching position to become the master commissioner for the Jessamine Circuit Court where he served for the next sixteen years. After the Civil War, Willis won election to the Jessamine County clerk's post and served two terms. By 1870, Willis and his wife Margaret had a daughter named Lucy, and about \$15, 300.00 in personal property and real estate. In 1871, Willis left the county clerk's position and founded the First National Bank of Nicholasville. Between 1871 and 1881, he worked as the bank's cashier and then president until 1896.⁶⁵

John Hervey's mother, Margaret Hervey, was also born to freedom's first generation on April 12, 1877, at the end of the Reconstruction period. Margaret came from a less ambiguous family situation. Her immediate family included seven children with ties to an extended family across the Mid-West in states such as Indiana and Ohio. According to John Hervey, his maternal grandparents John and Jennie Hervey—both slaves—may have become freed property owners before the Civil War. While no documented evidence is available to prove the latter claim, Wheeler believed it did explain why his maternal grandmother owned about 150 acres of land used to grow tobacco and corn at a time when most blacks lacked

⁶⁴ Bennett H. Young, *A History of Jessamine County, Kentucky From its Earliest Settlement to 1898* (Louisville, KY: Courier-Journal Job Printing Co., 1898), 234-235.

⁶⁵U. S. Census, 1860; U. S. Census 1870; Bennett H. Young, *A History of Jessamine County, Kentucky From its Earliest Settlement to 1898*, 252-253.

such independence.⁶⁶ John Leonidas and Margaret Hervey were born into the immediate postwar generation reared in certain hopes and expectations of freedom during an adjustment period when blacks asserted their claims to full citizenship for the first time.

The Civil War emancipated black Americans in 1865, at which point they continued to articulate and define their own aspirations and expectations for freedom as American citizens. The postwar hopes that former slaves in Kentucky, as elsewhere, had for themselves and their children centered on education, land ownership, political rights, and control over their own labor. Their eagerness to obtain basic education was something they expressed before and during the war.⁶⁷ African Americans living in Kentucky felt so strongly about their educational rights that they organized collectively, taking it upon themselves to establish their own private schools to compliment the limited resources from the state legislature between 1865 and 1874.⁶⁸ The Kentucky freedmen also obtained assistance from the newly created Freedmen's Bureau along with white religious and benevolent associations so they could achieve educations for their children.⁶⁹ Black Kentuckians sacrificed tremendously in the spirit of uplift, self-help, and self-reliance, to provide the necessary financial support to their schools. Aside from their counterparts in

⁶⁶"Biographical Sketch of Margaret Hervey Wheeler," 1962 Personal Correspondence Folder #2, Wheeler Papers.; Obituary of Margaret Hervey Wheeler, January 2, 1976, William Jesse Kennedy, Jr. Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; "St. Joseph's Honors Mrs. Wheeler as Its 'Mother of the Year,'" *Carolina Times*, May 19, 1962; John Hervey Wheeler, Interview by August Meier.

⁶⁷Victor B. Howard, *Black Liberation in Kentucky: Emancipation and Freedom, 1862-1884* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), 162; Marion B. Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky: From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891, Vol. 1* (Kentucky Historical Society, 1992), 229.

⁶⁸Victory B. Howard, *Black Liberation in Kentucky*, 167; James C. Klotter and Freda C. Klotter, *A Concise History of Kentucky* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 120.

⁶⁹Marion B. Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 230.

Louisiana, black Kentuckians gave more to support education than did other blacks anywhere in the ex-Confederate states.⁷⁰

Despite their best efforts, black Kentuckians had limited success because of harsh resistance from whites. Political opposition, in particular, aimed at black education in Kentucky served as an obstacle in the years directly following emancipation. It was not until February 23, 1874, that the Kentucky state legislature finally passed a measure to establish a public school system for blacks. Nevertheless, the new law unfairly taxed black Kentuckians and the state spent less money on black education; it also called for segregated black and white schools. Moreover, the law essentially withheld control over black education from African American leaders, leaving white administrators in charge of determining the direction that black education would take in the state.⁷¹

The fate that awaited John Leonidas served as an obvious contrast to that of his wealthy white father, and the youngster would have otherwise benefited from that privilege had race been removed as a determining factor. Despite the challenges of not having his father around, John Leonidas nevertheless had the opportunity to attend public school in Kentucky. His former slave mother was more than likely illiterate herself, yet the fact that she “put [her son] to school at Nicholasville when he was of school age,” demonstrates her own ambition to see that her son received a quality education, and perhaps a better life than what she and her parents knew. John Leonidas did not disappoint as he showed considerable promise, “prov[ing] to be an apt student” early on. “Such was his progress” as a student that

⁷⁰Ibid., 234.

⁷¹Victory B. Howard, *Black Liberation in Kentucky*, 170; Marion B. Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 255.

“even from the public school he was able to take up the work of teaching,” which probably helped nurture in him a sense of responsibility to community.⁷²

The public school system for freed people in Kentucky ensured that black children received instruction primarily from African American teachers. The black schoolteachers had to pass examinations—for certification purposes—to test their math, reading, spelling, and writing skills.⁷³ When John Leonidas began teaching in Kentucky’s public schools in the late 1880s, most black teachers held first-, second-, and third-class teaching certificates. Because of his young age, John Leonidas was probably among the only thirteen percent of black school teachers in Kentucky that had no teaching experience at all prior to being hired.⁷⁴ The monthly salaries for Kentucky’s black teachers during the 1880s ranged from thirty-seven to forty-seven dollars; those who taught at the high school level or in urban areas made more.⁷⁵ John Leonidas’ thirst for education did not end once he finished public school in Kentucky; teaching helped put him closer to reaching his own aspirations and expectations for freedom. Through determination and the financial sacrifices John Leonidas made while teaching, he saved up enough money to move to Ohio in 1889 with plans to attend Wilberforce University, which he did in 1890.⁷⁶

⁷²A. B. Caldwell, ed., *History of American Negroes and His Institutions, Georgia Edition* (A. B. Caldwell Publishing Company, 1917), 229-231.

⁷³Marion B. Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 255.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 257.

⁷⁵Marion B. Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 258.

⁷⁶ A. B. Caldwell, ed., *History of American Negroes and His Institutions, Georgia Edition*, 229, 231; M. S. Stuart, *An Economic Detour: A History of Insurance in the Lives of American Negroes* (New York : W. Malliet and Co., 1940).

According to her brief biographical sketch, Margaret Hervey attended Ariel Normal School, founded by white abolitionist John G. Fee—one of the foremost advocates of black education in Kentucky.⁷⁷ In 1864, under the auspices of the American Missionary Association, John Fee set-up a church and school for black Union soldiers and their families at Camp Nelson. Afterwards, Fee went on to organize black educational groups in other areas nearby.⁷⁸ Most notably, he re-opened Berea College as an integrated institution after the war. Fee's Camp Nelson School briefly operated during the war with limited government assistance, but it eventually disbanded. Fee's son Howard along with Gabriel Burdett and Abisha Scofield reopened the Camp Nelson School, with funds from the Freedman's Bureau and changed its name to Ariel Academy. It operated in earnest until the state established its own public schools for blacks.⁷⁹ Between 1875 and 1882, Gabriel Burdett's daughter ran a public school at Camp Nelson and then reopened Ariel Normal School, running it until 1900.⁸⁰ Attending Ariel Normal meant something special to Margaret Hervey; even in her old age, it was important to her that people knew she went to a school founded on the principles of racial equality and integration.

As the direct beneficiaries of black Kentuckians' persistent quest for increased educational opportunities, John Leonidas and Margaret Hervey had every reason to be optimistic and hopeful about their futures. As the "future of the race," they joined a rising

⁷⁷"Biographical Sketch of Margaret Hervey Wheeler," John Hervey Wheeler, 1962 Personal Correspondence Folder #2, Wheeler Papers, 1; "St. Joseph's Honors Mrs. Wheeler as Its 'Mother of the Year,'" *Carolina Times*, May 19, 1962; Victory B. Howard, *Black Liberation in Kentucky*, 161.

⁷⁸John G. Fee, *Autobiography of John G. Fee*, 175-183; Victory B. Howard, *Black Liberation in Kentucky*, 161.

⁷⁹Marion B. Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 231, 250.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 266.

postwar generation destined to “be helped to places of usefulness and respectability.” They took advantage of additional opportunities and continued their educational pursuits at Wilberforce University in Xenia, Ohio in the last decade of the nineteenth century. In college, John Leonidas demonstrated a strong work ethic, which proved important to racial uplift. While at Wilberforce, he paid his way through school by working in hotels and as a cook during the summers. In addition to laboring hard to earn enough to pay for his college tuition, John Leonidas worked equally as hard in the classroom. In the year after he enrolled at Wilberforce University, he received a scholarship, which “was of great assistance to him” in meeting his college expenses and academic expectations.⁸¹

WILBERFORCE UNIVERSITY, 1890s

By the time John Leonidas and Margaret Hervey left Kentucky and made their way to Ohio to enroll in Wilberforce University, the school was already the embodiment of black aspirations during freedom. The school represented everything African Americans could and did accomplish through self-help. It had a special place because it gave young blacks an opportunity to succeed in their strivings. Founded in 1856, Wilberforce during the 1890s stood out as an important black-owned educational institution ran by the AME Church, the largest black Christian denomination in the country. The AME Church also received financial support from the state for a “Combined Normal and Industrial Department at Wilberforce” that began in 1887. As the denomination’s flagship institution, Wilberforce became the premier hub when it came to Christian liberal arts education for blacks in the

⁸¹ A. B. Caldwell, ed., *History of American Negroes and His Institutions, Georgia Edition*, 229, 231.

United States. The white Methodist Episcopal Church in Ohio opened Wilberforce before the Civil War because it recognized a need to educate the state's free black population. In Wilberforce's early years, its student-body included the black offspring of many white southern slave owners.⁸²

The Civil War made it difficult for the Methodist Church to maintain Wilberforce's financial solvency, so its leaders decided to close the school in 1863. At that point Bishop Daniel Payne of the AME Church worked out a deal to purchase Wilberforce for \$10,000. Since the moment the AME Church acquired the school, Bishop Payne envisioned the institution as a place for preparing and training the postwar generation of African Americans for professional careers in teaching or the ministry. As historian Kevin Gaines has shown, educational attainment became an important tenet of racial uplift ideology after emancipation because black leaders "regarded education as crucial to group advancement."⁸³ The teachers and ministers educated at Wilberforce then had an assignment to go out into their respective communities, grounded in notions of responsibility and respectability, with the purpose to help "elevate" the race.⁸⁴ Bishop Payne had a strong desire to see that Wilberforce students

⁸² Horace Talbert, *The Sons of Allen: Together with a Sketch of the Rise and Progress of Wilberforce University, Wilberforce Ohio* (Xenia, OH: Aldine Press, 1906); William A. Joiner, *A Half Century of Freedom of the Negro in Ohio* (Xenia, O., Smith Adv. Co., 1915); Frederick A. McGinnis, *A History and an Interpretation of Wilberforce University* (Wilberforce: The Brown Publishing Co., 1941); David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993); W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁸³ Kevin Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 21, chapter 1.

⁸⁴ David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), 151-152; W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 116; Frederick A. McGinnis, *A History and an Interpretation of Wilberforce University* (Wilberforce: The Brown Publishing Co., 1941), 35, 41, 46-47, 57.

received a thorough Christian education, with particular emphasis on culture and sound foundational training in manhood and womanhood.⁸⁵ By no means alone in its mission to educate and uplift blacks, Wilberforce emerged alongside an influx of black institutions established in the aftermath of the Civil War. These included private colleges owned by both black and white religious denominations. At the turn-of-the-century, the AME Church controlled several black colleges including Edward Waters College (Florida), Kittrell College (North Carolina), Allen University (South Carolina), and Morris Brown College (Georgia).⁸⁶

At Wilberforce, John Leonidas and Margaret Hervey learned Christian principles that helped reinforce a culture of responsibility and respectability—the basis of education at Wilberforce. The school placed emphasis on the need for students to seriously understand the extent to which they represented their race in everything they did, whether intended or not because it reflected how whites viewed blacks. Wilberforce students also learned piety as virtually everything at the school centered on maintaining a walk with God. The students' strict daily regimen, which left little room for extra-curricular activities, included chapel services in-between classes and study-hours. The university suspended classes throughout the academic year so students and faculty could attend religious revivals, which according to one author were “ ‘deemed all important to their usefulness in life.’ ”⁸⁷

⁸⁵Horace Talbert, *The Sons of Allen*; William A. Joiner, *A Half Century of Freedom of the Negro in Ohio*; Frederick A. McGinnis, *A History and an Interpretation of Wilberforce University*, 35, 41, 46-47, 57; David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919*, 151-152; W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century*, 116; William Sanders Scarborough, *The Autobiography of William Sanders Scarborough*; Albert George Miller, *Elevating the Race: Theophilus G. Stewart*; Theophilus G. Stewart, *Fifty Years in the Gospel Ministry*; G. F. Richings, *Evidence of Progress Among Colored People*.

⁸⁶G. F. Richings, *Evidence of Progress Among Colored People*, 118-143; James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 239-240.

⁸⁷Frederick A. McGinnis, *A History and an Interpretation of Wilberforce University*, 158.

The university constantly drilled students in morality and clean living, which meant adherence to strict demands that counseled temperance in living. The lessons of responsibility and respectability that students learned centered on the formation of good character. The demands “exact[ed] a uniform regard for good order, studious habits, and attention to the prescribed routine of duty.”⁸⁸ Wilberforce had little tolerance for students caught with “intoxicants” such as alcohol and tobacco. The university also frowned-upon “firearms, games of chance, profanity, [and] obscenit[ies].”⁸⁹ Moreover, “immoral books or papers were forbidden, and students were punished for visiting each other’s rooms during the study hours or for [their] absence from the premises without permission.”⁹⁰ The university also went to great lengths to ensure students had no “clandestine associations,” as men and women had to use separate walkways going to and from class.⁹¹ In some instances, though, the “original sin would frequently manifest itself among the students, but woe to the students so found guilty.”⁹² Students caught having sex had to go before the university president, who used words often described as “ ‘coals of fire’ ” and deemed the students “lost souls doomed to eternal damnation,” before expelling them from school indefinitely.⁹³ In addition to rules against sexual promiscuity, other activities such as “card playing [were] regarded as the work of the devil,” and forbidden from dormitories as well. Students had the responsibility to

⁸⁸ Frederick A. McGinnis, *A History and an Interpretation of Wilberforce University*, 161.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

maintain their living spaces by “Making up beds, carrying in coal and water, and other activities incident to hygienic living.”⁹⁴

The Wilberforce faculty also instilled in their students Christian principles of manhood and refined womanhood. In this way, Wilberforce resembled most black Christian institutions of higher education. The schools reinforced the idea that tools learned at their institutions would lead to self-reliance and ultimately community leadership. Margaret Hervey’s time spent at Wilberforce would have resembled the experiences of other black women attending colleges and universities at the turn-of-the-century. As historian Stephanie Shaw explained, colleges that trained black women, much like Wilberforce, “were designed to cultivate or further develop a Christian (communal) spirit in the students; to instill leadership qualities in them; and to prepare them to use their training—moral, mental, and manual—to go into any community and establish themselves as useful members.”⁹⁵ The educational “process” at these schools “prepared young black women for public work and reinforced family and community interests related to self-development and social responsibility.”⁹⁶ As an independent black-owned institution, Wilberforce would have especially represented these ideals. In what she defined as “socially responsible individualism,” Shaw maintained “many African Americans believed that the most able to pursue formal schooling had to be prepared in the process to help those who were less able.”⁹⁷ At Wilberforce, Margaret Hervey’s training would have primarily centered on the

⁹⁴Ibid., 159-160.

⁹⁵Stephanie Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and to Do: Black Professional Women Workers During the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 69.

⁹⁶Ibid.

⁹⁷Ibid., 77.

“domestic arts,” as this training “was a very important part of the formal schooling the women undertook even at the liberal arts colleges and universities.”⁹⁸

The Christian liberal arts education received at Wilberforce also included disciplines such as the classics, where John Leonidas received his academic training, specializing in Latin and Greek. Since John Leonidas stayed at Wilberforce for six years, he probably had to take preparatory courses before beginning the college curriculum, an added layer that would have tested his fortitude and will. The classic’s department claimed faculty such as William Sanders Scarborough, a reputable classics scholar whose 1881 work *First Lessons in Greek* became a standard text in the field. In 1894, scholar William Edward Burghardt Du Bois joined the classics department. As the first African American to receive a Ph.D. degree from Harvard University, Dubois would have also provided Wilberforce students with an ideal example of how far they could go in life.⁹⁹ John Leonidas and other students in the classics department held very clear ideas about their educational aspirations and took offense when the university failed to meet those expectations. In 1894 for example, the students lodged several complaints against their new literature professor Ben Arnett, Jr. for his “incompetency.” The students, alongside faculty members such as Du Bois, protested to get the administration to fire Arnett, a concession they eventually won after the board appointed a committee to investigate their complaints.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹A. B. Caldwell, ed., *History of American Negroes and His Institutions, Georgia Edition*, 229-230; W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 117-118; Frederick A. McGinnis, *A History and an Interpretation of Wilberforce University*, 61; 68-69; 145; David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, 153.

¹⁰⁰David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois*, 153.

In 1897, John Leonidas graduated from Wilberforce “at the head of a class of twenty-eight” students with an A. B. degree. The successful completion of his college education was a major accomplishment and evidence of his hard work, determination, and sacrifice. In 1898, John Leonidas responded to a personal invitation to teach from Charles H. Johnson—his former Wilberforce classmate—and now a math and drawing instructor at Kittrell Institute. John Leonidas made his move to the South to teach Latin and Greek courses and to chair the new classics department at Kittrell.¹⁰¹

KITTRELL COLLEGE, 1898-1908

The AME Church’s Kittrell College—a sibling institution to Wilberforce—also represented blacks’ hopes during freedom. The biggest difference was that Kittrell operated in the South under more stringent and intimidating circumstances. The former Johnson School of Raleigh became Kittrell Normal and Industrial Institute in 1886. Miss Louise Door, a white northern missionary opened the school as a bible training class for blacks several years earlier. The idea to start Kittrell came from a group of Dorr’s students who “became enthusiastic over the studies and started to talk of better facilities. The matter was taken to the North Carolina Conference of the AME Church, and at once assumed definite shape, resulting in the proposition to establish a school at Kittrell, N. C.”¹⁰² Located in North Carolina’s Piedmont Region, the sixty acre Kittrell property stood “on the Raleigh and

¹⁰¹A. B. Caldwell, ed., *History of American Negroes and His Institutions, Georgia Edition*, 231; Letter from C. H. Johnson (Kittrell Inst.) to Miss E. L. Jackson (Wilberforce College,) December 2, 1897, J. L. Wheeler Scrapbook, Scrapbook and Photo Album Box, Wheeler Papers.

¹⁰²“About our School,” *The Christian Recorder*, August 19, 1886; Kittrell College Catalogue, 1918-1919, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, 5-6.

Gaston Railroad, 37 miles north of Raleigh and 8 miles South of Henderson.”¹⁰³

Kittrell had a unique and intriguing history. At one point, the Kittrell grounds operated as the Kittrell Springs Hotel, a summer vacationing spot for wealthy white families who “came in their private carriages with their [slave] servants, seeking amusement and recreation.”¹⁰⁴ During the Civil War, the Confederate Army took over Kittrell Springs and converted it into its General Hospital Number One to treat its sick and wounded soldiers. After the war, Kittrell Springs Hotel briefly reopened as a college for white women. The hotel reopened in 1872, but “the two largest buildings and two of the outhouses” mysteriously burned to the ground in December 1885, just four days before the AME Church’s North Carolina Conference officially acquired the site.¹⁰⁵ The exact details are not entirely clear, but the Conference’s Bishop R. W. E. Leake from Raleigh handled the land purchase and negotiations. One annual report described the fire as being “strange,” which suggests the incident probably came at the hands of an arsonist angered that the formerly all-white edifice would be used to educate and uplift African Americans. The AME Church voted to start Kittrell Normal before the fire happened with plans to use the scorched buildings as dormitories to accommodate at least 150 students. The fire came as a brief setback for the AME Church and there were few alternatives since the Johnson School property in Raleigh and had already been sold. Nevertheless, the North Carolina Conference refused

¹⁰³“Kittrell Normal and Industrial Institute,” *The Christian Recorder*, March 19, 1891; Kittrell College Catalogue, 1918-1919, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, 5.

¹⁰⁴ Obituary of John Hervey Wheeler.; Thomas Peace, ‘Zeb’s Black Baby’ *Vance County, North Carolina: A Short History* (Durham, N.C.: The Seeman Printery, Incorporated, 1955), 352.; Mark Crawford, *Confederate Courage on Other Fields: Four Lesser Known Accounts of the War Between the States* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000), 139.

¹⁰⁵Mark Crawford, *Confederate Courage on Other Fields*, 139-146; “Destruction of the Kittrell Springs school property,” *The Christian Recorder*, December 31, 1885; Kittrell Normal and Industrial Institute Fourth Annual Report, 1889-1890,” Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, 25.

to let the incident keep it from actualizing its postwar aspirations. Despite Kittrell Springs' ruin, the AME Church continued with its plans and opened the school's doors on February 7, 1886; The North Carolina Legislature incorporated Kittrell a year later.¹⁰⁶

In North Carolina, Kittrell Institute testified to the progress African Americans made through racial uplift. It also represented black's determination to overcome white supremacy in the post-Reconstruction South. Ossian O. Hawkins knew exactly what Kittrell meant to blacks living in the state. He personally witnessed the school's transformation from a bastion of slavery to a beacon of light for the race. In 1890, an emotional, but excited Hawkins "seemed to be the happiest man on the place" as he summed-up Kittrell's significance in a commencement speech to its first graduating class. He recounted his experiences as a slave, telling the audience "in his short address...of how things had changed [at Kittrell] within so short a time," only a quarter-century since his emancipation. Hawkins then "pointed to the room in which he had been made to sleep on the floor while his so-called master slept in a comfortable bed." The elder Hawkins' proudest moment came in seeing his son John Russell Hawkins become Kittrell's president, "furnishing [the elder Hawkins with] a good bed and [putting him] in charge of the same property on which he had been made to do duty as a slave."¹⁰⁷ It came as no small feat that a place built to serve whites and used to protect the institution of slavery would itself become a place for the sole purpose of educating generations of African Americans. Yet, despite Kittrell's presence and progress as

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷John R. Hawkins, *The Educator: A Condensed Statement of the Department of Education of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (AME Church, circa 1906-1908), 29; Hartshorn, W. N., *An Era of Progress and Promise: the Religious, Moral, and Educational Development of the American Negro since his Emancipation* (Boston: Priscilla Publishing Company, 1910), 288-289, <http://digital.ncdcr.gov/cdm4/document.php?CISOROOT=/p249901coll37&CISOPTR=4602&CISOSHOW=4441>.

a black-owned institution, vestiges and memories of the Old South were never far away. The presence of a Confederate cemetery just across the tracks from the school—a stone's throw away—stood as a visible monument. It was probably a constant reminder to blacks of their past enslavement, as well as their liberation. In an earlier period, Kittrell served a vastly different group of southerners than it did in later years. The historical backdrop remained visible once John Leonidas arrived at Kittrell College in 1898.¹⁰⁸

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, North Carolina still seemed to be an optimistic and promising place for anyone seeking to establish themselves, but subsequent events quickly made the state a hostile setting for blacks. When John Leonidas arrived in North Carolina in 1898, he did so amid a well-planned and violent white supremacist campaign launched by the state's Democratic Party. Two years earlier the U.S. Supreme Court handed down the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, which sanctioned separation between the races. As several authors have explained, the white supremacy campaign strategy consisted largely of propaganda, the sensationalized threat of "Negro domination," along with violence carried out against white Republicans and African Americans. White newspaper editors like the *Raleigh News and Observer's* Josephus Daniels played influential roles in aiding the Democrats' cause, often appealing to ideas of miscegenation and the rape of white women by black men to garner widespread support across class and political parties.¹⁰⁹ The violent acts aimed at Republican sympathizers made the Democrats' white

¹⁰⁸ Mark Crawford, *Confederate Courage on Other Fields*, 139-146; Samuel Thomas Peace, 'Zeb's Black Baby': *Vance County, North Carolina a Short History*, 363.

¹⁰⁹ Janette Thomas Greenwood, *Bittersweet Legacy: The Black and White 'Better Classes' in Charlotte, 1850-1910* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 189; Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North

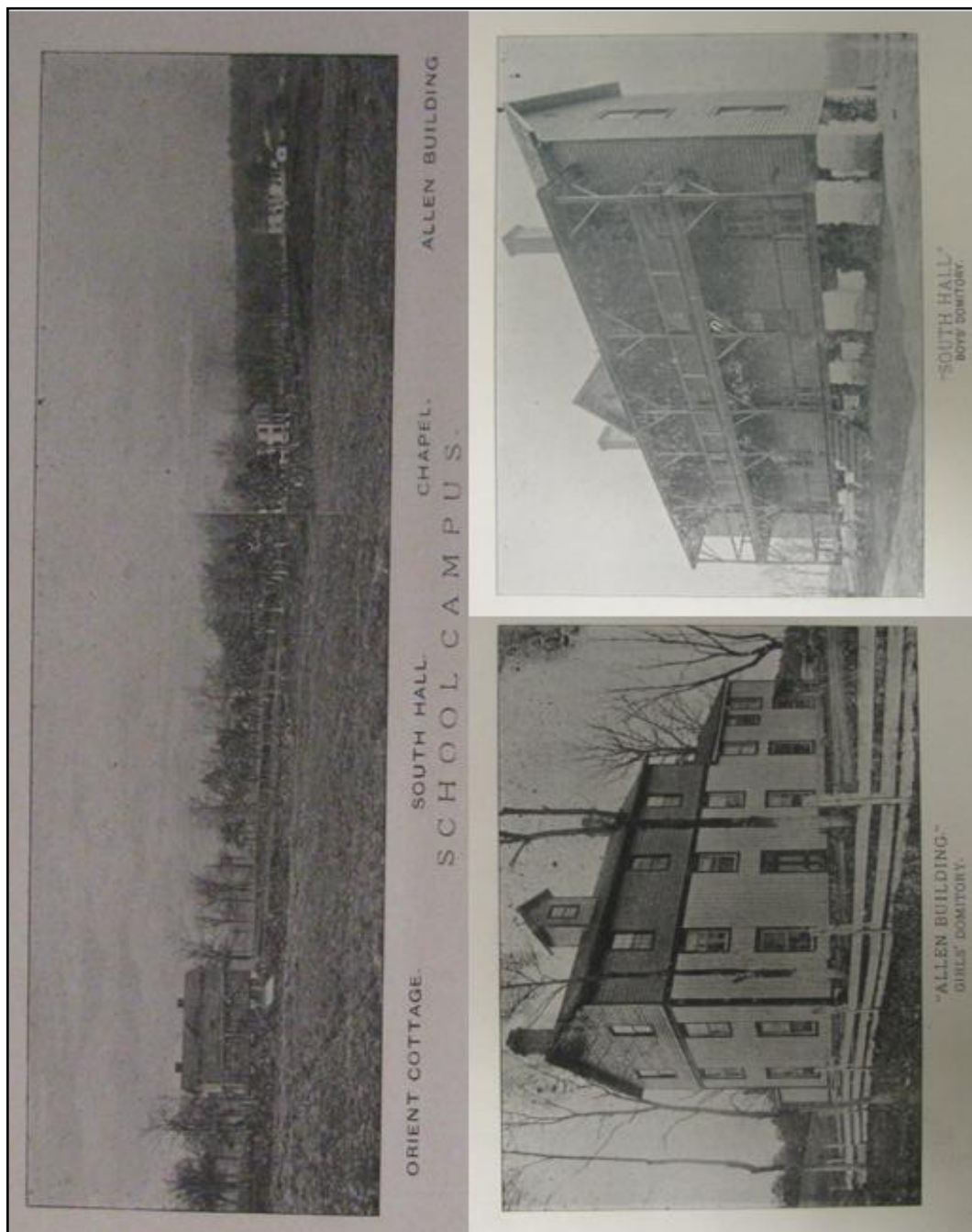


Figure 1.1 Kittrell College Campus (Source: *Kittrell Normal and Industrial Institute Fourth Annual Report, 1889-1890*, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University)

supremacy declarations all the more powerful. That violence peaked with the infamous 1898 Wilmington Race Riot, which local Democrats—using race as a crucial element—planned and executed a deadly coup d’état against a large black community and “fusion” controlled government in Wilmington, North Carolina in the days following the November election. The political alliance—referred to as fusion in 1890s North Carolina—came about because of disgruntled Democrats (mainly farmers and poor whites), African Americans, and Republicans. These groups aligned themselves politically, successfully electing joint-ticket candidates to local and state offices, once again restoring a sense of democracy and fair government in the state, something that had proved possible during Reconstruction.¹¹⁰ Despite the accomplishments of North Carolina’s fusion politics during the 1894 and 1896 elections, white supremacy triumphed in the end. The white supremacy campaign culminated with huge Democratic victories during the 1898 election and continued with the 1900 Suffrage Amendment, a devastating measure for African Americans as it led to their disenfranchisement in the state.¹¹¹ By ruling-out the possibility of future black-white political coalitions based on class rather than race, white supremacy probably proved

Carolina Press, 1996), 85-89; Eric Anderson, *Race and Politics in North Carolina, 1872-1901: The Black Second* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 254.

¹¹⁰Janette Thomas Greenwood, *Bittersweet Legacy: The Black and White ‘Better Classes’ in Charlotte, 1850-1910*, 177, 197, chapter 5; Helen G. Edmonds, *The Negro and Fusion Politics in North Carolina, 1894-1901* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1951), 136-217; Paul D. Escott, *Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 241, 247, 253-254; for more on the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot see David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson, *Democracy Betrayed: the Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and Its Legacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Leon H. Prather, *We Have Taken a City: the Wilmington Racial Massacre and Coup of 1896* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1984); *1898 Wilmington Race Riot Report* (Raleigh: Research Branch, Office of Archives and History, N.C. Department of Cultural Resources, 2006).

¹¹¹Helen G. Edmonds, *The Negro and Fusion Politics in North Carolina, 1894-1901* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1951), 136-217; Paul D. Escott, *Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 241, 247, 253-254.

especially distressing for blacks in places such as Vance County, Kittrell's location, as it had been a Republican stronghold when it was established in 1881.¹¹²

The Republican stronghold in Vance County was partly due to a larger political phenomenon known as the "Black Second," North Carolina's Second Congressional District fashioned in 1872 to maintain heavily Democratic white-majority voting districts in eastern North Carolina. The Black Second earned its name from an unintended consequence of redistricting: "politically and socially the most important feature of the second district was its large Negro population."¹¹³ As part of the Black Second, African Americans in Vance County outnumbered whites by as many as 700 to 800 voters. While they had political rights, blacks helped elect black candidates; between 1883 and 1900, Vance County elected five African American men to state offices: four to the House of Representatives (H. B. Eaton, James M. Watson, Moses M. Peace, and J. Y. Eaton), and one (W. B. Henderson) to the state senate. Henderson represented a district that included Vance and several other counties. Two African Americans served as Vance County's register of deeds during that same period. Republican Henry Plummer Cheatham served from 1884 until 1888, when Thomas S. Eaton succeeded him, serving from 1888 until 1898. Henry Cheatham narrowly defeated white Democratic congressman Furnifold M. Simmons in the 1888 election, a loss that enraged Simmons for years to come and greatly influenced his chairmanship of the Democratic Party as he played a significant role in devising the party's white supremacy campaign in 1898.¹¹⁴

¹¹²Samuel Thomas Peace, 'Zeb's Black Baby': *Vance County, North Carolina a Short History*, 12-13.

¹¹³Eric Anderson, *Race and Politics in North Carolina, 1872-1901: The Black Second*, 4.

¹¹⁴Samuel Thomas Peace, 'Zeb's Black Baby', 13-14, 16; Paul D. Escott, *Many Excellent People*, 255.

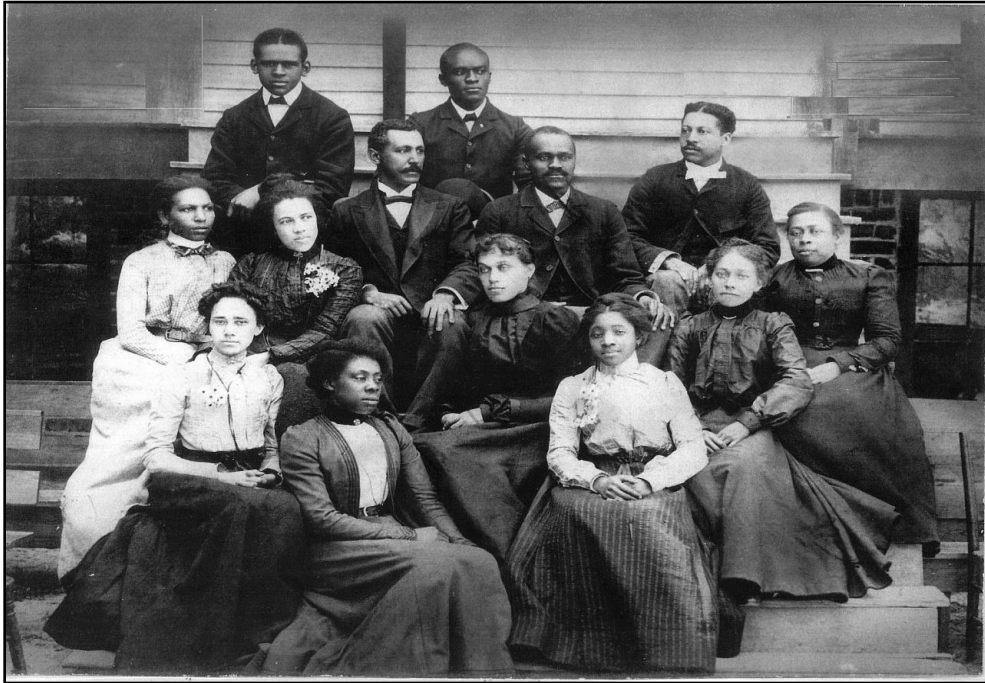


Figure 1.2 Kittrell College Faculty, Late 1890s. Left to Right: (top row) Earle Finch, George Adams, (second row from top) Kittrell College President John R. Hawkins, Pinkeney Hawkins, John Leonidas Wheeler, (the original photo description only includes five of the women pictured in no particular order) Mrs. John R. Hawkins, Kate Telfare, Mrs. Hawkins, Lena Cheek, and Rosa Alexander. (*Photo Courtesy of the Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center*)

Despite the propaganda and physical violence aimed at black North Carolinians and the new political restrictions placed on black freedom, John Leonidas opted to remain in Kittrell and build a life there. Margaret Hervey came to Kittrell after she graduated from Wilberforce in 1900; it is highly likely that John Leonidas and Margaret Hervey courted one another during their days at Wilberforce. That courtship may have even had its origins in Kentucky given that the two came from the exact same area; they married on September 25, 1901. In 1904, John Leonidas became president at Kittrell Institute, which by that time had changed its name to Kittrell College, a move that perhaps solidified the black institution's

determination to counter white supremacy.¹¹⁵ While at Kittrell between 1898 and 1908, the Wheelers would have prepared their students for life by expounding on the same principles they themselves learned at Wilberforce and through the AME Church's teachings. The "idea of self-help[, which was] strongly infused into the life of all the pupils and every student" at Kittrell made this especially true. A close reading of Kittrell's annual reports and catalogues for this period reveals the school's primary objective was to foster in students "a spirit of self reliance and Christian manhood and womanhood."¹¹⁶ In this way, Kittrell students would have "a thorough English education, with some practical training in the different branches of trade" so they could "become useful men and women in the great work of enlightening their people."¹¹⁷

At Kittrell this meant that, in addition to their academics, students worked for the school in some capacity each day to help defray the cost of tuition and board; for young men the work included "farming, brick-yard work, [or] carpentering," while young ladies performed domestic duties in "sewing, cooking, washing, ironing, [and] embroidering." Kittrell discouraged admissions applications from students who did "not care to rise early and work" because the school had "no time for idlers, or those who wish[ed] to fill their heads at the expense of the hands an[d] muscles." Kittrell's doors were "open to all" who sought "elevation, and [would] cultivate the habits of sobriety, industry, cleanliness and

¹¹⁵A. B. Caldwell, ed., *History of American Negroes and His Institutions, Georgia Edition*, 231.

¹¹⁶Kittrell Normal and Industrial Institute Sixth Annual Report, 1891-1892, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, 11.

¹¹⁷Kittrell Normal and Industrial Institute Fourth Annual Report, 1889-1890," Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, 25.

Godliness.”¹¹⁸ In her role as a sewing instructor in the Industrial Department, Margaret Hervey would have particularly instilled in her female students the notions of responsibility and respectability by teaching “traits of industrious, intelligent, dignified and cultured womanhood.” At Kittrell, young women learned the “proper observance of order and decency in the home, especially as to care of rooms and clothing; and the performance of all duties.”¹¹⁹

During John Leonidas’ tenure as professor and then Kittrell College president, it became evident that he reached a respectable status in his profession. In April 1906, for example, Professor Wheeler considered leaving the South and his position at Kittrell to accept a job offer as principal at a black high school in Evansville, Indiana for \$1,000 a year. While Wheeler ultimately declined, the recommendation letters he received from his former professors and colleagues speak to his standing as an accomplished educator. Joshua H. Jones, Wilberforce University president, described Wheeler as “an exceptionally strong man intellectually, morally, and socially.” Johnson also noted that Wheeler was “thoroughly trustworthy, [and] a Christian gentleman to the core. As an educator he [had] few superiors among those of his years.” Wheeler’s former Kittrell colleague Charles H. Johnson, then an instructor at Wilberforce University, called Wheeler “a man of many strong parts, [who was] brilliant, conservative, refined and honorable; [was] very pleasing of address and a progressive educator.” John R. Hawkins, former Kittrell College president, explained that Wheeler “impressed” him “as being a [C]hristian gentleman, with executive ability and an

¹¹⁸Kittrell Normal and Industrial Institute Fourth Annual Report, 1889-1890, 25; Kittrell Normal and Industrial Institute Sixth Annual Report, 1891-1892; Kittrell Normal and Industrial Institute Seventh Annual Report, 1892-1893; Kittrell Normal and Industrial Institute Eight Annual Report, 1893-1894.

¹¹⁹Ibid.

enviable tact to work compatibly with the other teachers who have had the honor of assisting him.” The heartfelt praise from colleagues also confirms the pride John Leonidas displayed in later years about his own character as he expressed his ability to “get along with people” and “how to concede to every man his right to his own opinion, and if at variance to anyone, try by word and deed, without antagonism, to convince him of his error and thus leave him without any cut to chew.”¹²⁰

THE NORTH CAROLINA MUTUAL AND DURHAM, NORTH CAROLINA, 1908-1912

While John Leonidas decided to stay on as Kittrell’s president, other important life circumstances caused him to rethink his livelihood and hastened his departure from the institution two years later. On January 1, 1908, the Wheelers had much to celebrate as they welcomed their first child into the world, naming him John Hervey Wheeler after Margaret’s father John Hervey and her husband John Leonidas. In May, Professor Wheeler resigned as Kittrell’s president at the AME Church’s general conference in Norfolk, Virginia. With the added responsibility to provide for his growing family and having already succeeded in his educational aspirations, Professor Wheeler left because of “an inducement of making much money.”¹²¹ That July following John Leonidas’ resignation, the family moved to Durham, North Carolina where he went to work as a Raleigh agent for the North Carolina Mutual and Provident Association (NCM), an insurance company, which by that time was one of the

¹²⁰Recommendation letter from J.H. Jones to J. L. Wheeler, April 27, 1906, J. L. Wheeler Scrapbooks, Wheeler Papers; Recommendation letter from C. H. Johnson to J. L. Wheeler, April 28, 1906, J. L. Wheeler Scrapbooks, Wheeler Papers; Recommendation letter from J. R. Hawkins to J. L. Wheeler, April 12, 1906, J. L. Wheeler Scrapbooks, Wheeler Papers; Speech by J.L. Wheeler, North Carolina Mutual Bulletin for the Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Tennessee Districts, July 12, 1948, J.L. Wheeler Scrapbook, Wheeler papers.

¹²¹Speech by J.L. Wheeler, North Carolina Mutual Bulletin for the Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and Tennessee Districts, July 12, 1948, J.L. Wheeler Scrapbook, Wheeler papers.

largest black-owned businesses in the country. Durham offered better opportunities for upward mobility, economic independence, and would have also ensured their son had certain advantages as well. In Raleigh, John Leonidas soon became the district superintendent.¹²²

The NCM received its charter in 1898 in the same year John Leonidas came to North Carolina, in what some writers suggest may have been a direct response to the Wilmington Race Riot. Historian Walter B. Weare asserted that “the terror of 1898 unquestionably heightened the pervasive mood of withdrawal and racial solidarity essential to the success of Negro business.”¹²³ Leslie Brown echoed that sentiment, explaining “indeed, the Mutual might have represented a post-Wilmington move away from politics and toward community uplift as a way of countering racial fears and anxieties.” Although blacks could no longer openly participate in politics, they did, however, shift their focus to “upbuilding” important community institutions.¹²⁴

The strong nexus between Kittrell College and Durham had already existed, which provides further insight to such a pivotal moment for the Wheelers. Kittrell supplied Durham with a steady stream of its recent graduates and many became teachers in the Durham public schools. Moreover, black families living in Durham also sent their sons and daughters to Kittrell so they could receive training for community leadership. While Professor Wheeler would have naturally been attracted to Durham because it had a burgeoning black community, his relationship with the city’s leading black and white businessmen prompted

¹²²“Resolution made by the Directors, Officers and Employees of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company upon the death on Saturday, March 30, 1957, of John Leonidas Wheeler,” J.L. Wheeler Scrapbook, Wheeler Papers.

¹²³Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South: A Social History of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1973), 21-22.

¹²⁴Leslie Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham: Gender, Class, and Black Community Development in the Jim Crow South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

his career shift from education to business. From Kittrell's inception these men gave generously to help support the school by donating money, construction supplies, personal time, and heading special committees. The school's white benefactors included tobacco and textile tycoons Julian Shakespeare Carr and James B. Duke. Its African American supporters included NCM founders John Merrick and Dr. Aaron McDuffie Moore; wealthy brick-maker Richard B. Fitzgerald; educators William Gaston Pearson and Dr. James Edward Shepard, founder of the National Religious Training School and Chautauqua (now North Carolina Central University); and physician Dr. Stanford L. Warren (an 1891 Kittrell graduate who later became John Hervey's father-in-law).¹²⁵

John Leonidas also came to NCM with his own business experience. Since 1903, Professor Wheeler had shares in two black-owned businesses in Kittrell: the American Union Industrial Company and the American Union Benefit Association. While at Kittrell, Wheeler became president and special agent for the American Union Benefit Association, an insurance company that offered policies to blacks in Vance County. John Leonidas' entrée into business also reinforced the important link between education and business as it related to racial advancement. In replacing politics, leading African Americans promoted education and business as the best paths to full citizenship.¹²⁶

The city of Durham is also significant because it represented New South prosperity. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the city grew considerably and became an industrial center for tobacco and cotton textile production. As noted by labor historian

¹²⁵Kittrell College annual reports, catalogues, and bulletins, 1889-1922, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University.

¹²⁶Certificate of Membership and Subscription for four shares of the capital stock of the American Union Industrial Company issued to J. L. Wheeler, June 3, 1904, J. L. Wheeler Scrapbook, Wheeler Papers.; *The Insurance Year Book* (New York: The Spectator Company, 1904), 689.

Dolores Janiewski, Durham emerged as “the quintessential city of the New South” because its white pioneers of industry embraced and capitalized on ingenuity, modernization, and urbanization to increase company profits, which catapulted their businesses into the expanding global economy. At the forefront of the tobacco industry was Julian S. Carr, who took his merchant father’s investment in a small pipe tobacco company known as the Blackwell Durham Tobacco Company to new heights. Carr later expanded his holdings through significant investments in cotton textiles. By 1900, “the Carrs built a chain of fourteen mills for the Durham Hosiery Mills Company.”¹²⁷ Carr’s tobacco business eventually came second to the enterprising “Dukes of Durham,” led by family patriarch Washington Duke who got his start in the 1850s and then by “peddling tobacco after the Civil War.”¹²⁸ Their company, W. Duke and Sons (later divided into two separate conglomerates) made its mark largely through manufacturing cigarettes. Once establishing themselves, the Dukes incorporated technological innovations such as the Bonsack “cigarette-making” machine into widespread use, which drastically reduced the company’s labor costs. Due to the tobacco and cotton textile boom, employers hired black and white workers from the countryside, which helped increase the city’s population. Thus, for the next half-century, New South prosperity hinged on the exploitation of cheap labor, which created an unequal dynamic between “the capitalists and the workers.”¹²⁹

The development of black Durham happened as an outgrowth of New South prosperity that was spawned by industrialization. It began in the late nineteenth century, and

¹²⁷Dolores E. Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied: Race, Gender, and Class in a New South Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985), 74.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, 68.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*, Chapter 5.

spearheaded by a group of “race leaders,” responsible for founding NCM and several other businesses and social institutions that became central to black life in Durham. Those individuals included John Merrick, Dr. Aaron M. Moore, Charles C. Spaulding, Richard B. Fitzgerald, Dr. J. A. Dodson, Dock Watson, Dr. James E. Shepard, W. G. Pearson, and Dr. Stanford L. Warren. At the forefront of this leadership stood Merrick, a former slave and entrepreneurial-minded barber turned insurance executive. He made his way to Durham in 1880 and opened a barbershop with John Wright, another fellow barber. Before long, Merrick’s white clientele included the city’s most influential businessmen such as the “Dukes, the Carrs...and all their associates.”¹³⁰

During NCM’s first decade in operation, between 1898 and 1908, it overcame several major obstacles before becoming an economic powerhouse. The first came in 1900 when several sick claims exceeded the company’s coffers and forced its officers to use personal funds to cover expenses, where all but three original investors left. Also, limited experience in the insurance field cost the company some profits as well. Nevertheless, with C. C. Spaulding’s appointment as general manager, along with increased advertisement, the company expanded into more than thirty-five cities by 1901. The NCM soon offered its agents alluring commissions as it turned a modest profit. In 1905, Merrick could boast of the company’s economic success, telling his agents that “ ‘all over North Carolina the North Carolina Mutual and Provident Association is planted on a firm basis.’ ”¹³¹ Merrick wanted the company to become “ ‘one of the strongest industrial insurance companies in the South.’ ”

¹³⁰Robert McCants Andrews, *John Merrick: A Biographical Sketch* (Durham: Seeman Printery, 1920), 40, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/andrews/andrews.html>.

¹³¹William Jesse Kennedy, Jr., *The North Carolina Mutual Story* (Durham: North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, 1970), 14.

”¹³² By 1908, when John Leonidas joined the company, it had certainly reached that expectation as it concerned black-owned insurance companies. However, more work needed to be done.

There were other important social institutions established at the behest of NCM’s leadership. In August 1908, a month after the Wheelers’ arrival to Durham, the Mechanics and Farmers Bank (M&F) opened its doors as another black-owned financial establishment.¹³³ Both NCM and M&F became sister institutions, complete with overlapping boards and officers; the two businesses grew alongside Durham. The black community built Lincoln hospital in 1901 with some financial backing from the Dukes and Carrs. In 1910, Dr. James E. Shepard established the National Religious Training School and Chautauqua to train ministers and teachers. The black community already had several religious institutions by the turn-of-the-century, including St. Joseph’s AME Church and White Rock Baptist Church where Durham’s black middle class attended. In addition to its social and economic institutions, black Durham also stood out because it boasted an increasing labor force, which mostly consisted of black women who found employment in the city’s tobacco factories and, to a lesser extent in cotton textile mills. Employment in Durham’s tobacco factories made it possible for working class blacks to support black-owned institutions. These community institutions also created a black professional class that included nurses, teachers, and secretaries.¹³⁴

¹³²Ibid.

¹³³“Negroes Open Bank: Owned, Lock, Stock, and Barrel By Colored People—As A White Paper Sees Them,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 22, 1908.

¹³⁴William K. Boyd, *The Story of Durham: City of the New South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1925), 277-295; Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South*, 53; Leslie Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham*, 32-33,

The success enjoyed by black businesses such as NCM also happened because of conditions stemming from Jim Crow Segregation. Ironically, Jim Crow laws made it possible for black institutions to thrive in a segregated (but also extremely limited) marketplace. In 1910, John Leonidias transferred to the NCM's Durham headquarters to supervise its records department. In a tour around North Carolina that fall, Booker T. Washington visited Durham and later dubbed it "the City of Negro Enterprises." In all, black Durham laid claim to nearly 160 businesses, which during the time the Wheelers lived in the city, ranged from two drugstores to one cotton textile mill.¹³⁵ In the South, Jim Crow laws firmly separated the white world from the black world, and Durham did not escape that reality. Historian Walter B. Weare described the latter irony as a "paradox" where "Negro business thrived on a modicum of racial hostility, yet at the same time its supporters incessantly prescribed it as the surest cure for unhealthy race relations." Durham, after all, became what some described as an example of good black-white race relations and a front-runner of sorts in racial uplift success in the New South.¹³⁶ Black and white leaders, mostly businessmen, on the surface operated on the premise of mutual understanding. That

171-172; Jean Bradley Anderson, *Durham County: A History of Durham County, North Carolina* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 220-230, 256-262.

¹³⁵John N. Ingham, "Building Businesses, Creating Communities: Residential Segregation and the Growth of African American Business in Southern Cities, 1880-1915" *The Business History Review*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (Winter, 2003), 660; "Banker with a mission: Successful Negro bank president, firm in pushing for both Negro advancement and North Carolina development, wins an influential role throughout South and in the nation," *Business Week*, May 16, 1964.

¹³⁶Booker T. Washington, "Durham, North Carolina, a City of Negro Enterprise," *The Independent*, New York, March 30, 1911, 642-670, <http://solomon.bltc.alexanderstreet.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/cgi-bin/asp/philo/bltc/getvolume.pl?S8354>; Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South*, 22. A prominent group photo taken during this particular visit features Washington alongside a group of Durham leaders that included Merrick, Dr. Shepard, and Stanford L. Warren. A man standing in the last row strongly resembles an earlier picture of John Leonidas, who would have been working at the North Carolina Mutual's home office at the time.

leadership is what W. E. B. Du Bois called, after he visited Durham in 1912, a non-hostile environment where whites in many ways took a “ ‘hands off—give them a chance – don’t interfere’ ” approach.¹³⁷ By the turn-of-the-century, Jim Crow relegated black business to black consumers. Blacks no longer had access to white economic institutions, if they had any to begin with. Thus, black businesses—especially black insurance companies and banks emerged from the need to ensure blacks had financial coverage during unexpected economic hardships resulting from the deaths of family members. In other words, black businesses became inextricably linked to community welfare.¹³⁸

Both Washington and Du Bois also pointed to black Durham’s rise as a place where the black middle class flourished. The Wheelers joined the emerging black elite, and by the 1920s, noted sociologist E. Franklin Frazier called Durham the “Capital of the Black Middle Class.” The NCM—where notions of responsibility and respectability mattered most—became the epicenter of the city’s black middle class. Besides reinforcing middle class respectability, NCM hired educated blacks that brought respectability with them. In 1906, for example, NCM hired Susie V. Gille, herself a Wilberforce graduate like John Leonidas and Margaret Hervey, to work as its secretary. As historian Leslie Brown explained “Gille personified the respectability of her employer.”¹³⁹ “As a visible representative of the company,” Brown continued, Gille “was to model a public expression of a private life above reproach and in repudiation of any hint of impropriety, just like North Carolina Mutual.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Upbuilding of Black Durham.” *World’s Work*, XXIII (January, 1912).

¹³⁸ Juliette E. K. Walker, *A History of Black Business in America*, Ch. 7.

¹³⁹Leslie Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham*, 110.

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*

In a similar way, John Leonidas represented exactly what the company wanted from its employees. Consequently, his position with NCM helped the company gain respectability as much as it helped him advance economically. John Leonidas' decision to resign from Kittrell College did not come without criticism as he was "ridiculed by his [education] associates who felt that he was degrading his profession to engage in the insurance business."¹⁴¹

The insurance agents working for NCM had significant influence as community leaders, primarily because many were already well respected educators and could draw upon that influence on their employer's behalf. The company's agents, therefore, stood for something far greater; they embodied the hopes and aspirations of the larger black community.¹⁴² At the time NCM came along in 1898, black fraternal and mutual benefit societies owned most black insurance companies and since many failed toward the late nineteenth century, African Americans believed them to be untrustworthy.¹⁴³ The NCM set out to counterattack those assertions by hiring respectable blacks from the professional class that included educators. The NCM even hired Wheeler's former students, including John M. Avery, a teacher who graduated from Kittrell College in 1900. In 1905, Avery started as a traveling agent for NCM and then moved to the company's home office in 1907 where he

¹⁴¹Speech given by J. L. Wheeler for the Opening of the N.C. Mutual's Newark, NJ office, J.L. Wheeler Scrapbook, Wheeler papers; *Centennial Encyclopedia of the AME Church*.; "Kittrell College Faces Today's Challenge for Freedom and Character in Education," Speech given by J. H. Wheeler at Kittrell College's Founders Day Address, March 1, 1960, box 1, folder 91, unprocessed speeches, John Hervey Wheeler Papers, Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center, Atlanta, Georgia, 3.; A. B. Caldwell, ed., *History of American Negroes and His Institutions*, Georgia Edition; "North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company Founder's Day Address," Speech given by J. H. Wheeler, October 20, 1972, box 2, folder 208, unprocessed speeches, John Hervey Wheeler Papers, 7.

¹⁴²Leslie Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham*, 123.

¹⁴³Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South*, 15-16.



Figure 1.3 On the left, John Leonidas Wheeler at age forty-eight, circa 1917. On the right, the North Carolina Mutual Life and Provident Association's first home office, 1906. (Photograph courtesy of Durham County Library)

became an assistant to the company's manager, C. C. Spaulding. In fact, Avery helped persuade his former professor to join the NCM family. By luring people like John Leonidas—individuals with proven reputations in leadership, responsibility, and respectability—the company hoped to bring more legitimacy to black insurance companies.¹⁴⁴

The Wheelers lived in Durham's third ward also known as "Hayti" (pronounced Hay-ti). They attended religious services and taught Sunday-School at St. Joseph's AME Church, a prominent black church in the city. While living in Durham, John Leonidas and Margaret

¹⁴⁴ "North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company Founder's Day Address," Speech given by J. H. Wheeler, October 20, 1972, 1972, 5; Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South*, 89-90; "J. M. Avery: A Business Genius," *Farm and Business*, no date, John M. Avery Scrapbook, folder 347, in the William Jesse Kennedy, Jr., Papers, #4925, Southern Historical Collection of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the African American Resources Collection of North Carolina Central University.

Hervey had another child in 1910, a little girl they named Ruth Hervey Wheeler. By then Margaret was a homemaker, a privileged position afforded only to black middle class women whose husbands' incomes made it possible for their wives to remain at home to attend to matters within the household. The Wheeler's enrolled their son and daughter in Durham's first black kindergarten where they attended with other children from the black middle class elite.¹⁴⁵ The family remained in Durham from 1908 to 1912 when John Leonidas received a promotion. He quickly worked his way up the NCM ladder, as his "thorough equipment and his intimate knowledge of both the field and the office work, made him a valuable man for a larger field."¹⁴⁶ So he transferred to the company's Atlanta, Georgia office in 1912. In replacing William B. Matthews, an Atlanta University professor who was over NCM's operations there, Wheeler found himself in charge of supervising the company's entire Georgia district.¹⁴⁷

ATLANTA AND MOREHOUSE COLLEGE, 1912-1929

The fact that Durham became a major center for an expanding black community, by 1912, Atlanta outpaced the tobacco city several times over. As a New South city, Atlanta also had a thriving black middle class with strong businesses, private schools, and religious

¹⁴⁵Photograph titled "Durham's First Negro Kindergarten," Scrapbook/Alum 1, John Wheeler Papers; The names of the other children in Durham's "First Negro Kindergarten" included C.C. Spaulding, Jr., Haywood Townsend, Arnetta Glenn, Otelia Spaulding, Fannie Allen, Inez Bynum, Minnie Pearson, Sarah Yearby, Norma Bruce, Novella Spaulding, Berta Mae Townsend, Marion Bailey, Ruth Wheeler, Lina Russell, Dorothy Alston, Mrs. Mattie Louise Moore (McDougald), Sam Whitted, J. C. Scarborough, Jr., Samuel Green, Edgar Pratt, Janet Avery, Annie Smithey, and Amey Armistead.

¹⁴⁶A. B. Caldwell, ed., *History of American Negroes and His Institutions, Georgia Edition*, 231.

¹⁴⁷A. B. Caldwell, ed., *History of American Negroes and His Institutions, Georgia Edition*, 231; Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South: A Social History of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company*, 91; Merah Steven Stuart, *An Economic Detour: a history of insurance in the lives of American Negroes* (New York: W. Malliet and Company, 1940), 227.



Figure 1.4 “Durham’s First Negro Kindergarten,” John Hervey is the first child seated from left to right.¹⁴⁸

institutions. The city was home to some of the South’s most prominent black churches, including “Big” Bethel AME Church where the Wheelers attended and taught Sunday School there. The colleges—Morehouse, Morris Brown, and Spellman Colleges—alongside Clark and Atlanta Universities were the five black institutions of higher learning. “Sweet Auburn Avenue” became the center of black Atlanta’s commercial district and home to NCM’s Atlanta office. John Leonidas helped the company maintain a competitive edge over their Atlanta counterparts “keeping the Mutual prosperous in the face of a powerful challenge from a large black middle class that founded” the Atlanta Life and Standard Life Insurance

¹⁴⁸The other children listed in this class included C.C. Spaulding, Jr., Haywood Townsend, Arnetta Glenn, Otelia Spaulding, Fannie Allen, Inez Bynum, Minnie Pearson, Sarah Yearby, Norma Bruce, Novella Spaulding, Berta Mae Townsend, Marion Bailey, Ruth Wheeler, Lina Russell, Dorothy Alston, Mrs. Mattie Louise Moore (later married R. L. McDougald), Sam Whitted, J. C. Scarborough, Jr., Samuel Green, Edgar Pratt, Janet Avery, Annie Smithey, and Amey Armistead (*Photograph courtesy of Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center*).

Companies.¹⁴⁹

During John Hervey's childhood days in Atlanta, he and his sisters—a younger sister named Margery Janice Wheeler came along in 1913—had a significant economic advantage over most African Americans. "I started off life even," is how John Hervey described his fortunate upbringing when interviewed by a Durham newspaper in 1953. His father, John Leonidas, "had to work his own way through school, [and] he came out of college with more than [what] he started [with]."¹⁵⁰ The sacrifices that John Hervey's parents made in the twenty years prior to them coming to Atlanta guaranteed the younger generation would fare much better in life and have the opportunity to succeed beyond what their parents could have ever imagined. Margaret, herself an educator, homeschooled the three children until third grade and then enrolled them in the Atlanta Public Schools where they attended Butler Street Elementary School through seventh grade. The Wheeler children had a comfortable childhood, reared under the best possible circumstances for blacks considering the limitations of the Jim Crow South. In reference to the latter statement, John Hervey told an interviewer some years later that since childhood, he "never felt that [he] was outside of the American society." Instead, Wheeler "always felt [his] freedom [of movement] to go anywhere [he] wanted to go, and [to] participate in anything that [he] had a desire to participate in." Wheeler also admitted that he had to "develop some blind spots [in order to] believe this" as

¹⁴⁹ A. B. Caldwell, ed., *History of American Negroes and His Institutions, Georgia Edition*, 231; Clifford M. Kuhn, Harlon E. Joye, and E. Bernard West, *Living Atlanta: An Oral History of the City, 1914-1948* (Athens and Atlanta: University of Georgia Press and the Atlanta Historical Society, 1990), 252, 152, 95, 100, 105; Walter Weare, *Black Business in the New South*, 91; Herman "Skip" Mason, *Going Against the Wind: A Pictorial History of African-Americans in Atlanta* (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1992); Alexa Benson Henderson, *Atlanta Life Insurance Company: Guardian of Black Economic Dignity* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990); Willard Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

¹⁵⁰ "Decision Led to Banking," *Durham Morning Herald*, August 2, 1953; A. B. Caldwell, ed., *History of American Negroes and His Institutions, Georgia Edition*, 231.

well.¹⁵¹

By the time John Hervey came of age, the Wheeler family had middle class status in back Atlanta. “Prof. Wheeler,” noted a 1917 publication, was “representative of a type of the intelligent, cultured, progressive Negro of the present generation.”¹⁵² John Leonidas and Margaret Hervey made sure to raise their children in a Christian household with plenty culture. John Hervey and his sisters learned to play musical instruments, Ruth played the piano while John Hervey played the violin; Margery Janice had a strong interest in the arts. The Wheeler’s light-skinned complexions perhaps also gave them an advantage, as the U. S. Census often listed them as mulatto. The family lived in a home located on Johnson Avenue in Atlanta’s Fourth Ward, not far from Auburn Avenue where John Leonidas worked. By 1917, the family had clearly advanced economically owning real estate in Ohio, North Carolina, and New York. This meant that the Wheeler children grew up alongside other children from Atlanta’s black middle class elite. That “substantial” black middle class, as one magazine article described black Atlanta, included the White family whose son Walter H. White eventually headed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Other well known black families included the King and the Dobbs families.¹⁵³ The Wheeler’s economic standing helped both John Leonidas and Margaret Hervey become civic leaders in Atlanta’s black community.

¹⁵¹John Wheeler interview, “Robert Penn Warren’s *Who Speaks for the Negro?*: an Archival Collection” at: <http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/>.

¹⁵²A. B. Caldwell, ed., *History of American Negroes and His Institutions, Georgia Edition*, 231.

¹⁵³“Banker with a mission: Successful Negro bank president, firm in pushing for both Negro advancement and North Carolina development, wins an influential role throughout South and in the nation,” *Business Week*, May 16, 1964.

Despite John Hervey's assertion that he always felt part of the American society, in reality Jim Crow segregation remained a constant barrier to making that at all possible, no matter the economic status. During the 1910s, segregation in housing, transportation, and education made life problematic for black Atlantans. Before the Wheelers moved to Atlanta, the city's Fourth Ward section experienced years of increased tensions between bordering white and black neighborhoods because of what whites saw as black intrusion in previously all-white neighborhoods. As historian Alton Hornsby pointed out, "The area along Auburn Avenue, in the Fourth Ward of northeast Atlanta, was particularly attractive to middle and upper-income blacks because it contained a number of handsome homes with both white and black occupants."¹⁵⁴

By 1913, however, the city of Atlanta passed a restrictive covenant law that forbade black and white residents from moving into neighborhoods already occupied by the other racial group. The new ordinance followed a similar measure passed in Baltimore, Maryland several years earlier. The Georgia Supreme Court rejected the Atlanta law in a 1915 case by pointing to its "arbitrary nature." In October, the high court's ruling caused tensions to explode where they reached a tipping point in Atlanta's Fourth Ward, as white residents complained that "the 'black tide' was crowding white people out of their homes, forcing the sale of property at greatly reduced prices."¹⁵⁵ In response, a "representative" biracial committee formed with six whites and eight blacks with the responsibility to calm escalating tensions; John Leonidas joined other black leaders appointed to serve on the committee.

¹⁵⁴Alton Hornsby, Jr., *Black Power in Dixie: A Political History of African Americans in Atlanta* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009), 50.

¹⁵⁵Agreement Reached in the Fourth Ward: Committees of Whites and Blacks Will Try to Enforce Segregation," *Atlanta Constitution*, October 9, 1915.

After the group met, they decided on a two-point agreement, which also passed at a larger community meeting, stating that they would “use all moral influence to prevent any colored person from purchasing or renting any property in blocks [that were] predominantly owned by whites,” and vice versa. The committee decided to “condemn...any person, owner, real estate or other agent, who [sought] to sell or rent any place in [those] blocks to persons of the opposite race.”¹⁵⁶

Though John Leonidas signed the agreement alongside other black committee members, the settlement made clear how powerless even the most well-to-do blacks were in the face of Jim Crow. The agreement primarily served white interests because it adhered to the biased 1913 ordinance. Yet even with those arrangements, a year later the Atlanta city council passed another measure, which barred blacks from living as close as one block from largely white areas. In the 1917 case *Buchanan v. Warley*, African Americans won a major victory when the U.S. Supreme Court rejected a Louisville, Kentucky ordinance because the order denied black citizens their Fourteenth Amendment rights. Despite the high court’s ruling in *Buchanan*, Atlanta’s residential segregation problems persisted as city leaders passed more ordinances, which allowed for residential segregation by race; the housing issue continued well after the Second World War.¹⁵⁷

Just as white city leaders in Atlanta prohibited blacks from residing in predominantly white neighborhoods, a move that otherwise gave the impression of first-class citizenship, the

¹⁵⁶Ibid.

¹⁵⁷“Agreement Reached in the Fourth Ward: Committees of Whites and Blacks Will Try to Enforce Segregation,” *Atlanta Constitution*, October 9, 1915; Alton Hornsby, *Black Power in Dixie: A Political History of African Americans in Atlanta* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009); Tera Hunter, *To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 104-105; Tomeiko Brown-Nagin, *Courage to Dissent: Atlanta and the Long History of the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 60-61.

powers-that-be made it even harder on black education. In 1913, the city's all-white school board voted to cut the seventh and eighth grades from black schools in the interests of white schools. The board did not succeed at making those cutbacks, but did eliminate the eighth grade from black schools the following year. After that, black children could only attend Atlanta's public schools through seventh grade, while their white counterparts received free public education for another four years. By 1916, the board again attempted to do away with seventh grade education for blacks to make room in the budget for "a junior high school for whites." Perhaps the board would have succeeded had the Atlanta branch of the NAACP not been established by middle class blacks led by Walter White. The branch officially received its charter in 1917 after the organization's national field secretary, James Weldon Johnson, came to Atlanta that March.¹⁵⁸

The Atlanta NAACP branch made the battle for educational equality a main priority and sought to mobilize African Americans to take action by increasing membership and by holding mass voter registration drives. John Leonidas described himself as a Republican who claimed "not [to be] active in politics," and rightfully so since black Atlantans became disfranchised in 1908. Nevertheless, his decision to join the Atlanta NAACP in its first year was a political act, and he and his wife Margaret would have most certainly helped in the organization's efforts to obtain better educational opportunities and improved facilities for blacks, especially since they had three children enrolled in the Atlanta Public Schools at the time and because the Wheelers valued education. While black Atlantans could not vote in regular citywide elections at that time, they could cast ballots with regard to bond referendums as passage required a three-fourths majority. In 1918, and again in 1919, the

¹⁵⁸Ibid.

NAACP registered enough black voters to stop a municipal bond issue for improvements in white schools, without any considerations for upgrades in black schools. African Americans specifically wanted a public high school and when another bond referendum made its way to voters in 1921 blacks finally consented because it included funding for Booker T. Washington High School, the city's first public high school for blacks built in 1924.¹⁵⁹

Besides their involvement in civil rights issues confronting black Atlantans, John Leonidas and Margaret Hervey also became involved in other important community institutions. John Leonidas served as Sunday School superintendent at "Big" Bethel. He helped expand the black Butler Street Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and joined its board of directors. That role often included giving generously to help support various causes; John Leonidas regularly paid memberships for children "not able to pay the fee." In Atlanta, John Leonidas also helped increase recreational opportunities for African Americans as well, "popularizing the game of tennis in Atlanta." John Leonidas supported athletics in the area schools, especially Booker T. Washington High School. Margaret also became active in cultural and civic organizations such as the Carrie Steele-Pitts Orphans Home and the Atlanta Woman's Club.¹⁶⁰

At NCM, John Leonidas enjoyed a very successful insurance career. In 1922, he became the company's assistant agency director and a member on the company's board of directors. In 1927, the company promoted him to regional supervisor and he became the

¹⁵⁹Kenneth Janken, *Walter White: Mr. NAACP* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 22-26; Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel*, 89; Clifford M. Kuhn et al. *Living Atlanta: An Oral History of the City, 1914-1918* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 152-153.

¹⁶⁰A. B. Caldwell, ed., *History of American Negroes and His Institutions, Georgia Edition*, 231; Obituary of J. L. Wheeler, Wheeler Papers; "Membership Drive for Negro Y.M.C.A Given Fine Start," *The Atlanta Constitution*, May 19, 1922, "Negro Insurance Man Retires after 41 Years," *Atlanta Journal*, March 19, 1950.

institution's assistant agency director in 1933. He helped found the National Negro Insurance Association and held a membership in the National Negro Business League. In 1948, two years before retiring from NCM after forty-five years of service, John Leonidas became a vice president with the company. John Hervey would have learned what it meant to be a loyal company man from his father. Besides the example provided by his father, NCM had a profound impact on John Hervey's early life in several other ways.¹⁶¹ Wheeler's parents regularly opened their home to accommodate close business associates traveling from NCM headquarters in Durham to Atlanta. John Hervey remembered that he frequently had the privilege to eat breakfast with the company's founders, John Merrick and Dr. Aaron M. Moore, on their many business trips to Atlanta. Wheeler would:

listen carefully to the conversations which he [John Merrick] and Dr. Moore held with [his] father both during the meal and afterward. Dr. Moore was a scholarly type of person who seemed to be constantly engaged in observation or evaluating everything with which he came in contact. Although he was a man of few words, Dr. Moore's brain appeared to be a constant beehive of activity and his personality indicated a constant searching for truth and for new and better ways of doing things. For a youngster ten years old, these experiences left upon [John Hervey] a lasting impression of the all-inclusive manner in which Mr. Merrick and Dr. Moore worked so hard to place the company on a firm footing.¹⁶²

As John Hervey recalled, the two men "were in every sense of the word, social engineers, possessed with a oneness of purpose" and "exercised a strong influence upon [his] life as well as upon the lives of countless others."¹⁶³ Despite John Leonidas' business success, he could not completely guarantee that his son John Hervey and his daughters Margery and

¹⁶¹Meriah Steven, *An Economic Detour: A History of Insurance in the Lives of American Negroes* (New York: W. Malliet and Co., 1940), 226-227.

¹⁶²Speech given by John H. Wheeler at the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company Founder's Day Address, October 20, 1972, John Hervey Wheeler Papers, box 1, folder 208, unprocessed speeches, John Hervey Wheeler Papers, Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center, Atlanta, Georgia, 1.

¹⁶³*Ibid.*

Ruth would have their full citizenship rights.

By 1921, Atlanta, like so many other cities throughout the country had to deal with exacerbating race relations. Benjamin Elijah Mays moved to Atlanta that same year to teach mathematics at Morehouse College, an all male school for African Americans. In his autobiography *Born to Rebel*, Mays outlined the racial violence against blacks that took place in the years prior to his arrival that fall. In 1906, just fifteen years earlier, blacks witnessed a deadly race riot. In 1915, they also saw the re-emergence of the Ku Klux Klan, a violent white supremacist organization, in nearby Stone Mountain. In 1919, following World War I and two years before Mays arrived, tensions exploded across the U. S. as race riots broke out in cities such as Memphis, Norfolk, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and Elaine, Arkansas.¹⁶⁴ The threat of postwar racial violence in Atlanta provided the impetus for white progressives in the city to form the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, an organization established in 1919 to ease racial conflict, specifically the terror inflicted by the Ku Klux Klan.¹⁶⁵

As Mays recalled, “it was in Atlanta that [he] was to find the cruel tentacles of race prejudice reached out to invade and distort every aspect of Southern life.”¹⁶⁶ His words here vividly describe how deeply rooted Atlanta’s Jim Crow system had become since the late 19th century. In Atlanta, blacks especially encountered segregation in train stations, streetcars, elevators, buses, department stores, schools, and hotels. Against the backdrop of

¹⁶⁴ Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel*, 67-68.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 71; Ann Wells Ellis, “The Commission on Interracial Cooperation, 1919-1944, Its Activities and Results,” Ph. Diss., Georgia State University, 1975, 7-8; Will W. Alexander, “Phylon Profile, XI: John Hope,” *Phylon*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1947, 5.

¹⁶⁶ Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel, An Autobiography* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2003, first printed in 1971), 67.

segregation “the experience of one black man was the experience of every black man whether he was a college professor, doctor, minister, janitor, or maid.”¹⁶⁷ Despite growing up in Atlanta’s black middle class, John Hervey and others from well-to-do families still came face to face with Jim Crow because the system was no respecter of persons. It placed all blacks on the same level regardless of one’s station in life. John Hervey asserted years later that while growing up in Atlanta:

There were things I just wouldn’t do as a kid—I wouldn’t give anyone a chance to Jim Crow me. And Martin Luther King [Jr.]’s father and I were classmates at [Morehouse] [C]ollege, and one of the things about him was that he would never ride on the streetcar in Atlanta or a bus. I admit that I did, but he didn’t. There were some things [though] that I wouldn’t do. But you just turn the blind side to participation in anything that didn’t leave you standing up as a man.¹⁶⁸

During the interwar period, John Hervey enrolled in Morehouse Academy—the college’s secondary department—in the year Mays arrived. In fact, Mays taught Wheeler high school algebra as an instructor at the school between 1921 and 1924 and years later recalled Wheeler wearing “knee pants.”¹⁶⁹ As a requirement, all historically black colleges and universities in the area had their own academy or high schools, including Spellman, Clark, Atlanta, and Morris Brown. The Wheelers could afford to send their children to private school, easily making the regular tuition payments for John Hervey’s schooling with a \$2.50 check, but disparities in education stood as major barriers used to destroy the future for so many other blacks during this period.

¹⁶⁷Ibid., 75, 67-68, 76-83.

¹⁶⁸ John Wheeler interview, “Robert Penn Warren’s *Who Speaks for the Negro?*: an Archival Collection” at: <http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/>.

¹⁶⁹“Final Respects Paid Wheeler,” *Durham Morning Herald*, July 9, 1978.

Though John Hervey's parents achieved economic success and worked hard in previous decades to place their children on a level playing field, their generation had only laid the foundation. Both John Leonidas and Margaret Hervey worked toward building important community institutions and organizations, which proved vital in aiding future causes. Nevertheless, their generation could not claim an end to Jim Crow segregation as their achievements stopped short of dismantling the unjust system. Their generation could, however, lay claim to their middle class respectability, which often set them apart from the economic struggles experienced by the black masses. Yet, their middle class respectability could never bring them or their children into the larger American society. Instead, the task to eliminate segregation would be set aside for John Hervey's generation, which came of age during the 1920s at the height of the "New Negro" era. John Hervey and his sisters needed to carry their parents' legacy forward in a significant way in order to ensure the next generation of Wheelers would not be limited by their race, but would have equality commensurate with their skill, potential, and intellect. Moreover, segregation presented the biggest obstacle to moving far beyond their parents' generation.

The beginning of moving his parents' legacy forward began once John Hervey became a student at Morehouse College. In the same way that Wilberforce and Kittrell had been institutions that prepared young black men and women for leadership positions within their respective communities, so too did Morehouse College. In 1867, the American Baptist Home Mission Society (ABHM) of New York started Morehouse as the Augusta Institute in Augusta, Georgia. In 1913, the board of trustees changed the school's final name to Morehouse College, naming it after Reverend Henry Lyman Morehouse, a board member

and an ABHM administrator.¹⁷⁰ By the 1920s, the Baptist school became an important institution solely for the purpose of training young black men for their “social responsibilities” while ushering them into adulthood. By the time John Hervey entered Morehouse Academy, the venerable black leader Dr. John Hope had led the black institution for over a decade. Not only did Hope serve as Morehouse president, but the prominent leader also played an influential role in improving race relations in Atlanta. In 1905, Hope participated in the Niagara Falls Movement—the only black educator from the South to do so. The intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois spearheaded the Niagara Movement, a protest group that became the forerunner of the NAACP. Hope helped charter the Atlanta NAACP, and his wife, Lugenia Burns Hope, took an active role in improving health and welfare conditions in Atlanta’s black community. During World War I, John Hope traveled to France as part of the War Department’s delegation headed by Robert R. Moton, the successor to Booker T. Washington, where he investigated the conditions faced by black soldiers. Hope’s experiences during WWI, particularly the discriminatory treatment faced by black soldiers (at the hands of the American military) abroad, led him to become more involved in race relations at home. In 1919, he became a founding member of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation. At Morehouse, Hope regularly pressed upon his students the value and necessity of their responsibility to community.¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰Benjamin G. Brawley, *A History of Morehouse College*, (College Park, MD.: McGrath Publishing Company, 1917), 9-10.

¹⁷¹Benjamin G. Brawley, *A History of Morehouse College*, (College Park, MD.: McGrath Publishing Company, 1917), 9-10; Edward A. Jones, *A Candle in the Dark: A History of Morehouse College* (Valley Forge: The Judson Press, 1967, 80-89, Chapters 4-5; Glenn Sisk, "Morehouse College," *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Spring, 1958), 201-208; Will W. Alexander, "Phylon Profile, XI: John Hope," *Phylon*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1st Qtr, 1947), 4-13; Ridgely Torrence, *The Story of John Hope*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), 228-230.

John Hervey's involvement in several student activities while at Morehouse reveals his early inclinations toward his cultural sensibilities. He had a passion for music and joined the "Glee Club and Orchestra" (one organization), which had "thirty-five pieces [musical instruments] and forty-eight voices [vocalists]." Wheeler mastered the violin, his musical instrument of choice, which also represented the epitome of middle class respectability. As a member in the Glee Club and Orchestra, John Hervey soared as a top-notch performer; he held the title of first-violin (an important title that denoted the best violinist in the group). Professor Kemper Harreld, himself a trained concert violinist and graduate of the Chicago Musical College, started the Glee Club and Orchestra in 1911. Once he arrived at Morehouse, Professor Harreld transformed the school's music department and "introduced good music to the College and community [and] almost singlehandedly built up nationally recognized vocal and instrumental organizations." Harreld "became an 'institution' at Morehouse" by developing a highly trained Glee Club and Orchestra, which "held its own [against] any comparable musical group in the country." Harreld's most successful student, as far as music, became Mattiwilda Dobbs, the daughter of Atlanta civic leader John Wesley Dobbs; she gained both national and international notoriety as an opera singer.¹⁷²

As a musician with the Glee Club and Orchestra, John Wheeler learned very important lessons about responsibility and respectability. Kemper Harreld played an integral role in Wheeler's development in this area. Harreld instilled in Wheeler a commitment to the many elements that came to define John Hervey's personal credo: "Hard work, thorough

¹⁷²Edward A. Jones, *A Candle in the Dark*, 93-95; *The Maroon Tiger*, April-May, 1927, Vol. 2 Nos. 6-7.

training, tenacity, a genuine interest in other people, and intense self-discipline.”¹⁷³ In a letter to Harreld years later, John Hervey acknowledged his former music instructor’s contributions in helping to develop these ideals. Wheeler wrote:

As the years have gone by, the discipline which you instilled in me and your effort to impress upon me the great value of thoroughness have been among my most valued possessions. Although I have not always been able to live up to the high standards of perfection which you taught me to strive for, I have unconsciously found myself avoiding the pitfalls of doing things in a slipshod or casual manner.¹⁷⁴

The Glee Club and Orchestra not only served as an extracurricular activity that helped develop the ideals that Morehouse students like John Hervey followed, but it became an important community organization in Atlanta. Performing with the Glee Club and Orchestra at certain community functions probably taught John Hervey about community pride.¹⁷⁵

Besides helping to nurture in Wheeler and other students the life-long lessons of self discipline and responsibility to community, the Glee Club and Orchestra also gave them opportunities to travel throughout the country. The organization made an annual tour across southern states mainly performing for African American audiences in local black churches, high schools, colleges, and public halls. In 1927, the Glee Club and Orchestra began that year’s two week tour with performances in southern Georgia before traveling to Florida where they made stops in Jacksonville, Palatka, Gainesville, Sanford, Orlando, Daytona Beach, and St. Augustine. Wheeler and other Morehouse students would have certainly observed the similarities between Georgia and Florida’s Jim Crow systems. At the same

¹⁷³“Banker with a mission: Successful Negro bank president, firm in pushing for both Negro advancement and North Carolina development, wins an influential role throughout South and in the nation,” *Business Week*, May 16, 1964.

¹⁷⁴ Letter from Wheeler to Kemper Harreld, July 1, 1957, personal correspondence folder (10 of 14) 1950-1957, personal correspondence box 2, Wheeler papers.

¹⁷⁵Edward A. Jones, *A Candle in the Dark*, 93-95.

time, traveling with the Glee Club and Orchestra presented John Hervey with great learning opportunities. That kind of moment of exploration perhaps served as an eye-opener and could have birthed in him a strong sense of how important the idea of freedom of movement was to full citizenship. Considering his family's background and social status, Wheeler would have probably been considered a "cosmopolite" by the Morehouse undergraduates, a common student reference to "those who [had] been everywhere, seen everything, and [knew] everybody."¹⁷⁶ John Hervey had a promising career ahead of him as a professional musician. He became an accomplished violinist and "received great distinction in the musical world because of the training and development[,] which he received by participating in the [Glee Club and] Orchestra. John Wheeler, in and out of Morehouse [became] the recipient of many honors, favorable comments, and national applause, because of his skill and technique in playing the violin."¹⁷⁷ Wheeler's "talent and genius," noted one student newspaper article, gained him national recognition. In 1929, the National Negro Musical Association awarded him membership in the organization, a high honor given to talented African American musicians.

John Hervey's cultural sensibilities helped to heighten his social consciousness and would have greatly influenced his developing worldview. In addition to his talent as a classical musician, John Hervey had interest in writing about social problems, an interest he continued later in life. As an assistant editor with the Morehouse student newspaper, the *Maroon Tiger*, Wheeler oversaw the paper's literary content. His writing responsibilities included penning vibrant reviews about concerts, plays, and other forms of artistic expression

¹⁷⁶*The Morehouse Tiger*, Volume 1, 1925 (1925-1926).

¹⁷⁷"The Glee Club and Orchestra Complete Successful Tour of Florida," *Maroon Tiger*, Feb.-March, 1927, Vol. 2 Nos. 4-5, 68-69; *The Maroon Tiger*, May-June, 1929 Volume IV., No. 7, 100.

that took place on the Morehouse campus.¹⁷⁸ At the time, Morehouse student performances covered classical music and literature by writers such as William Shakespeare and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Nevertheless, as the literary editor for a black college student newspaper during the 1920s, Wheeler would have been in-tune with the black cultural movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, which gave new voice to the black experience in the United States. The New Negro Movement, in full swing by that time, had its epicenter in Harlem, New York. The *Maroon Tiger* not only featured artistic happenings on campus, but also included incisive articles related to contemporary debates that affected black college students at the time.

The New Negro Movement regularly became the subject of debate in the *Maroon Tiger* during the 1920s. The critique on black life that the New Negro Movement provided would have inspired young black college students like Wheeler and others at Morehouse. One insightful article in the *Maroon Tiger* discussed the relevance that works by New Negro artists such as Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen had in voicing black demands for equality, “as [African Americans grew] into [their] increasing economic and social freedom.” The essay entitled “The New Negro expresses himself in poem,” pointed to Hughes’ “I Too, Sing America,” and Cullen’s “Defiance,” as works that represented “the militant refusal [of African Americans] to submit and the awakening of the Negro to his own strength and worth.” Furthermore, “the poetry that [was] typical of the ‘old’ Negro [was] weak, melancholy, spiritless. It [gave] the impression of a race whose life [was] throttled, and dismally creeping toward a silent grave.”¹⁷⁹ But, “the poetry of the New Negro [had] the

¹⁷⁸*Morehouse Tiger*, vol. 1, 1925; *The Maroon Tiger*, January 1926, vol. 2, no. 3.

¹⁷⁹*The Maroon Tiger*, December. 1926, vol. 2 no. 3, 48.

virility of youth, who [was] strong at the dawn of life, and who thrust[ed] aside the obstacles of [the] unnatural environment.”¹⁸⁰

In addition to explaining how New Negro artists depicted the black experience, the *Maroon Tiger* also made clear to Morehouse students the harsh and violent realities that often told another story about what it meant to be black in states like Georgia and the South more broadly. In December 1926, for example, the student newspaper reported that between 1919 and 1926, 366 blacks were lynched in Georgia. “Something” argued the student newspaper “should be done to stop lynching.” “If the states won’t protect the lives and property of the people therein,” continued the student newspaper, then “the Federal Government should.” They did nothing about “lawlessness, violence and mob action [that] blot[ted] out the lives of [black] citizens.” The *Maroon Tiger* also explained that “the situation [became] more acute, the tensions more restrained, [so] the lynchings [had] to be condemned.” The paper felt that “state representatives could help, if they would get serious,” and “stop advocating National Blue Sunday Laws [that prohibited business transactions on Sundays], and laws of [a] discriminating nature.”¹⁸¹ John Hervey and other students would have been well versed on lynching statistics, which highlighted the need for racial justice.

The early writings by John Hervey found in the *Maroon Tiger* are lacking in abundance to tell an overall narrative, but they do reveal many interesting elements about his evolving worldview while at Morehouse. In one essay, “From the Delphian Oracle: The Trend of Modern Art,” John Hervey articulated his views on the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro Movement. First, he discussed the “credibility,” “worthiness,” and “future” of

¹⁸⁰Ibid.

¹⁸¹“Lynchings,” *The Maroon Tiger*, December 1926, Vol. 2 No. 2.

modern art, which established its own separate and unique practices. The New Negro Movement, he proclaimed, represented challenging circumstances and the desires of blacks to gain their “freedom.” “The present age,” Wheeler declared, had “presented many new versions of life—versions which represented new and strange customs, conditions, and perhaps even new types of people.” Therefore, he saw no need for “Modern artists to express a new sort of civilization in terms of an older and different one.” “The true duty and desire of every Artist,” Wheeler wrote was “to express the joys, sorrows, and life itself of his own age.” “To the works of modern artists, one must truthfully say ‘Freedom.’ Our age is an age of Freedom – for women as well as for men. Athletics, sports, independence, Free speech, Movements, and free association of classes of people—All help make the major portion of civilization a free institution. American [art] typifies this most distinctly. Hence our art to begin, must typify the spirit of the ages. There is ample illustration of this.” Wheeler noted that “Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes [had] broken away from conventions in order to depict [black] life today.” While this might have expressed Wheeler’s views about the New Negro movement, it also represented how he might have envisioned the future for the world around him; and the need to take problems spoken by artists like Hughes and Cullen toward finding viable solutions.¹⁸²

In yet another essay, “The College Man’s Religion,” John Hervey defended the emerging youth culture during the 1920s. Wheeler especially focused on the idea that college students in his generation lacked religious consciousness due to perceptions held by some who saw college campuses as “breeding places for immorality, atheism and unrest.” To the contrary, according to Wheeler, that view came from “men on the outside [looking

¹⁸²“From the Delphian Oracle: The Trend of Modern Art,” *The Maroon Tiger*, October 1927, Vol. 3, No.1.

in].” John Hervey agreed that some college students rejected “a Supreme Being,” but he found it “unfair to apply it to all, or even to the majority of students in American colleges.” In his view, “the truth of the situation [was] that there [existed] such a complexity in modern life that a demand for a new and more practical code of behaviors and ideals [had] arisen—a demand which call[ed] for a view of religion as a manual for the conducting of human relationships, yet for a religion not essentially different from that of [their] forefathers.” In other words, John Hervey viewed religion as important but also believed that only from a “practical” standpoint could it be “applicable to every day [*sic*] problems and occurrences.” He saw his own Christian religion as “the most universal and far-reaching of all religions.” Decades later, the nation saw Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. use the practicality of his faith—exemplifying Christian principles of love—to challenge the oppression aimed at African Americans and other oppressed peoples throughout the world. Christianity, from John Hervey’s perspective, therefore “embodie[d] those principles which [were] capable of meeting current problems.” “But,” John Hervey continued, “there [was] a difference in method and effectiveness of its application to problems of the modern age.”¹⁸³

This suggests John Hervey saw his generation as being integral to solving the problems caused by racial injustice. Wheeler pointed to his generation as being able to see things differently from previous generations, and, therefore, had the responsibility to meet those challenges in more effective ways than ever before. He suggested that it could not be done by one group alone, but it could only be done by working together. “The twentieth century require[d] a new interpretation— not a changing of the basic elements of religion, but

¹⁸³John Hervey Wheeler, “The College Man’s Religion,” *The Maroon Tiger*, Feb.-March, 1927, Vol. 2 Nos. 4-5.



Figure 1.5 A young John Hervey as a High School Student at Morehouse Academy. (*Photograph courtesy of Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center*)

a new interpretation in the light of existing conditions, which [were] certainly new and different in their nature from those of the preceding centuries.” In pointing to the future, and perhaps his vision of how to solve the most pressing social conditions at the time, John Hervey concluded that “In truth, America through its college youth [was] about to attain a new and greater Christianity—a refined Christianity founded upon the principles of brotherly love. Yea, the new Christianity [had] emerged from its old shell of decaying superstition and sectarian animosity. It stands high in its massive strength and sheds its light of purity on the heads of thousands of thinking students in [their] colleges and universities who in turn look[ed] to it as the guiding force of their lives.”¹⁸⁴

On June 4, 1929, John Hervey graduated from Morehouse College with his A. B. degree. He did well as a college student, earning honors all four years and finishing with a three-point-eight grade average in a class that consisted of sixty-seven students. John Hope gave that year’s commencement address, his last as Morehouse president. During his speech, Hope stressed to the graduates that they would “face some situations that other people [would] not have to face,” but that African Americans had faced them “for centuries.” Nevertheless, “in the press and push of life if there ever [came] to [them] a question of what does it matter, [and they asked] is it worthwhile,” Hope wanted them to “think back to [that] afternoon and get something to encourage [them], to make [them] live on and press on and

¹⁸⁴Ibid.; It was also at Morehouse, in fact, that John Hervey cultivated his knowledge and appreciation of history as the official historian for his graduating class, and combined it with his skills as a writer; Wheeler had a rare gift where he could draw upon the historical failures and successes as useful lessons and cautionary tales to connect urgent contemporary issues to their historical forebears. John Hervey often pulled from his thorough understanding of history to trace the origins of failed governmental policies and discriminatory laws in order to press for advances in racial and economic equality; Wheeler also joined a Greek-lettered fraternity called Omega Psi Phi. The fraternity would have promoted responsibility, respectability, and community engagement; John Hervey was an avid tennis player, another embodiment of middle class respectability.

do a woman's part and a man's part in this great world.”¹⁸⁵ At that moment, John Hervey faced the most important decision in his young life up to that point. His serious talent in music and interests in the arts led him to contemplate a career as a musician. Upon graduating, he had two job offers that would each take him into opposite directions as far as career paths went: “[one] to teach in the music department at Tuskegee Institute for \$150 per month or [two] be a teller in the Mechanics and Farmers Bank in Durham, [North Carolina] for \$60 per month.”¹⁸⁶ Wheeler chose Mechanics and Farmers Bank and moved to Durham soon thereafter.¹⁸⁷ His parents influenced the decision to return to Durham—they saw business as the better option. It also seemed to be the most logical choice given his father's business connections. With his future now certain at the prosperous black-owned financial institution, John Hervey entered a city with a history of “black business activism.” In the years ahead, he would be forced by outside circumstances to reconsider the banking profession, yet he and others in his generation would also give the latter phrase new meaning by battling to see that all African Americans “started off life even.”

CONCLUSION

The fact that John Hervey had options once graduating from Morehouse College can be attributed unquestionably to his parents, John Leonidas and Margaret Hervey. In one generation removed from slavery, the Wheelers came to represent the immediate postwar

¹⁸⁵Morehouse Commencement Speech by John Hope, June 4, 1929, Presidential Archive, Atlanta University File, Box 70, folder 2, Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center; *Morehouse Alumnus*, May 1929, vol. 1, no. 6.

¹⁸⁶“Decision led to Banking,” *Durham Morning Herald*, August 2, 1952, Wheeler Vertical File, 7.

¹⁸⁷*Ibid.*

generation raised up by their former slave parents with the expectations and aspirations of full citizenship. The most important and long desired citizenship rights that blacks had once emancipated was the freedom to obtain a basic education for themselves and their children. Through education, blacks believed, their children could escape slavery's legacy. Becoming literate became a way for them to achieve something far beyond what their parents imagined—what Booker T. Washington once described as akin to “getting into paradise.”¹⁸⁸ In this way, blacks could show white Americans that they had abilities to rise above their previous status as slaves, capable of being more than laborers.

In so many ways, John Leonidas and Margaret Hervey exceeded those expectations by attending college at Wilberforce University in the final decade of the nineteenth century. At Wilberforce, they learned lessons of responsibility and respectability to prepare them for leadership positions, as teachers in the black community. Wilberforce helped them develop their talents and nurtured their commitment to their race. Both John Leonidas and Margaret Hervey accepted the responsibility to help move the race forward through racial uplift. They came to North Carolina and the New South during a period of uncertainty as black citizenship rights continued to be hotly contested by white supremacists, state legislatures, and the U.S. Supreme Court. Nevertheless, their resolve remained unchanged.

In the early part of the twentieth century, the Wheelers worked hard, sacrificed, and achieved middle-class respectability. As educators between 1898 and 1908, John Leonidas and Margaret Hervey taught at Kittrell College in Vance County, North Carolina where they helped train the next generation, instilling in them the same ideals taught to them by the AME Church and Wilberforce University. John Leonidas became president of Kittrell and

¹⁸⁸Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4.

later branched out into the field of business. Before long, the Wheelers moved to Durham, North Carolina where John Leonidas joined NCM, a black-owned insurance company established in 1898. Durham offered the Wheelers an even greater chance at upward mobility and economic freedom as part of the city's growing black community. The decision to join NCM proved beneficial to John Leonidas and his young family.

The family's economic independence ensured that the Wheeler children "started off life even." The Wheelers raised their children in Atlanta, among the city's black middle class. However, their economic security alone could not fully shelter their children from the harshness of the Jim Crow system. John Hervey and his siblings were only free within the confines of the black community, but as far as the larger American society was concerned, they were just like all other blacks—subject to the same discriminatory treatment that segregation entailed. "The Morehouse man," asserted Benjamin E. Mays, "learned well that 'a man's reach should exceed his grasp' and never accepted the idea that the ceiling was the limit of his striving. Rather, the sky was his goal, even though, all too often, his wings were clipped at the ceiling level."¹⁸⁹ Within this context, as a student at Morehouse College during the 1920s, it became apparent to John Hervey that it would take his generation demanding change by constantly questioning the world in which they lived in order to truly succeed.

¹⁸⁹Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel*, 91.

CHAPTER 2

“TAKE CARE OF THE COMMUNITY AND THE COMMUNITY WILL TAKE CARE OF YOU”: THE MAKING OF A BLACK BUSINESS ACTIVIST IN DEPRESSION-ERA NORTH CAROLINA, 1929-1941

But to-day, the Negro has his middle class, and with it his middle-class psychology. More and more certain elements of the race are absorbing the typical spirit and push of modern industrialism in America; in the composite portrait of the New Negro must be put the sharp and forceful features of the Negro man of business. Through his effort and success, the Negro is becoming an integral part of the business life of America, and is sharing particularly in the economic development of the New South, which is perhaps the outstanding economic consequence of the World War on America.

—E. Franklin Frazier, in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, 1925

On November 7, 1929 Mechanics and Farmers Bank (M&F) vice president and cashier Richard Lewis McDougald gave an address to a group of African American bankers attending the fourth annual meeting of the National Negro Bankers Association. “If a community entrusts its funds to a given bank,” he told them, “then that bank owes a moral obligation to that community to in turn invest a substantial portion of the funds back into the community rather than send it out of town where the people who have accumulated the money cannot benefit from its accumulation.” McDougald had a simple motto: “Take care of the community and the community will take care of you.” The banker's talk happened just over a week after the country suffered a devastating stock market crash on October 29, which pushed the nation into an economic depression.¹⁹⁰

¹⁹⁰“A Banker who Believes in Investing in One’s Community: R. L. McDougald of the Mechanics and Farmers Bank Believes ‘If You Take Care of Your Community, the Community will Take Care of You,’” *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 9, 1929.

Richard McDougald's declaration came in response to a panel, which asked the question "how can the bank best serve the community?" Although the response seemed to come from a strictly economic standpoint, he also believed taking care of the community had larger significance for men his position as well. "Something higher should be the goal of a Negro bank," he reasoned. After all, "The banker is the key man of the community, and he should create a feeling in the community, that above everything else he intends to serve the community's best interests."¹⁹¹ McDougald had no problem backing up this challenge, not only as a banker but as an active civic leader in Durham's black community. The role also meant that black business leaders in a given community had to put themselves out-front by fighting for the social, political, and economic rights of their black patrons. In the end, it would ensure the bank's ultimate welfare. The banker's belief along those lines can be seen in a December 1930 appeal he made before "500 of the prominent business, educational, and industrial leaders of western and central North Carolina," attending the Sunday afternoon forum held by the Negro Citizens League of Charlotte.¹⁹² In representing the North Carolina Association of Citizens Leagues, McDougald urged the group to make "use of the power of the vote as a means of gaining more consideration and privilege in the exercising of his wishes and desires." According to the same newspaper account, McDougald "bewailed the fact that the race has been slow to dissolve the general atmosphere that is thrown around him by the white race, as a [human] being generally and collectively associated with criminal tendencies, making reference to various incidents which would substantiate his

¹⁹¹"North Carolina Banker Urges Larger use of Voting Power: R. L. McDougald Addresses Club in Charlotte," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, December 20, 1930.

¹⁹²*Ibid.*

contentions.”¹⁹³ In other words, blacks had to do everything in their collective power to counter negative stereotypes whites had about them.

The role that McDougald agreed to have in his community became something he and other black business leaders in Durham expected of themselves and their employees at M&F and NCM. This was one of the central ingredients highlighted in the merger between business and responsibility to community. It represented good business practice and a way to bring about racial equality at the same time. John Wheeler arrived to Durham soon after his graduation from Morehouse in June. McDougald would have been among the first community leaders Wheeler encountered, primarily because the bank cashier practically ran the bank's every detail. McDougald probably already knew Wheeler given the connections the Wheelers had to Durham, especially considering John Leonidas' position at NCM. Since 1923, McDougald had also been a vice president with the insurance company. The relationship between Wheeler and McDougald became that of a mentor-mentee, as McDougald had twelve years over Wheeler; both men held memberships in the Omega Psi Phi Fraternity. In his new job as a bank teller, the young Wheeler would have also been expected by the bank's other officers, including bank president Charles Clinton Spaulding, to become an active participant in Durham's black community. During that time, Spaulding became perhaps the most prominent black businessman in the country and since 1923 served as NCM's president. The expectation to become involved in the community meant that one had to find a way to complete their regularly assigned duties a bank employee, while at the same time giving themselves to community causes, and to do so without excuse. Vivian Rogers Patterson came to work at M&F in 1944 and held several positions with the company

¹⁹³"North Carolina Banker Urges Larger use of Voting Power."

ranging from teller to loan officer, and eventually worked as the administrative assistant to John Wheeler in the 1960s. Patterson worked at the Citizens Trust Bank in Atlanta for about two years before she joined M&F. At the bank, she remembered their “whole thing was that all of us [employees] should participate in outside activities.” She particularly remembered being encouraged to become active in the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs. “When you get there [to the meetings] you found that you had been volunteered to do this or that.” “For any organization to really make it,” Patterson maintained “it is my belief that they have to give something to the community in which they are located.” By the late 1970s, Patterson became the bank’s trust officer and a vice president at the institution.¹⁹⁴

As John Wheeler got acclimated to his new job at M&F, he would have represented what sociologist E. Franklin Frazier pointed to in a 1925 essay, when he wrote “Durham is promise of a transformed Negro.”¹⁹⁵ This especially held true for someone in Wheeler’s position—a well-educated person coming from a middle class background with arranged employment and housing. By that time, M&F had its headquarters located on Parrish Street on the first floor in the NCM building, “a six-story, modern, brick building, located in the heart of the central [white] business section of the city and symbol of achievement of [the] city’s Negro population.”¹⁹⁶ It became more aptly referred to as Durham’s “Black Wall Street.”¹⁹⁷ The other businesses closely affiliated with M&F and NCM included the People’s

¹⁹⁴Interview with Vivian Rogers Patterson by author, March 11, 2010.

¹⁹⁵E. Franklin Frazier in *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, 1925.

¹⁹⁶Hugh Penn Brinton, “The Negro in Durham: A Study of Adjustment to Town” (Ph.D. Diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1930).

¹⁹⁷John Hervey Wheeler interview by August Meier, 1960, Durham, NC, notes, box 139, August Meier Papers, 8.

Building and Loan Association (1915), the Bankers Fire Insurance Company (1920), the Mutual Building and Loan Association (1921), and the Southern Fidelity and Surety Company (1926).¹⁹⁸

John Wheeler found himself in an ideal situation. Once he arrived to Durham he settled into the city's black Hayti section "where the best Negro homes in Durham [were] found" and the same area where his family had once lived when he was still a small child.¹⁹⁹ Wheeler moved into the home of Mrs. Sarah McCotta "Cottie" Dancy Moore, the widow of the late NCM founder Dr. Aaron M. Moore. Cottie Moore not only opened up her home to Wheeler at 606 Fayetteville Street, but also gave the Morehouse class historian instructive lessons about black Durham's past, handing him the most intimate details and family connections. She would have also helped ease his transition to the small town where "new comers [were] made to feel they were just that."²⁰⁰ Another interesting detail reveals that Moore doubled as McDougald's mother-in-law and outside the bank's offices McDougald and Wheeler would have regularly crossed each other's paths at her home. This would have been particularly true when McDougald brought his children to visit their grandmother, especially after his wife Mattie Louise Moore died in September. Wheeler also had secure employment and could expect to work consistently throughout the year. His \$60 a month salary would have provided the income he needed as a single person living in Durham. In contrast to Wheeler's circumstances, most blacks who came to Durham during this same time worked as unskilled laborers in the city's tobacco or textile factories, and assigned to the

¹⁹⁸Hugh Penn Brinton, "The Negro in Durham."

¹⁹⁹Ibid.

²⁰⁰John Hervey Wheeler interview by August Meier, 1960, Durham, NC, notes, box 139, August Meier Papers, 3.

most labor intensive, lowest paid, jobs available to them. Moreover, these laborers came to Durham as migrant workers without any guaranteed employment arrangements and had few, if any, contacts to rely upon; the only housing available to them would have been in the city's most neglected, poorest and oldest sections.²⁰¹

During these early years, John Wheeler did not have the experience and preparation needed to take on the responsibilities that came to define his leadership in the black freedom movement. This was the making of a black business activist in Depression-era North Carolina. In this regard, Durham and M&F became Wheeler's training ground in black leadership during the 1930s. These leaders "used business success as a launching pad into civil rights," to borrow a phrase from historians David and Linda Beito.²⁰² In the 1930s, amid the Great Depression, Wheeler learned a fluid behind-the-scenes leadership style of leadership that defined the men and women in his mother and father's generation. In describing the tactics used by an earlier generation of black leaders in Durham—individuals like C. C. Spaulding, Dr. James E. Shepard, and William Gaston Pearson—John Wheeler explained that until about the 1930s "There was nothing—no relief available [to blacks]. If you resisted the [Jim Crow] system—there were no Supreme Court decisions—on practically every important matter that we think about today in terms of freedom of movement and civil rights protection [prior to the 1930s] was a closed door, and the Negro leadership had to be very skillful. And it didn't dare express itself except in rare instances. It played the white

²⁰¹Interview with Asa T. Spaulding by Walter B. Weare, April 14, 1979 # C-OO13-2, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; John Hervey Wheeler interview by August Meier, 1960, Durham, NC, notes, box 139, August Meier Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 3; Hugh Penn Brinton, "The Negro in Durham," 70, 80-88, 192.

²⁰²David T. and Linda Royster Beito, *Black Maverick: T.R.M. Howard's Fight for Civil Rights and Economic Power* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), xiv.

leadership for all it was worth, and being very careful and very skillful, knowing that they had no redress.”²⁰³ In the decades that followed, Wheeler embraced that leadership style and bridged it with more hard-line tactics, which came to define black business activist in his generation. In the decade before World War II, Wheeler was being prepared to follow behind men such as McDougald, Spaulding, Edward R. Merrick, W. G. Pearson, and Dr. Stanford L. Warren, all leading figures in Durham’s black community and officers or board members at M&F and NCM. In addition to Wheeler during the 1930s, black Durham welcomed several up-and-coming black business leaders including John Sylvester “Shag” Stewart, Asa T. Spaulding, and James J. “Babe” Henderson. Other members from this generation who made names for themselves included attorney Conrad O. Pearson and newspaper editor Louis E. Austin. John Wheeler’s sister Margery Janice Wheeler joined her older brother in Durham for a brief period where she became an art teacher in Durham’s segregated school system.²⁰⁴

THE MECHANICS AND FARMERS BANK, 1908-1929

The Mechanics and Farmers Bank (M&F) owed its existence to several important developments. In February 1907, Dr. Manassa Thomas Pope, a black doctor from Raleigh and Shaw University's Professor Edward A. Johnson met with black businessmen in Durham. They tried to convince the leaders to set-up a building and loan association in the city. Once

²⁰³ Interview with John Hervey Wheeler by Robert Penn Warren, June 30, 1964, original interview transcript can be accessed online at “Robert Penn Warren’s *Who Speaks for the Negro?*: an Archival Collection,” http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/sites/default/files/RPW.reel_3.T.H.%20Wheeler.pgs_.968-1001.doc.pdf, 2; audio version also available through “Robert Penn Warren’s *Who Speaks for the Negro?*: an Archival Collection,” <http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/interview/john-hervey-wheeler>.

²⁰⁴ Kristin B. Mallegh, ed., *Who's Who Among African Americans*, 20th ed. (Detroit: Gale, 2007), 154.

the group assembled it became evident they had no interest in a loan association, but several men wanted a bank instead. In fact, entrepreneurs Richard B. Fitzgerald and William G. Pearson had the inkling to open-up such a financial institution. The two even broached the idea to NCM president John A. Merrick at least two years earlier, but Merrick did not heartily endorse the proposal. However, after meeting with Pope and Johnson the black leaders in Durham quickly formed a bank.²⁰⁵

In the meantime, Fitzgerald and pharmacist turned educator Dr. James E. Shepard drafted the bank's initial charter. After meeting on several other occasions Fitzgerald, Shepard, Pearson, Warren, and Dr. J. A. Dodson all put down an initial investment comprising the bank's stock; both Merrick and Dr. Aaron M. Moore both became early shareholders. In all, they raised approximately \$10,000 and then took the steps toward official incorporation. On February 25, 1907, the North Carolina General Assembly granted a charter to the previously mentioned investors.²⁰⁶ M&F's establishment gave the Tar Heel State its third bank "owned, lock stock and barrel by colored people."²⁰⁷ The bank's formation represented a natural progression given the black business community's size and scope. "Often," explained historian Juliet E. K. Walker, "black insurance companies preceded the founding of black banks." The emergence of financial institutions such as M&F "were not only symbols of the increased financial holdings of blacks but also an

²⁰⁵R. McCants Andrews *John Merrick: A Biographical Sketch* (Durham: Seeman Printery, 1920), 50-55, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/andrews/andrews.html>; William K. Boyd, *The Story of Durham: City of the New South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1925), 288-299; Lassiter, Hans Dominique, "A History of Mechanics and Farmers Bank, 1908-1969" M.A. thesis, North Carolina Central University, 2000, 5-7.

²⁰⁶*Ibid.*

²⁰⁷"Negroes Open Bank: Owned, Lock, Stock and Barrel by Colored People—As a White Paper Sees Them," *Afro-American*, August 22, 1908; "Mechanics and Farmers Bank Enters 20th Successful Year," unidentified newspaper, 1918, William Gaston Pearson Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

expression of defiance to white attempts to impose a separate and subordinate status on America's citizens of African descent."²⁰⁸

In August 1908, M&F opened for business, barely one month after the Wheeler family moved to Durham. The incorporators located the bank's headquarters in the building owned by the black fraternal order the Royal Knights of King David located on Parrish Street. After the bank's first meeting in July, Fitzgerald, Dodson, Pearson, Merrick, Shepard, Spaulding, Stevens, Moore, and Warren became the bank's inaugural board of directors. The board elected Fitzgerald as the institution's first president, alongside vice president John Merrick and William Pearson as cashier.²⁰⁹ During M&F's first week in operation, it received assistance from bank managers at the city's white banks. J. B. Mason from the Citizens National Bank "came over each day for a week...and showed them [M&F managers] how to open and close the bank."²¹⁰ Already bolstered by NCM's economic success, the bank was destined to become another link in the chain of black economic achievement in Durham and the New South.

Between 1908 and 1929, M&F rose to prominence among the nation's leading black-owned banks. M&F's leadership—its officers and board members—consisted of the same individuals responsible for NCM's growth and expansion.²¹¹ M&F's first president Richard B. Fitzgerald, an original NCM founder, made his fortune as a skilled brick maker in

²⁰⁸Juliet E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship* (New York: Macmillan Library Reference USA, 1998), 190, 193.

²⁰⁹R. McCants Andrews, *John Merrick: A Biographical Sketch*, 50-55; Hans Dominique Lassiter, "A History of Mechanics and Farmers Bank, 1908-1969," M.A. thesis, North Carolina Central University, 2000, 5-7; William K. Boyd, *The Story of Durham, City of the New South*, 288-289; Jean Bradley Anderson, *Durham County*, 256-257; Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South*, 81.

²¹⁰"Leaders of Both Races Celebrate 20th Anniversary Mechanics-Farmers Bank," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, August 11, 1928.

²¹¹Arnett G. Lindsay, "The Negro in Banking" *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (April, 1929), 188.

Durham, after starting his company soon after emancipation; he became the “largest brick manufacturer in Durham County.”²¹² The bank’s cashier, William Pearson also helped found NCM. Pearson, a prominent educator and businessman, also became principal at the black Hillside Park High School. By the 1920s, Pearson helped start several other businesses associated with the NCM and M&F including the Bankers Fire Insurance Company and the Southern Fidelity and Surety Company. Pearson merged his commitment to business with responsibility to community; he also vied for full citizenship on blacks' behalf, while he modeled black business activism.²¹³ Other board members (Dodson, Shepard, Spaulding, Stevens, Moore, and Warren) did well for themselves financially before becoming bankers. Moore and Spaulding, the uncle and nephew duo made up the NCM “triumvirate,” the management team credited with the company’s early “success and survival.”²¹⁴

In as much as M&F’s leadership came from NCM’s ranks, that same leadership made community involvement a main priority through civic leadership. John Merrick followed in the philosophical tradition most identifiable with Booker T. Washington, where he counseled blacks to avoid politics. Merrick once remarked, “ ‘A man goes into politics a good man and [then] he goes to pulling the wires and soon is classed a politician.’ ” “ ‘What difference does it make to us who is elected?’ ” asked Merrick. “ ‘We got to serve in the same different

²¹²William K. Boyd, *The Story of Durham*, 291; Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South*, 43; Leslie Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham*, 115-116; Dolores E. Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied*, 79.

²¹³Obituary of William Gaston Pearson, September 25, 1947, William Gaston Pearson Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library, Duke University; "Chronological Summary of Specific W. G. Pearson Achievements," William Gaston Pearson Papers; R. McCants Andrews, *John Merrick: A Biography*, 44-46; "The Royal Knights of King David Historical Sketch," William Gaston Pearson Papers, 4, 10-17; "Mechanics and Farmers Bank Enters 20th Successful Year," unidentified newspaper, 1918, William Gaston Pearson Papers.

²¹⁴Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South*, 29; Leslie Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham*, 115-116; Jean Bradley Anders, *Durham County*, 221.

capacities of life for a living.’ ”²¹⁵ Despite Merrick’s insistence here, he and his colleagues stood at the forefront in civic leadership in Durham and across North Carolina from the beginning of M&F and NCM’s establishment. Dr. Aaron M. Moore held a deep and notable interest in black education, which led to significant contributions in that area. He became secretary-treasurer for the Rural School Extension Department for the North Carolina Teachers Association. During World War I, Moore served as the Special Agent and Supervisor of Negro Economics with the War Department in North Carolina. Most people described Moore as a “silent thinker” and a “philosopher.”²¹⁶

Charles C. Spaulding was born to former slaves on August 1, 1874 in Columbus County, North Carolina. He came to Durham in 1894 after intercepting a letter that his uncle Dr. Moore intended for his brother, which recommended the elder sibling come to Durham at once. Spaulding gained the nickname “Mr. Co-Operation,” several reasons. “Well,” as Spaulding himself explained, “co-operation brings organization, efficient organization brings success, and success alone inspires confidence and understanding.” “I tell the young people,” Spaulding exclaimed, “that life has to be lived out, not with money, not with machines, but with people. And I mean not only with other people of our own race but with the members of the white race—in fact, here in the South. I mean especially that.”²¹⁷ Spaulding firmly believed it to be “foolish...to talk about granting equality, except equality

²¹⁵William K. Boyd, *The Story of Durham*, 282-283.

²¹⁶“Death Claims Dr A. M. Moore at His Durham Home,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, May 5, 1923; Asa T. Spaulding interview by Walter B. Weare, interview transcript, 15.

²¹⁷Archibald Rutledge, “The Call Him ‘Co-Operation,’” *The Mutual*, reprinted from the *The Saturday Evening Post*,” March 27, 1943, C. C. Spaulding Vertical File, Stanford L. Warren Library, Durham, North Carolina; C. C. Spaulding, “Pioneer Insurancemen, Bankers Hailed”; “Business Tycoon Died on Date of 78th Birthday,” *The Carolinian*, August 9, 1952.

of opportunity.” He had no formal education, yet he encouraged blacks interested in business to attend college and learn scientific business practices.

During the 1920s, M&F’s economic rise became most evident. By then the bank assembled a financially savvy group of employees. The bank's leadership by that time included board chairman Dr. Stanford L. Warren, president C.C. Spaulding, vice president Richard McDougald, second vice president Edward Merrick, third vice president Dr. Clyde Donell (the Harvard trained medical doctor), fifth vice president Brittain Pearce, and cashier W. H. Wilson; James M. Avery became the institution's trust officer. In early 1922, M&F merged with the Fraternal Bank and Trust Company, a bank founded by William Pearson in 1920. With the two banks now consolidated, M&F strengthened its overall assets to about \$633,000. The consolidation helped position M&F as a frontrunner among black banks in North Carolina and among the most profitable black banks in the country.²¹⁸ In January 1923, M&F expanded its holdings when it opened a second branch in Raleigh. The Raleigh branch opened with approximately \$115,749.95, which brought M&F's general resources to \$650,000. Charles R. Frazier, a former dean at Shaw University, became the branch manager.²¹⁹ By 1927, the Raleigh branch reported “loans and discounts” at \$623,833.56 and embarked on a \$50,000.00, two months-long deposit campaign.²²⁰ In a January 1925 article, the black *Norfolk Journal and Guide* reported that black enterprises in Durham looked “forward to [a] year of prosperity,” as they hosted a conclave to re-organize the local

²¹⁸“Durham Bank's Consolidate,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, March 4, 1922.

²¹⁹“Another Race Bank for North Carolina,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, January 20, 1923.

²²⁰“50,000 Deposits Drive By Farmers Mechanics Bank [M&F],” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, February 5, 1927.

National Negro Business League (NNBL) branch, an organization founded by Booker T. Washington in 1900.²²¹

As M&F made considerable economic progress, the larger black banking world formed a professional organization known as the National Negro Bankers Association (NNBA). The idea for the NNBA came from Major Richard R. Wright, a former educator from Georgia who served as president at the Citizens and Southern Bank and Trust Company of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In 1920, Wright opened his Citizens and Southern Bank after witnessing the black community's dollars continuously pass from their hands and into white hands while “ ‘building up businesses’ ” that “ ‘discriminate[d] against our people.’ ”²²² The origins for the NNBA also dated back to 1906 a NNBL affiliate, but the organization ceased to exist after 1916.²²³

In 1924, black bankers again used the NNBL's annual meeting in Cleveland, Ohio to convene a session that ended with the NNBA's reorganization. As detailed by historian Alexa Benson Henderson, the bankers believed “strong banks were essential to the economic progress of African Americans.”²²⁴ In 1926, the NNBA organized their own separate meeting in Philadelphia where M&F president C. C. Spaulding gave the keynote address and urged “cooperation” between a reported seventy black banks in operation throughout the

²²¹“Big Business Ventures Plan 1925 Campaign,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, January 10, 1925; “Pioneer Insurancemen, Bankers Hailed,” unidentified newspaper article in the C. C. Spaulding vertical file, Stanford L. Warren Library, Durham, North Carolina; Juliet E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship*, 184.

²²²Alexa Benson Henderson, “Richard R. Wright and the National Negro Bankers Association: Early Organizing Efforts among Black Bankers, 1924-1942” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 117, No. ½ (Jan.-Apr., 1993), 54.

²²³*Ibid.*

²²⁴*Ibid.*, 58.

country. He told the bankers in attendance that they needed to “ ‘pull together and make openings for [their] young men and women, and serve the race.’ ”²²⁵ Before the meeting ended the bankers selected Wright to be president, Wilson Lovett of First Standard Bank in Louisville, Kentucky as secretary and Spaulding became treasurer.²²⁶ The NNBA's formation coincided with the move by blacks in other fields to create their own organizations in order to strengthen professional standards. In addition to the NNBA, the other groups included the National Association of Negro Insurance Companies, the National Association of Funeral Directors, the National Association of Real Estate Dealers, the National Bar Association, the National Press Association and the Colored Undertakers and Embalmers Association.²²⁷

Since the NNBA's inception, Spaulding and M&F played a vital role in the organization's development and ultimate survival. In fact, between September 15 and 16, 1927, M&F hosted the second annual NNBA convention. Durham by that time also had prestige as “ ‘the financial center of Aframerica’ ”²²⁸ The NNBA made its concern the “economic advancement of our group” and therefore “effective mobilization of the money-power of the race.” It wanted to solve the problem of “the unorganized Negro money-power.” M&F casher Richard L. McDougald had the responsibility to make local arrangements for the gathering. By the time of the Durham meeting the organization's membership increased to fifty-five member banks. The bankers in attendance that year

²²⁵Ibid., 59.

²²⁶Ibid., 60.

²²⁷Juliette E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America*, 312.

²²⁸Alexa Benson Henderson, “Richard R. Wright and the National Negro Bankers Association, 60.

received a first-hand look at how Durham's black businesses operated. They also traveled to Raleigh to visit Shaw University and M&F's branch there.²²⁹

There are many individuals than can be credited with M&F's economic advancement between 1908 and 1929. However, the bank's history cannot be discussed without mentioning Richard Lewis McDougald who became bookkeeper in 1919; by 1923, he became the bank's vice president and cashier. He was born on April 11, 1896 in Whiteville, North Carolina in a family that included ten children to parents Richard and Ida Virginia Moore McDougald. He spent his childhood growing up in New York where he completed a year of high school. From there, McDougald enlisted in the United States Air Force and served the country in World War I. After the war, the military veteran returned to his home state and enrolled at the National Religions Training School and Chatauqua where he graduated. Along with his employment at M&F, McDougald helped found other important financial institutions in Durham also linked to M&F and NCM. Most notably, he helped establish the Mutual Building and Loan Association (MB&LA) in 1921 and had a prominent role in the Southern Fidelity and Surety Company. He started the MB&LA to educate blacks about " ' the importance of owning their own homes.' " Moreover, the company "aimed for the [black] masses, selling its 'shares' at twenty-five cents each. These shares were converted into saving certificates akin to bonds which matured in 333 weeks. McDougald calculated that such a program would enable the black worker to accumulate a down payment on a home and then, of course, borrow the balance from the Association."²³⁰ He also became an

²²⁹"National Negro Bankers' Association," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, July 23, 1927; "Negro Bankers Meet in Durham," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, August 6, 1927; "National Negro Bankers Ass'n to Meet in Durham," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 13, 1927; "National Bankers Meet in Louisville Session," *Baltimore Afro-American*, September 22, 1928.

²³⁰Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South*, 121-122.

officer and board member at the Bankers Fire Insurance Company; in the early 1920s, he had a hand in expanding the Merrick-McDougald-Wilson Company—later the Union Insurance and Realty Company—and in 1929 he started the Mortgage Company of Durham. The entrepreneur had a special knack for business and before joining the military, he worked as a Wall Street “runner.” McDougald had “very fair [skinned]; he was often mistaken for white,” remembered Asa Spaulding. “You couldn't tell him from being white,” Spaulding continued, “And a lot of people in Durham didn't know he was not white.” However, “he never would [try] to pass for white.” In fact, “it was an insult to consider him as white” and “he made no bones about it any time, that he was a Negro.”²³¹

In August 1928, M&F celebrated its twentieth year anniversary and the bank's total resources were at \$800,000.²³² North Carolina's lieutenant governor Jacob Elmer Long attended that year's observance. Long told the celebrants that in Durham they “could not have any better leaders” and that “the State of North Carolina [was] exceedingly proud of [their] institution.” Despite the bank's success during the previous two decades, M&F president C. C. Spaulding relayed that they “were not going to get the big head,” but would “keep our feet on the ground.” Spaulding's assurance in the above instance correlated with the bank's cautious banking practices, which most observers gave as reasons for the

²³¹Obituary of R. L. McDougald, October 5, 1944, courtesy of North Carolina Central University archivist Andre D. Vann; “Death Claims R. L. McDougald,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, October 7, 1944; Asa Spaulding interview April 16, 1979, transcript, 8; Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South*, 121-123; “Will 'The Town that Co-Operation Built' Hold its Own?: Will Durham Continue the Seat of Negro Business?” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 26, 1929.

²³²“Harlem Suffering from Too Much Pleasure,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 24, 1927; “Leaders of Both Races Celebrate 20th Anniversary Mechanics-Farmers Bank,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, August 11, 1928; “800,000 N.C. Bank Winds Up 20th Yr.,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 11, 1928; “Mechanics and Farmers, North Carolina's Largest Negro Banking Institution,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, December 29, 1928; “N.C. Bank Robbery Still Mystery: Durham's Institution's Cashier Grilled Five Hours,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 9, 1929.

institution's economic sturdiness." In December 1927, the black *Pittsburgh Courier* newspaper wrote about M&F and NCM's cautious business practices. The article compared black Durham's economic rise with the larger black metropolis of Harlem, New York. "Harlem," the article explained, "is put to shame from a business point of view by a mere handful of Negroes in Durham." After briefly detailing the scope of black enterprises in Durham, the article attributed the city's black business success to M&F president C. C. Spaulding for "preaching 'cooperation,' and not only in Durham, but all of North Carolina, telling Negroes to pull together and they can get somewhere."²³³ The experts considered M&F to be "a safe and conservatively managed institution."²³⁴ To also mark the occasion, Spaulding and M&F raised \$82,000 in deposits "for both the Durham bank and the Raleigh branch." They even received a \$10,000 check from a "local white business for deposits." By that time, M&F also became a depository "for the city...and county of Durham."²³⁵

By 1920, M&F had such sound footing that when thieves robbed its Raleigh branch of \$4,000 in January, the bank had little trouble recovering. In fact, C. C. Spaulding "came to Raleigh at once, transferring \$115,000 in bonds and \$52,000 in cash to the vaults of the robbed bank." He also assured the bank's customers that "the loss was fully covered by a

²³³"Harlem Suffering from Too Much-Pleasure," *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 24, 1927.

²³⁴Arnett G. Lindsay, "The Negro in Banking," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Apr., 1929), 188.

²³⁵"Leaders of Both Races Celebrate 20th Anniversary Mechanics-Farmers Bank," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, August 11, 1928; "800,000 N.C. Bank Winds Up 20th Yr.," *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 11, 1928; "Mechanics and Farmers, North Carolina's Largest Negro Banking Institution," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, December 29, 1928.



Figure 2.1 John Hervey Wheeler, 1930s-1940s (Photo Courtesy of the Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center)

\$20,000 burglar insurance [policy].”²³⁶ Despite M&F’s economic growth by decade’s end, John Wheeler had yet to work at the bank a full year when the stock market crashed in October 1929, this brought the country to its knees. The “golden age” that came to define black business between 1900 and 1930 now faced an almost insurmountable giant—the Great Depression. The economic downturn was especially difficult in the banking field, and even more distressing for black-owned banks.²³⁷ Between the late 1880s and mid-1930s, about 134 black banks formed.²³⁸ By 1908, when M&F came along, nearly 70 black banks existed

²³⁶N. C. Bank Robbery Still a Mystery," *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 9, 1929; Arnette G. Lindsay, "The Negro in Banking," 188.

²³⁷Lila Ammons, "The Evolution of Black-Owned Banks in the United States Between the 1880s and 1990s" *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Mar., 1996), 474.

²³⁸Juliet E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship*, 187.

throughout the country and the South was home to an overwhelming majority.²³⁹ However, the depression forced all but twelve of those banks into collapse before the decade came to an end; only half of those banks made it to World War II.²⁴⁰ Fortunately for John Wheeler and black Durham, M&F avoided closing its doors amid the chaos that increased significantly beginning in 1930.²⁴¹ According to one newspaper, "Later, the depression came and the advice to John Hervey was to get out of the banking business. But Mr. McDougald persuaded John to stay and with the enthusiasm of youth both John and the bank survived the crisis that swept the Nation."²⁴² About 215 North Carolina banks closed in the first half of the depression decade. As noted by Milton Ready, this meant that between 1930 and 1933 two North Carolina banks went under every week.²⁴³

The collapse of the Binga State Bank in Chicago, Illinois provides the most telling effects the Great Depression had on the country's most successful black banks. In August 1930, the bank's sudden closure stunned black Chicagoans. Jesse Binga established his State Bank as a private institution in 1908, the same year black businessmen opened the doors to M&F.²⁴⁴ During the 1920s, Binga State Bank reached its pinnacle as the nation's top black

²³⁹Ibid., 191.

²⁴⁰Ibid., 193.

²⁴¹ Alexa Benson Henderson, "Richard R. Wright and the National Negro Bankers Association," 68.

²⁴²"Decision Led to Banking," *Durham Morning Herald*, August 2, 1933.

²⁴³William Link, *North Carolina: Change and Tradition in a Southern State* (Wheeling, Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2009), 338; Milton Ready, *The Tarheel State: A History of North Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 324.

²⁴⁴"Crowd Waits in Vain for Bank to Re-Open: Defunct Banks Have Deposits of 3 Million," *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 9, 1930.

bank. Nevertheless, shady dealings by the bank's president Jesse Binga compromised the financial institution's future. According to Juliet E. K. Walker:

Binga borrowed from white banks, using mortgages held by his bank on black real estate as security. But in the late 1920s, with Chicago's housing market in a slump, the downtown banks were unwilling to accept his mortgages, which tied up \$800,000 of Binga's resources.²⁴⁵

The bank took out approximately \$267,612 in “dummy loans,” that were also “made ostensibly to [bank] employees or others at the behest of Binga, without security.”²⁴⁶ An investigation into the bank's loan records in July 1930 revealed loans given to Binga actually amounted to \$379,000. After several unsuccessful attempts by Binga to rectify the situation by trying to raise \$430,000 to satisfy state auditors, the bank closed for good. In his response to Binga State Bank's closing, M&F president C. C. Spaulding told one newspaper that “We happen to know that most Negro banks began business without experienced bankers and, as a result, acquired a large number of loans without liquid securities.” “Some of these securities have been nurtured an[d] carried for years,” noted Spaulding “with the hope of working them out, but the financial depression has made it almost impossible for them to do so.” Spaulding's statement reflects his belief that banks with less than cautious policies could not expect to survive the depression.²⁴⁷ In line with Spaulding's statements, M&F weathered the economic storm during the depression's early years and despite other challenges, ultimately survived collapse during the entire decade.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁵Juliet E. K. Walker, *The History of Black Business in America*, 192.

²⁴⁶“Crowd Waits in Vain for Bank to Re-Open: Defunct Banks Have Deposits of 3 Million,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 9, 1930.

²⁴⁷*Ibid.*

²⁴⁸“Will ‘The Town that Co-Operation Built’ Hold its Own?: Will Durham Continue the Seat of Negro Business?” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 26, 1929; “Defunct Banks Have Deposits of 3 Million,” *Baltimore*

On October 26, 1929, just a few days before the stock market crashed, the *Pittsburgh Courier Newspaper* asked the question “Will ‘The Town that Co-Operation Built’ Hold its Own?” The article pointed to the next generation of black business leaders in Durham to answer in the affirmative. Durham had a “second line of defense,” which meant a reserve “group of young men who could not only carry on the present businesses and make them bigger and better, but who would carry on the Durham tradition for business leadership as well.” “It has [already] been a cardinal part of the Durham leaders’ program,” the article continued “to build an organization as well as a business—an organization that can and will carry the business on either with or without the presence of the chief executive.” The article particularly singled-out Richard L. McDougald as “the man who [really] runs [M&F].” Moreover:

Mr. McDougald has demonstrated that he is capable of not only handling the bank itself, but that he has the vision to foresee possibilities for sound development, and he had the courage to push in that direction. Much of the new activity in Durham in recent years is due to his initiative in advancing credit along safe and constructive lines...[he] has been practically free to manage the bank as he sees fit. His methods, however, have been such that he has received the enthusiastic support of all the people of the community, high and low. He is perfectly at home with the humblest depositor, or with the largest depositor, and he knows the problems and possibilities of every type of endeavor that is in Durham. Although Mr. Spaulding is president, he rarely bothers with the bank, except to O.K. what Mr. McDougald does.²⁴⁹

A month later, Spaulding agreed when a *Norfolk Journal and Guide* reporter put a similar question to him. “The North Carolina Mutual believes,” Spaulding declared “in its motto of ‘Safety First.’” “Wall Street call money did not sweep [the company] off its balance,” he

Afro-American, August 9, 1930; “Bankers to Convene on Hampton Campus,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 13, 1930.

²⁴⁹“Will ‘The Town that Co-Operation Built’ Hold its Own?: Will Durham Continue the Seat of Negro Business?” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 26, 1929.

explained “because the company’s investments of nearly two million dollars in first mortgages is on property owned by local, thrifty people. Furthermore, the company’s investments are in states where it operates and insurance funds are not used in ruthless speculation.”²⁵⁰

THE BATTLE FOR RACIAL EQUALITY IN DURHAM DURING THE EARLY 1930S

Despite the economic advancement seen by businesses such as M&F during the 1920s, blacks in North Carolina still faced racial segregation, which became even more persistent during the Great Depression. Increasingly, blacks considered their re-entry into politics as a way to overcome racial inequality in the state. In theory, black North Carolinians regained the political freedoms they lost at the turn-of-the-century, around the same time John Wheeler’s father made his way the state. In 1920, for example, North Carolina rescinded its discriminatory poll tax, a clause from the 1900 Suffrage Amendment that required eligible voters to pay a fee in order to exercise voting privileges.²⁵¹ Despite the elimination of the poll tax and what it meant for voters, in 1923 registration rolls in Durham included just twenty-five blacks.²⁵² By 1928, Durham only had fifty blacks registered to vote.²⁵³ Although these numbers were small by any standard of comparison, several black political activists made the increases possible. As early as 1922, black attorney-businessman Robert McCants Andrews alongside Louis Ernest Austin, editor of the black newsweekly the

²⁵⁰“C. C. Spaulding, Leader, Norfolk,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, November 16, 1929.

²⁵¹Harry Joseph Walker, “Changes in Race Accommodation in a Southern Community” (Ph.diss., University of Chicago, 1945), 124.

²⁵²*Ibid.*

²⁵³Jean Bradley Anderson, *Durham County*; Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South*.

Carolina Times, organized the Colored Voters League to help facilitate black voter registration in the state.²⁵⁴

As the poll tax became a distant memory, prospective black voters faced ongoing problems with local white registrars who relied on many high-handed tactics to thwart black voter registration. In most instances, the registrars had the sole authority to determine whether black voters satisfied literacy requirements by having them read and interpret the U.S. Constitution.²⁵⁵ R. McCants Andrews, considered among the black radicals, regularly accompanied potential black voters to the registrar's office to ensure successful registration.²⁵⁶ John Wheeler's initial introduction to North Carolina politics came in 1930, the year he registered to vote for the first time. "There were barriers," Wheeler remembered which "weren't openly practiced but they were there." Such obstacles meant blacks who wanted to vote "were forced to wait a long time or required to do a lot of reading by registrants." Although "sophisticated tactics," served as impediments explained Wheeler, in subsequent decades Durham's blacks eventually accounted for a third of the city's registered voters.²⁵⁷ NCM secretary Viola G. Turner also remembered the first time she registered to vote in Durham. As she explained, C. C. Spaulding accompanied her and about four NCM employees to the courthouse. Spaulding's presence made it more likely for them to get

²⁵⁴Ibid.

²⁵⁵Harry Joseph Walker, "Changes in Race Accommodation," 185, 193-196.

²⁵⁶Ibid., 188; Brandon Winford, "The Struggle for Freedom Begins Every Morning: The Durham Committee on Negro Affairs, 1935-1970," M.A. Thesis, North Carolina Central University, 19-18; Jerry Gershenhorn, "Louis Austin," 76-77.

²⁵⁷"Tarheel of the Week – John Wheeler: Working Quietly for the Progress of Blacks," *The News and Observer*, March 15, 1970; Interview with Viola G. Turner by Walter B. Weare, April 17, 1979 (C-0016), in the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007), Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, interview transcript, 33; <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/C-0016/C-0016.html>.

register without any problems. Nevertheless, most blacks in Durham avoided this formality altogether to escape the embarrassment that often came with the whole ordeal.²⁵⁸

During the 1920s and 1930s, M&F's Richard McDougald helped make up the political vanguard in Durham. Thus, the bank supported increased black voter registration in the decade before the Great Depression. As McDougald explained to a sociologist conducting research on black Durham in the late 1930s, that when he began working at the bank in 1919 “ ‘those ‘Parrish Street Negroes’...told me that we don't go in for politics. We aren't interested in anything like that because it [would] only mean trouble.’ ”²⁵⁹ This meant R. McCants Andrews, L. E. Austin, and McDougald “ ‘had to bootleg politics.’ ” In other words, they had to seek an end-run around older black leaders such as C. C. Spaulding, W. G. Pearson, and Dr. J. E. Shepard.²⁶⁰

Although older bank officials such as C. C. Spaulding took a less public stance when it came to politics, the bank's younger generation represented by McDougald and later John Wheeler joined Louis Austin and R. McCants Andrews in their voter registration efforts. In discussing how his own involvement in political activism came to be, McDougald told how R. McCants Andrews “ ‘proposed that a few of us get together and advise the Negro that before he could enjoy his full citizenship, it was not sufficient to be thrifty, but that he must also exercise his right to vote.’ ”²⁶¹ In that context, economic advancement alone could not bring about racial equality for blacks. The only alternative rested with having access to full

²⁵⁸Harry Joseph Walker, "Changes in Race Accommodation," 193-196.

²⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 190.

²⁶⁰*Ibid.*

²⁶¹*Ibid.*, 189.

citizenship, the most reasonable step toward economic power, an ideal John Wheeler promoted to no end in the decades that followed. Racial equality and full citizenship were necessary requirements for economic power and New South prosperity. C. C. Spaulding even came to recognize the inherent limitations placed on blacks' ability to gain racial equality through economic advancement alone. Spaulding expressed many regrets about his unwillingness to get behind politics in the previous decade because " 'the future of our group lies in getting more political power. Somehow we have to teach our people to use the ballot intelligently.' " ²⁶²

Although the earlier voter registration attempts led by R. McCants Andrews came up short, according to McDougald the efforts " 'were persistent and as the years went by, many more joined [Andrews] in his efforts to make the Negro vote-conscious.' " By 1938, the voter registration efforts begun by Andrews, Austin, and McDougald paved the way for over three thousand " 'Negroes on the registration books in Durham, and thirty thousand in the state.' " ²⁶³ Throughout the Great Depression—Andrews died mid-decade—the threesome continued to lead the way toward black political participation in Durham and across the state. As black voter support shifted from the Republican Party to the Democratic Party during the 1932 presidential election, black North Carolinians demanded more access to the state Democratic Party.

The contributions made by political activists such as McDougald, Andrews, and Austin generated more interest in voting, yet the role played by black "ward heelers" also helped with black political activity among African Americans. The white candidates paid

²⁶²Ibid., 210.

²⁶³Harry Joseph Walker, "Changes in Race Accommodations," 189.

ward heelers, which were black political workers, to solicit black voter support. Then on election days ward heelers had the responsibility to turn out to the polls as many black voters as possible on their candidate's behalf. This meant transporting black voters to and from the polls on election days. As noted by NCM's Asa Spaulding, the numbers for general voter turnouts "were not spectacular" during that time, which meant that on any given election day a ward heeler need only "pick up twenty-five, fifty, or a hundred votes" in order to give their candidate a victory. In Durham, cotton textile worker Annie Peterson alongside grocery store proprietor Buck Waller and Albert Smith had reputations as the most powerful black ward heelers. They each made no qualms about the link between their own economic interests and politics. The Durham Committee on Negro Affairs later challenged the influence held by ward heelers' by encouraging black political solidarity with better precision. In the early 1930s, a younger generation wanted blacks in Durham to become more politically assertive. They viewed ward heelers "as retarding the progress of blacks instead of improving it."²⁶⁴ Despite the contributions made by ward heelers to black political life they became problematic for younger black activists who wanted a powerful political voice. Once black leaders called for political solidarity, they encouraged blacks to embrace community mobilization. In 1932, for example, about 500 blacks led by Louis Austin convened a meeting in Durham to help organize the statewide Independent Voters League. The League promoted black political activity and tried to convince blacks about the relevance the ballot had to their everyday lives.²⁶⁵

²⁶⁴Harry Joseph Walker, "Changes in Race Accommodation," 191; Asa T. Spaulding interview with Walter B. Weare, 1979, interview transcript, 16.

²⁶⁵Jerry B. Gershenhorn, "A Courageous Voice for Black Freedom: Louis Austin and the *Carolina Times* in Depression-Era North Carolina" *North Carolina Historical Review*, 77; Leslie Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham*, 306-307.

While black North Carolinians made some inroads on the political front, they received frequent reminders about how far they still had to go before they reached racial equality. Moreover, a powerful black bank president could not escape this reality. In 1931, white store clerk George Brown attacked M&F president C.C. Spaulding as he drank a Coca-Cola in the Conyer's Cigar Store in Raleigh. Brown, a new employee, worked as a soda dispenser at the store, located in the same building as M&F's local branch when he commanded the older gentleman to take his drink outside. When Spaulding raised questions about why he had to leave the store, Brown pounced on the fifty-nine year old banker. According to newspaper accounts, Brown "rushed from behind the counter and knocked the drink from [Spaulding's] hand." He then "shoved [Spaulding] out the door, brutally beating and kicking him as he fell."²⁶⁶ The attack left Spaulding with two missing teeth and "bruises all about the face." After the incident angry Spaulding supporters, including Spaulding's son, rushed to the store. At Spaulding's request, however, the group disbanded but the attack on him shocked black communities in Raleigh and Durham and gave them a sober reminder about Jim Crow's brutality, which cared little about respectability. Spaulding refused to appear in court, which meant the police dropped all charges against Brown.²⁶⁷ John Wheeler would have witnessed Spaulding's bewilderment, yet received some important lessons in navigating the delicate parameters of race in the New South. Namely, breaking the rules, no matter how unjust, always came with consequences.

²⁶⁶ N.C. Ins. Head Assaulted by Dixie Clerk," *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 8, 1931; Harry Joseph Walker, "Race Accommodations," 158.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

As the Great Depression decade moved forward, John Wheeler's personal life took on new meaning. In 1932, a chance encounter with a young lady named Selena Lucille Warren caught his undivided attention. In June, Selena graduated from the all-black Howard University in Washington, D. C. where President Herbert C. Hoover gave the commencement address. With the country's economic depression and the impending presidential election on his shoulders, Hoover congratulated the black college graduates on their accomplishments and told them that unless the black population "developed proportionality with the rest of the population, it cannot pull its proper strength at the oars of our pressing problems of democracy."²⁶⁸ Soon after graduation, Selena's mother purchased a car for her as a gift to reward the accomplishment. Before long, John sent Selena a playful message that read: "don't break your neck now," referring to her new car and the two soon courted.²⁶⁹

Selena was the only child born to the union between Dr. Stanford L. and Julia McCauley Warren. The prominent Durham doctor, and a former tobacco worker, helped found M&F. Dr. Stanford Warren finished among the earliest Kittrell graduates—he probably sat in the audience the day Ossian Hawkins spoke about the school's transition from slavery to freedom—and then Dr. Stanford Warren went to Shaw University's Leonard Medical School. Julia Warren, a child orphan, had the good fortune of being adopted by family friends who later sent her to college at Howard University. The Sumter, South

²⁶⁸Herbert Hoover, "Commencement Address at Howard University, June 10, 1932, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=23123>.

²⁶⁹Selena Wheeler, interview by Brenda Williams, June 27, 1995; Southern Oral History Program #4007, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, interview V-42, tape 1, side 1; John Hervey Wheeler interview by August Meier, 1960, Durham, NC, notes, box 139, August Meier Papers, 3.

Carolina native became the first hairdresser in Durham and operated a beauty parlor for whites near Main Street. As an only child, Selena “grew up very much alone” and quickly learned to entertain herself. She used to “sit out on the curb” playing alone when passersby would ask for her name. Selena proudly proclaimed, “my name is Selena Lucille Dr. Warren.” She recalled it as a sign of how much she adored her father.²⁷⁰ The religious Warren family brought their daughter to services at St. Joseph’s AME Church every Sunday. At St. Joseph’s, Selena’s mother taught Sunday School and her father served on the church’s board. The Warren family would have been members alongside the Wheelers before the Wheelers left Durham for Atlanta.²⁷¹

According to Selena, her parents had considerable influence over her life and she believed whatever they said, she should do. Prior to college, she attended Durham’s West End School and then graduated from Hillside Park High School. Selena thoroughly enjoyed her experience at Howard—her first time away from home. When Selena first met John Wheeler, she planned to attend law school to avoid becoming a teacher. “I hated the idea of teaching,” Selena once told an interviewer. Nevertheless, she put those plans on hold temporarily to fill a position at Durham’s Colored Library after the librarian Mrs. Hattie B. Wooten died. Selena never expected to be a librarian, but enjoyed the work so much that she put her law school plans aside permanently to pursue a degree in library science at Hampton Institute in Virginia. When Selena left Durham for Hampton she and John also put their

²⁷⁰Selena Wheeler, interview by Brenda Williams, (Date), Southern Oral History Program #4007, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, interview V-42, tape 1, side 1; John Hervey Wheeler, Interview by August Meier, 1960, Durham, NC, notes, box 139, August Meier Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; Dorothy Phelps Jones, *The End of An Era* (Durham: Brown Enterprises, 2001); Andre D. Vann and Beverly Washington Jones, *Durham's Hayti*, 20.

²⁷¹Ibid.

relationship on the backburner. As John drove her to Virginia when the time came for her to attend Hampton the two probably contemplated their future together but according to Selena, at the time marriage came up only as an afterthought.²⁷²

Besides John Wheeler's work responsibilities, the young man still in his twenties at the time had to find other ways to spend his time. In his unpublished autobiography, NCM's Asa Spaulding fondly reminisced about his friendship with Wheeler. The two became roommates when Wheeler moved to Durham as an adult. In 1933, Wheeler also joined NCM's Investment Securities Committee.²⁷³ Asa Spaulding, a nephew to Dr. Aaron M. Moore, lived at the Moore home on Fayetteville Street during that time. Spaulding graduated from North Carolina College (NCC) and then enrolled in business school at the University of Michigan; Spaulding then went back to work for NCM as the nation's first black insurance actuary. Both Wheeler and Spaulding sometimes dined in the adjoining cafeteria at the NCM women's dormitory where they also went to get a glimpse at the young women. Spaulding met his wife Elna there when "one evening John Wheeler and I were going there to eat, and Elna and a girl friend were crossing Fayetteville St. to meet Ethel [NCM secretary] and eat with her. Wheeler and I, of course, had spied them." Once introduced, "Elna and I immediately had eyes for each other ." "We all strolled along together to the dining room."²⁷⁴

²⁷²Ibid.; Beverly Washington Jones. *Stanford L. Warren Branch Library: 77 Years of Public Service*. Durham: Durham County Library, 1990, 74.

²⁷³John Hervey Wheeler Pension Plan with NCN, Asa T. Spaulding Papers.

²⁷⁴"Chapter four draft of Asa T. Spaulding's unpublished autobiography," Asa T. and Elna Spaulding Papers, Box AWS-2, Duke University Manuscripts Department, Durham, North Carolina, 8.; "Chapter three draft of Spaulding's unpublished autobiography," Asa T. and Elna Spaulding Papers, Box AWS-2, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, 10; Asa Spaulding interview with Walter B. Weare, April 16, 1979, 34; "Friend, Good Citizen Gone," *Durham Sun*, August 7, 1978.

It is worth mentioning that in the three decades that followed the Great Depression years, both John Wheeler and Asa Spaulding became the two most influential black businessmen in the country—as presidents at M&F and NCM, respectively. Yet the two differed in their approaches to community involvement and the larger battle for civil rights. Wheeler took an outward stance as an activist, while Spaulding had "more of an inward focus." Spaulding himself admitted he "wasn't politically active at all before [the late 1960s], except to go and vote." "At that time," said Spaulding "I wasn't mixing my business with politics, because sometimes you can really make...business enemies [that way]."²⁷⁵ Dr. Charles Watts, later the medical director at Lincoln Hospital, remembered that Wheeler "was more active." Spaulding's "outreach was probably f[urther]," Watts opined, given NCM's operations in eleven states and he "may not have had the time to give to local affairs that other people were able to devote." As NCC history professor Helen G. Edmunds once pointed out "Asa is never going to cut his ties with the whites so if you expect him to cut out there and lead an activist role on the black question you are just wrong as you can be." James J. "Babe" Henderson, who became a top NCM executive, agreed saying "Mr. [Asa] Spaulding confined himself more or less to the top leadership of the business institutions." "I don't recall too much," continued Henderson, of "his involvement in social [activism] and his small group was more or less confined to the institutions." Nevertheless, Spaulding always made his financial resources available to activists during the black freedom movement.

²⁷⁵Asa T. Spaulding interview with Walter B. Weare, April 16, 1979, 34.



Figure 2.2 John Hervey Wheeler, 1940s. (*Photo Courtesy of the Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center*)

"John Wheeler and Asa Spaulding were [just] different," asserted M&F executive James Sansom, Jr., "they provided a sort of different type of leadership for the community."²⁷⁶

By 1933, the Great Depression had already taken a toll on most Americans. The country's economic crisis came front and center during the 1932 presidential election between incumbent President Herbert Hoover and New York Governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt. After Roosevelt defeated Hoover that fall, he became the first Democratic president to take office since Woodrow Wilson. That year's election held special significance for black Americans, as they gave their overall support to Roosevelt, which marked a

²⁷⁶Interview with Helen G. Edmunds by John E. Fleming, April 2, 1979; Interview with James Sanson, Jr. by John E. Fleming, June 28, 1979; Interview with J. J. Henderson by John E. Fleming, April 2, 1979; Interview with Dr. Charles D. Watts by John E. Fleming, April 3, 1978; Interview with Nathan B. White by John Fleming, April 4, 1979, all in the Asa and Elna Spaulding Papers.

complete shift in their previous allegiance to the Republican Party, the party long associated with black emancipation. In 1933, when Roosevelt began his first term in office, he immediately launched an ambitious recovery program during his first 100 days to reverse the country's economic course. In North Carolina, the president's New Deal policies were met with resistance and skepticism by the state's conservative political faction.

In Roosevelt's all-encompassing New Deal plan for the banking industry, he instituted a national bank holiday on March 4. North Carolina's governor John C. B. Ehringhaus initiated the state's bank holiday two days later. The next week, "On the night of March 13, 1933," remembered John Wheeler, M&F officials led by bank president C. C. Spaulding and cashier R. L. McDougald "filed into the office of [the] Honorable Gurney P. Hood," the state's banking commissioner. "Like other bankers," continued Wheeler, went to Hood's office "seeking permission to reopen their institution." "Although comparative strangers to each other," Wheeler explained "there seemed to be an instant meeting of the minds between the commissioner" and M&F's "white-haired president." Moreover:

After a brief but intense discussion of the condition of the bank, a license was issued to reopen for business the next morning. There was little doubt, however, that the apparent sincerity and great interest of this small group of men in the progress of their own race of people had influenced the commissioner's decision in large measure.²⁷⁷

That night M&F became the first bank in North Carolina—white or black—to reopen. Both M&F and Wachovia Bank had the responsibility to service the Capital in Raleigh for a time, the only two banks given that responsibility. It showed the bank's economic soundness, as "the criteria for allowing banks to reopen included strength of management and soundness of

²⁷⁷John Hervey Wheeler, "A Negro Banker Speaks to the South," *The Tarheel Banker*, vol. 24, no. 5, November 1945, North Carolina Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 26.

assets."²⁷⁸ It also showed the black bankers' skills at behind-the-scenes negotiations. John Wheeler's vivid recollections about what transpired that night suggests that he accompanied his M&F superiors to Raleigh and would have observed their shrewd brokering first-hand. In addition to M&F, about eleven black-owned banks across the country received the green-light to reopen their doors. These black banks, with one exception, operated in the South.²⁷⁹ The behind-the-scenes maneuvering by Spaulding and other M&F leaders in the above instance provides a window into how he and other leaders in Durham operated with white power-brokers. On June 16, 1933, Roosevelt signed the Banking Act of 1933 into law, establishing the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC). A year later, the FDIC "purchased and paid \$100,000 worth of preferred stock" from M&F whereby it insured "each deposit up to \$5,000."²⁸⁰

As Spaulding and M&F leaders maneuvered their way out of the earlier economic crisis, another development with far-reaching implications on racial equality gained traction. In addition to politics during the early 1930s, blacks pointed to educational equality as a necessary requirement for full citizenship. It also tested Durham's "old-guard" black leadership in their behind-the-scenes tactics in several important ways. In early March, as the banking holiday took effect, *Carolina Times* newspaper editor L. E. Austin alongside attorneys Cecil A. McCoy and Conrad O. Pearson accompanied twenty-four year old Thomas

²⁷⁸"Wheeler: His Commitments Go Far Beyond His Bank," *The Carolina Financial Times*, February 9, 1976.

²⁷⁹John Hervey Wheeler, "A Negro Banker Speaks to the South," *The Tarheel Banker*, vol. 24, no. 5, November 1945, North Carolina Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 7; "Race Banks Reopening: Many Doing Business On Usual Basis," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, March 18, 1933; "6 Banks Open: 5 Expectant, 2 in Receivership," *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 18, 1933; Alexa Benson Henderson, "Richard R. Wright and the National Bankers Association," 73.

²⁸⁰"Local Race Bank has Served City Over 30 Years," *Carolina Times*, November 20, 1937.

Raymond Hocutt on a bold mission to the University of North Carolina in nearby Chapel Hill. Once there, the determined foursome went to the university registrar Julius R. Wilson's office to inquire about Hocutt's course schedule and housing assignment. Wilson provided no such information because the University had a whites-only admissions policy. The group's effort to get Hocutt admitted to the University's School of Pharmacy failed. Wilson had no plan plans to admit Hocutt that day, or any other day for that matter, and the group left with segregation at the state's flagship institution still intact for the time being.²⁸¹

On March 16, just three days after M&F reopened for business, attorneys C. O. Pearson and C. A. McCoy filed a lawsuit on Hocutt's behalf against UNC to obtain a writ of mandamus, “ ‘commanding the University...to show cause why he should not be admitted as a student.’ ”²⁸² In the documents filed with the court, the young attorneys charged UNC with violating Hocutt's Fourteenth Amendment rights to the U. S. Constitution as well as the state's own charter.²⁸³ Within a week, Judge M. V. Barnhill notified the university that it had until month's end to defend its decision not to enroll Hocutt.²⁸⁴

The local newspapers described the challenge aimed at the university as a broad move by several “younger and more aggressive Durham Negroes.” Both Pearson and McCoy led the effort to seek admissions for blacks in the state's all-white colleges and universities,

²⁸¹“Entrance to U. N. C. Sought by Negro: Thomas Hocutt, of Durham, Asks Mandamus Writ for Admission to Carolina,” *Durham Morning Herald*, March 17, 1933; Augustus M. Burns, “Graduate Education for Blacks in North Carolina, 1930-1951” *The Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (May, 1980), 195-196; Jerry B. Gershenhorn, “Hocutt v. Wilson and Race Relations in Durham, North Carolina, during the early 1930s,” 293.

²⁸²“Judge to Act Today on Negro's Petition: Barnhill Promises Ruling on Hocutt's Demand to Enter State,” *Durham Morning Herald*, March 18, 1933.

²⁸³“Entrance to U. N. C. Sought by Negro: Thomas Hocutt, of Durham, Asks Mandamus Writ for Admission to Carolina.”

²⁸⁴“Wilson Ordered to Explain negro Ban: Barnhill Signs Hocutt's Write Demanding Admission to State University,” *Durham Morning Herald*, March 19, 1933.

something they began as early as February 1933; their actions also had the NAACP's backing.²⁸⁵ At the time the two attorneys first laid-out their plans, M&F president C. C. Spaulding pledged his support to Conrad Pearson. According to historian Jerry B. Gershenhorn, NAACP executive secretary Walter White seemed more than pleased with the prospects, especially since he believed it to be “very unusual for black businessmen to support such a radical move, and White was sure to take advantage of this opportunity.”²⁸⁶ Despite Spaulding’s support just the month before, by the time *Hocutt vs. Wilson* (1933) rolled-out he changed his tune about publicly endorsing the suit. Attorney C. A. McCoy dispatched Walter White about Spaulding’s back-peddling saying, “ ‘undoubtedly you have encountered this position before on the part of southern Negro businessmen.’ ”²⁸⁷ The reason for Spaulding’s about-face had to do with opposition from white leaders—individuals with whom Spaulding “co-operated” with on race relations. On some level, too, Spaulding feared a violent backlash—harking back to the 1898 Wilmington Race Riot. Spaulding called Pearson, McCoy, and Austin into his office for a private conference in the hours after their return from Chapel Hill. He hoped to persuade the young radicals to reverse course; however, they rejected his pleas. That meeting became so intense M&F and NCM board member Edward R. Merrick threatened (though idle) to throw Conrad Pearson out of a window after Pearson called him a “ ‘handkerchief head.’ ”²⁸⁸

²⁸⁵“Entrance to U. N. C. Sought by Negro”; “Wilson Ordered to Explain Negro Ban.”

²⁸⁶Jerry B. Gershenhorn, “*Hocutt v. Wilson* and Race Relations in Durham, North Carolina, during the early 1930s” *North Carolina Historical Review*, 291.

²⁸⁷Quoted in Jerry Gershenhorn, “*Hocutt v. Wilson* and Race Relations in Durham, North Carolina, during the early 1930s,” 292.

²⁸⁸ Jerry B. Gershenhorn, “*Hocutt v. Wilson* and Race Relations in Durham, North Carolina, during the early 1930s,” 295; Conrad O. Pearson interview with Walter Ware..., April 18, 1979, 18; Gilbert Ware, “Hocutt:

The Durham NAACP branch existed on paper since about March 1919. Nevertheless, by 1930 the local organization could only boast about its dues paying membership, and little else. The organization's national office tried desperately on several occasions to entice the Durham arm to become more active when it came to issues involving racial injustice in the city. According to Conrad Pearson, lead attorney in *Hocutt*, during the branch's early years in existence members paid their dues and that was it.²⁸⁹ In 1929, the apathy by blacks prompted *Carolina Times* newspaper editor Louis E. Austin to criticize Durham's black businessmen for not supporting the NAACP with their actions and financial resources. "Durham," Austin wrote, "with its gigantic business institution, its progressive schools, hospitals and church does not find time or place for a branch of the N.A.A.C.P." Not only did the city need to have a local NAACP branch but "it ought to make its contribution toward safeguarding the opportunity to operate big business institutions by becoming active in that particular phase of the struggle of the race." "We praise the work of the N.A.A.C.P.," Austin concluded "but praise won't pay lawyers' fees, and other expenses that go with such an organization. It takes money and a plenty of it, and we certainly have no right to claim any part of a victory that organization has won unless we produced some of the wherewith."²⁹⁰ When it came time to collect membership dues for the local branch in August 1930, John Wheeler joined alongside other M&F employees and officers; he also paid for a subscription to the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine, edited by his father's former Wilberforce

Genesis of Brown" *Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (Summer, 1983), 227; Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South*, 232.

²⁸⁹C. O. Pearson interview transcript, 86-88; Leslie Brown, *Upbuilding Black Durham*, 313; Alphonse Powe, "The Role of Negro Pressure Groups," 118-119.

²⁹⁰"Money Talks," *Carolina Times*, November 23, 1929, in the NAACP Papers (microfilm at Duke University).

professor W. E. B. Du Bois.²⁹¹ Between late 1930 and early 1931, NAACP field secretary William Pickens and director of branches Robert W. Bagnall from the national office pressed local officers to sponsor mass meetings and membership to building up the Durham branch. The national office felt that Durham could be an important asset to the organization because it had the financial resources and economic independence to strongly support the organization's work. Nevertheless, local branch president NCC Professor James T. Taylor moved at a snail's pace in the endeavor.²⁹²

In addition to C. C. Spaulding, NCC president Dr. James Shepard refused to publicly support the case and much like Spaulding, he pushed his own behind the scenes crusade. He even leaked Pearson and McCoy's plans to file a lawsuit to a newspaper reporter from Greensboro well before they officially filed suit against UNC. The black college president had his sights set on what he believed to be loftier goals. Thus, Shepard viewed the *Hocutt* case as an opportunity to expand his institution's educational offerings. Nevertheless, in private deliberations and correspondence with white city and state leaders, most notably Nathan C. Newbold—director of the North Carolina Division of Negro Education—Shepard outlined his overall views on the actions taken by his younger brethren. Shepard argued that the *Hocutt* case provided evidence on why state legislature needed to established graduate and professional programs for black North Carolinians and maintained the opportunity to do

²⁹¹Durham NAACP Membership Report, August 11, 1930, February 16, 1931, NAACP Papers.

²⁹²Letter from William Pickens to J. T. Taylor, September 24, 1930; Letter from J. T. Taylor to W. T. Andrews, September 26, 1930; Letter from William Pickens to J. T. Taylor, October 3, 1930; Letter from William Pickens to J. T. Taylor, October 4, 1930; Letter from William Pickens to J. T. Taylor, October 9, 1930; Letter from Rev. R. M. Williams to J. H. Buchanan, October 14, 1930; Letter from William Pickens to J. H. Buchanan, October 14, 1930; Letter from William Pickens to J. T. Taylor, November 3, 1930; Letter from Robert W. Bagnall to J. T. Taylor, December 3, 1930; Letter from Robert W. Bagnall to J. T. Taylor, December 17, 1930; Letter from J. T. Taylor to Robert W. Bagnall, December 22, 1930; Letter from Robert W. Bagnall to J. T. Taylor, January 2, 1931; Letter from Robert W. Bagnall to J. T. Taylor, January 8, 1931; Letter from Robert W. Bagnall to J. T. Taylor, January 13, 1931, all in the NAACP Papers (microfilm, Duke University).

so could begin at his school.²⁹³ At the same time, Shepard knew he could not publicly criticize the actions by the younger generation, or else risk serious criticism from blacks in Durham and across the state. As the consummate politician, Shepard had the ability and skill to turn unfavorable circumstances into an advantage for his institution. in terms of his abilities and skills at turning unfavorable circumstances into an advantage for his institution. Attorney Conrad O. Pearson reasoned that if the elder statesman had “been white, he would have been governor of [the] state.”²⁹⁴ Shepard regularly sent “everybody in the legislature—the Senate and the House—a Christmas present” to win political favor with them.²⁹⁵

The *Hocutt* case quickly raised internal tensions and heightened generational conflict between the “old guard” leaders represented by Spaulding and Shepard and the up-and-coming black activists about the most appropriate strategies. By virtue of his employment with the bank, it is doubtful that the young banker John Wheeler came out directly against the M&F president but would have paid close attention to how Spaulding handled decisions during that time. At the same time, Wheeler identified with the younger activists in his generation and probably wanted Spaulding to side with them without hesitancy. Wheeler might have been more vocal on the issue during conversations he more than likely had with Richard McDougald, who was perhaps just as ambivalent as his younger employee.

As the *Hocutt* case proceeded, several other developments transpired. In the days leading to the scheduled court date, rumors surfaced in the local press that Hocutt and his lawyers planned to withdraw their case in order to “adopt other tactics.” In return for

²⁹³Conrad O. Pearson interview with Walter Ware, April 18, 1979, 5.

²⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 16.

²⁹⁵*Ibid.*

withdrawing their case, out-of-state tuition would be provided for Hocutt and other blacks who wanted training not already available to them in the state. The controversy centered on black leaders allegedly “drafting a bill for presentation in the legislature which would authorize the state to pay the tuition of North Carolina Negroes in out-of-state institutions when facilities are not available within their borders to provide the courses of study desired.”²⁹⁶ The rumor had to do with a March 18 meeting that occurred among black Durham businessmen; the group supposedly favored the out-of-state tuition option above going further with the legal challenge.²⁹⁷ It is unclear where John Wheeler stood or if he he attendance the meeting. Once word reached Pearson about dropping the case he dismissed his own involvement in efforts to obtain out-of-state tuition for blacks.²⁹⁸

Almost as quickly as the first hearings began on March 24, Judge Barnhill continued the hearing until the following morning but called attorneys from both sides into his chambers “for more than an hour and a half.” In their private conference, they tossed around several possible solutions to settle the case. By that time, too, attorney William H. Hastie from the NAACP's national office took over as Hocutt's lead attorney alongside Pearson and McCoy. After their private conference, lawyers from each side conferred with their respective legal teams. During their deliberations, attorney M. Hugh Thompson, a black Durham attorney sent to represent the fifty black business leaders, tried to convince Hocutt's

²⁹⁶“Hocutt to Switch Fight to Raleigh: Backers of Negro Seeking Admission to U. N. C. Draft Bill for Legislature,” *Durham Morning Herald*, March 22, 1933.

²⁹⁷Jerry B. Greenhorn, “*Hocutt v. Wilson* and Race Relations in Durham, North Carolina, during the early 1930s,” 296; Robert Joseph Cannon, “The Organization and Growth of Black Political Participation in Durham, North Carolina, 1933-1958” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.).

²⁹⁸“Ranks of Negro's Supporters Split: Group Backing Hocutt's Fight to Enter University Divide Over Compromise,” *Durham Morning Herald*, March 24, 1933.

lawyers to drop the suit once and for all in exchange for the out-of-state tuition bill. One newspaper reported a heated argument between Thompson and Pearson about the best steps to take.²⁹⁹ After behind-the-scenes negotiations between both sides, Conrad Pearson “intimated that ‘some sort of an agreement’ had been attempted.” However, he and Hocutt’s other lawyers rejected the agreement because State Attorney General Dennis G. Brummitt—the lawyer representing UNC—could not guarantee the out-of-state tuition bill’s passage in the state legislature. During more hearings, Hocutt’s academic record came into question. His former Hillside High School principal J. W. Wilson described Hocutt’s grades at Hillside as borderline passing, which contradicted the exceptional academic background promoted by his lawyers in their earlier court filings.³⁰⁰

The *Hocutt* case ended in late March. Judge Barnhill “declined to place his signature of a preemptory writ of mandamus compelling the university to admit the Negro to its school of pharmacy.”³⁰¹ Moreover, Hocutt lost his case as noted by Barnhill’s decision “on the grounds that the writ of mandamus sought in the complaint was not the proper remedy for the relief of the alleged grievance of the plaintiff.” Judge Barnhill saw no valid reason why the university had to admit Hocutt based on his lawyers’ discrimination claims. The only obligation the university had, according to Barnhill, would have been to consider Hocutt’s application on its own merits without regard to race.³⁰² Barnhill also ruled in the university’s

²⁹⁹“Hocutt Hearing Continued Today: Barnhill Withholds Decision on Negro’s Demand to Enter State University,” *Durham Morning Herald*, March 25, 1933.

³⁰⁰“Hocutt’s Suit to Enter Carolina Again Continued: Credits of Durham Negro Insufficient to Warrant Matriculation, University Registrar Testifies,” *Durham Morning Herald*, March 26, 1933.

³⁰¹“Hocutt Loses Opening Round in Legal Fight to Enter University,” *Durham Morning Herald*, March 29, 1933.

³⁰²*Ibid.*

favor partly “on technical grounds.” The most damaging piece of evidence used against Hocutt came at the hands of NCCN’s Dr. James E. Shepard who refused to send Hocutt’s college transcript to the UNC thereby making his admissions application incomplete.³⁰³

By 1933, just as *Hocutt* started, the NAACP had another opportunity to establish a strong presence in Durham. The local branch reorganized under its enthusiastic branch president Miles Mark Fisher, the pastor at White Rock Baptist Church, where C. C. Spaulding and other members from the black middle class and business community attended. Despite Fisher's excitement and plans for a workable program for the local branch, the *Hocutt* case derailed those hopes. No sooner than Fisher took the helm, he resigned due to internal tensions within the black community and the branch itself as the more radical elements favored moving the *Hocutt* case forward, rather than compromise.³⁰⁴

Despite the reluctance by the Durham group to give their public support to the *Hocutt* case, in the following months they carried on a productive exchange with the NAACP's national office. It was C. C. Spaulding and Richard McDougald who reached out to Walter White after the NAACP leader toured the state in May to drum-up statewide interest in the organization's programs. The NAACP had plans for a statewide conference, complete with more branches; the organization wanted on the equalization of teachers' salaries. White's

³⁰³Ibid.

³⁰⁴Letter from Miles Mark Fisher to NAACP National Office, March 13, 1933, NAACP Papers; Letter from the NAACP Department of Branches to Miles Mark Fisher, March 16, 1933; “Hocutt Hearing Continued Today: Barnhill Withholds Decision on Negro’s Demand to Enter State University,” *Durham Morning Herald*, March 25, 1933.



Figure 2.3 Charles Clinton Spaulding (left) and John Hervey Wheeler (right), circa 1940s-1950s (*Photograph courtesy of Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center*)

visit provided an opportunity to capitalize on the momentum from *Hocutt* and another high-profile NAACP case in Virginia.³⁰⁵

As the NAACP laid the groundwork toward launching a statewide conference to challenge educational inequality, blacks in Durham made their own proposals for improvements in Durham's segregated school system. In August, a committee went before the Durham City School Board to discuss black schools. The group included James T. Taylor, Lyda Moore Merrick (wife to M&F's Edward Merrick and "Cottie" Moore's daughter), Selena Warren's mother Julia Warren, Richard McDougald, C. C. Spaulding, and

³⁰⁵Kenneth W. Mack, *Representing the Race: The Creation of the Civil Rights Lawyer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), Ch. 4; Powe, "The Role of Negro Pressure Groups," 119; 1941 Durham NAACP had its peak membership at 1800 members, p. 121.

Louis Austin. The committee made several appeals for black representation on the board and teacher salaries. First, they called the board to appoint a black advisory to consult them on matters related to black schools. The contingent saw this as a temporary move until the city council appointed the first black member board member; however, the council made no such provisions.³⁰⁶ Second, the committee asked for more black teachers as well as higher salaries, which they condemned as being "highly discriminatory." Although they believed the authority to raise teacher salaries ultimately rested with the state, they still wanted the city to subsidize salary differentials between black and white teachers using "one-third of the money [marked] for supplementary teachers' salaries to supplement the salaries of Negro teachers." The board consented on a few items, such as adding telephones and attendance officers in all of the city's black schools. However, the board pointed to the city council as being responsible for appointing board members and refused to specify salary allocations but promised that "funding and teachers for all the schools [would be distributed] on as equitable a basis as possible."³⁰⁷ In October, the NAACP held an organizing conference for the statewide NAACP in October. The M&F's Richard McDougald had a central role in the meeting's success and gave one of the main speeches at the statewide gathering. With its feet now planted on a more firm basis in North Carolina, the NAACP pressed for equity in teacher salaries.

³⁰⁶School Board Meeting Minutes, August 21, 1933.

³⁰⁷Ibid.

THE DURHAM COMMITTEE ON NEGRO AFFAIRS (DCNA)

The early to mid-1930s in Durham served as a pivotal and transformative learning experience for John Wheeler. It served as an opportunity to be schooled on important lessons in local community politics and black leadership. That training included observational exercises on how black business activism functioned in the New South. Yet Wheeler had to wait by patiently for his turn to put those lessons, which he no doubt learned from men like C. C. Spaulding and R. L. McDougald, into practice on a much larger stage. The many lessons taught to Wheeler also had to do with the survival of black financial institutions like M&F. During the Great Depression, the older generation of black business leaders groomed and prepared Wheeler and others to take on larger community responsibilities.

Although John Wheeler joined the local NAACP branch and continued to exercise his voting rights, not until the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs' (DCNA) formation in 1935 did his role as a black business activist began materialize and take on greater meaning. The organization offered a new outlet for a generation of up-and-coming leaders to get involved in community affairs. On August 15, M&F president C. C. Spaulding called an initial meeting at the Algonquian Tennis Club, the private country club for Durham's black middle class. The DCNA came to the forefront in the battle for racial and economic equality on the heels of several attempts by blacks to establish a stronger voice alongside Durham's white power-brokers. In the previous two years blacks focused on forming an organization to confront widening disparities they continued to face at the height of the Great Depression. The earlier attempts by the NAACP to establish an active presence in black Durham never came to fruition to the extent national leaders wanted. Instead, Durham's black business leaders preferred to deal with local circumstances on their own terms, which they partly

believed could be accomplished through group solidarity. Thus, the DCNA emerged from continued marginalization Durham's powerful white elite. The DCNA also came forth in response to the failed promises of Roosevelt's New Deal Programs for black Americans.³⁰⁸

The seed for the DCNA was planted in North Carolina's capital city. The widely-held narrative credits Reverend George Fisher from Raleigh with bringing the idea to attorney C. O. Pearson and NCCN professor J. T. Taylor. At the time, both Pearson and Taylor held positions with two New Deal agencies, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the National Youth Administration (NYA) in Raleigh. Fisher and the black Raleigh Citizens Committee succeeded in getting city officials to build the Chavis Park Swimming Pool African Americans. Fisher envisioned similar organizations throughout the state as a way to expand the levers of power in black communities like Durham that had for so long rested in the hands of the few—with men like Spaulding, Shepard, and W. G. Pearson. He wanted those levers placed into the hands of the black masses as well. From there, Conrad Pearson and J. T. Taylor consulted black business activist Richard McDougald who gave them his blessing without hesitancy. Although McDougald aligned himself with businessmen such as Spaulding on certain approaches to handling community problems, he, perhaps more than any single black businessman in Durham during that time, came across as "liberal minded," which meant progressive when it came to tactics used in bringing about racial equality. This was a powerful gesture stemmed from pronouncements in "taking care of the community." John Wheeler received a promotion to M&F's assistant cashier by decade's end, which meant

³⁰⁸ C. O. Pearson interview, Letter from R. N. Harris to Louis E. Austin, June 19, 1962, R. N. Harris Papers; Robert J. Cannon, "The Organization and Growth of Black Political Participation," 9; "DCNA Executive Committee Year-End Report," August 1, 1936, box 1, folder 1, J. S. Stewart Files, North Carolina Central University Archives; Harry Joseph Walker, "Changes in Race Accommodations," 206-207; Alphonso Stewart Powe, "The Role of Negro Pressure Groups in Interracial Integration in Durham City, North Carolina," 56.

he had a front seat to how the veteran banker navigated race relations in the New South.³⁰⁹

In no time, McDougald convinced Spaulding that the organization could effectively represent black Durham's broader concerns.³¹⁰ At their initial meeting on August 15, the select group who met at the Algonquian Tennis Club agreed to elect an executive committee to serve as the new organization's leadership. After several nominations and a final vote taken by "blind ballot," they had an executive committee. In doing his due diligence as a black business activist in training, John Wheeler counted ballots on a three person committee at the DCNA's first meeting. He did not come away with a leadership position in the new organization because he was still "too junior," according to Asa Spaulding, to have a leadership position on the DCNA. However, in less than a decade he and others led the DCNA's battle for freedom and toward fulfillment in postwar America. The individuals elected to the DCNA's first seven-member executive committee included Spaulding (chair), Dr. James Shepard (vice president), James Taylor (secretary), McDougald (treasurer), Louis Austin, Rencher N. Harris, and William Daniel Hill. Within days, the executive committee organized a mass meeting to discuss the new organization's purpose.³¹¹

In addition to the DCNA's founding in 1935, John Wheeler's professional responsibilities branched out. In January, his alma mater called when John Hope—past Morehouse head and then the Atlanta University System's president—appointed Wheeler to the boards of trustees at Morehouse and Atlanta University. At twenty-seven, Wheeler

³⁰⁹C. O. Pearson interview, Letter from R. N. Harris to Louis E. Austin, June 19, 1962, R. N. Harris Papers; Robert J. Cannon, "The Organization and Growth of Black Political Participation," 9; "DCNA Executive Committee Year-End Report," August 1, 1936, box 1, folder 1, J. S. Stewart Files, North Carolina Central University Archives; Harry Joseph Walker, "Changes in Race Accommodations," 206-207.

³¹⁰Ibid.

³¹¹Ibid; Spaulding interview; "DCNA 50 Anniversary Pamphlet," August 10, 1985.

became the youngest board member ever appointed to either school. Adding Wheeler to the boards—while a strategic move from a financial standpoint—recognized the banker's rising leadership potential. On top of that, education always held significance in the lives of the entire Wheeler family. His mother and father began their professional careers as educators; his sister Margery Janice Wheeler became an art teacher and during the 1934-1935 academic year she was the art instructor at Durham's black Hillside Park High School. Wheeler's other sister Ruth became an instructor at Bennett College in Greensboro.³¹² The appointment now gave Wheeler an opportunity to affect change at black institutions of higher education in the New South. In 1940, Wheeler received perhaps his most important board assignment when he traveled to the nation's capital to interview his former mathematics professor, now *Dr.* Benjamin E. Mays. By that time, Mays spent six years as dean at Howard University's School of Religion. Wheeler had the task to explore Mays' potential candidacy for the Morehouse presidency; after Mays overcame initial reservations, he accepted the post. During the next twenty-seven years, with support and encouragement from board members like Wheeler, the "School Master of the Movement," as Mays' recent biographer has described him, turned the institution's declining reputation around and built a lasting legacy.³¹³ The *Hocutt* case, still fresh on Wheeler's mind no doubt focused his attention on the need to provide advanced training for blacks in the South—something that remained and goal for him throughout his career. As a black banker, Wheeler could begin to think more

³¹²Margery Wheeler became a children's book author and illustrator and teacher in the Newark, New Jersey public school system. She would have been there when the race riots happened in 1967.

³¹³John Hervey Wheeler interview by August Meier, 1960, Durham, NC, 8, 5, notes, box 139; Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel*, 139; Randal Jelks, *Schoolmaster of the Movement*; 138; Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, September 12, 1934; Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, April 9, 1935.

deeply about the central meaning of education in relation to full citizenship, black economic power, and New South prosperity.

On Christmas Day 1935, John Wheeler made another life altering decision when he married Selena Lucille Warren. Selena graduated from Hampton University in 1934 and became head librarian at the Durham Colored Library, later named the Stanford L. Warren Library in her father's honor. Wheeler and his new wife shared a common interest in librarianship and joined the library's board in 1931. In Atlanta, Wheeler worked as an assistant in the Auburn Avenue Branch of the Atlanta Public Library System where he learned to catalogue. During Wheeler's entire junior year at Morehouse, he managed the school's library "while the librarian was [on leave] studying [elsewhere]."³¹⁴ When Wheeler asked Selena's father for her hand in marriage, the M&F board chairman explained that his daughter would not settle for being a homemaker—nor would she be the domestic type—but a career woman. The wedding perhaps came sooner than either wanted so as to avoid having a child out of wedlock; the couple's first child Julia Warren Wheeler was born on April 4, 1936, just four months later.³¹⁵ They had their second child, Warren Hervey Wheeler, on October 1, 1943.

In 1935, a year after Congress passed the Housing Act of 1934, which established the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), M&F became the first North Carolina bank permitted to administer the government-backed home loans. John Wheeler reflected on this development with pride. "Mechanics and Farmers Bank," Wheeler explained "filed the first

³¹⁴Letter from Louis E. Austin to the Jury on Citation of Trustees (American Library Association), March 12, 1952, John Hervey Wheeler Vertical File, Stanford L. Warren Library; Beverly Washington Jones. *Stanford L. Warren Branch Library: 77 Years of Public Service*. Durham: Durham County Library, 1990, 67, 72, 74.

³¹⁵Beverly Washington Jones. *Stanford L. Warren Branch Library: 77 Years of Public Service*. Durham: Durham County Library, 1990, 74.

application in North Carolina for insurance of a mortgage loan by the Federal Housing Administration under terms of Title II, Section 203" and had "the distinction of holding the permanent registration No. 1 of the lending agencies authorized and approved by [the] FHA in the State of North Carolina."³¹⁶ The latter fact gave M&F cashier Richard McDougald the leverage he needed to achieve his vision for increased black homeownership. It Housing Act provide especially beneficial to M&F because, as Wheeler maintained, "in the '30s's, when there was no market for any FHA loans under Title 2 to a Negro borrower, and such market as there was existed in one or two Negro insurance companies. The big [white] insurance companies and big institutional investors in the country would" not offer them.³¹⁷ Most people considered Richard McDougald a finance genius and the banker spent much time and expertise "scrutinizing" local bond referendums, weighing the advantages and disadvantages for black Durham. After receiving FHA approval, McDougald, himself a real estate developer as well, pressed city leaders to clear and rezone land he wanted to use for building homes in Durham's black sections "so that he and Wheeler could finance new housing for Negroes through low-cost FHA loans."³¹⁸ While FHA home loans had potential benefits for black Durham, and McDougald's motto was "take care of the community and the community will take care of you," as a banker he had the power to authorize or turn down loan applications. In this way, some blacks viewed McDougald, Wheeler, and M&F with resentment. An anecdote told to Durham businessman Nathan Garrett by his father York Garrett, Jr., a druggist who also came to Durham during the 1930s is very telling. A

³¹⁶John Hervey Wheeler, "Keynote Address at the First Annual Housing and Urban Renewal Clinic at N.C. A&T," November 2-3, 1961.

³¹⁷John Hervey Wheeler interview with Robert Penn Warren, 5.

³¹⁸Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South*.

prospective borrower went to see McDougald for a loan the story went. As the conversation progressed McDougald fired away question after question all the while sizing up any potential risks for the bank. Finally, the applicant turned the tables around. "Say Mr. McDougald," the man started, "you've got a toilet in your house [right]?" "Yes," answered McDougald. "You probably have a bathtub in there [too]?" the man continued. "Yes I do," replied McDougald probably now puzzled at the line of questioning. "Did you take a bath this morning?" the man went on. "Yeah I took a bath this morning," said McDougald. "Well I'm sure glad to hear it," the applicant concluded "because apparently I'm gonna have to kiss your ass in order to get this loan."³¹⁹ No matter how committed McDougald, Wheeler, and M&F were to Durham's black community, the bank's main priority was to increase company profits.³²⁰

Between 1935 and 1941, the DCNA's primary goals became strengthening its credibility in the black community by taking on several important community issues, which contributed to its effectiveness as a civil rights organization. Its first annual report speaks to the organization's agenda during its early years maintaining that it was "organized to consider matters affecting the interest of the Negroes in the Community, to devise and sponsor programs designed to promote the welfare and to otherwise act in behalf of the Negro Citizens."³²¹ Those priorities particularly centered on "requesting police protection in Negro

³¹⁹Interview with Nathan Garret by Brandon Winford, August 4, 2008.

³²⁰Ibid.

³²¹"DCNA Executive Committee Year-End Report," August 1, 1936, box 1, folder 1, J. S. Stewart Files, North Carolina Central University Archives, 1; Earl E. Thorpe, "The Untold Story of the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People," Black History Month Lecture, February 2, 1981, Asa and Elna Spaulding Papers;

sections; conferring with school authorities with a view toward improvement of the local school system; securing of donations for sowing [*sic*] room for Negroes; writing of letters and conducting conferences regarding injustices and in many other cases where it was thought that the Committee might help."³²² The DCNA wanted to "obtain for the Negroes of the Community more consideration in the matter of government employment, especially in the various government [New Deal] relief units."³²³ It saw the need for the "improvement of municipal recreation facilities for Negroes" as an effective agent for "good citizenship." Thus, the organization "dedicated" itself "to [the] educational, economic, social and political welfare of the Negroes in North Carolina." The DCNA's organizational structure and main sub-committees addressed the above categories. In many ways, the DCNA established helped to bridge the class divide, but as several authors have pointed out, this did not happen so easily.³²⁴

During this time no single issue, aside from politics, garnered the DCNA's time and attention more than did the battle for black educational equality. In this way, the organization consistently appeared before the Durham City School Board to lobby for improved educational facilities and black representation. They appealed for equitable distribution of city and county resources toward equipment, the building program, and teacher salaries. The organization requested program and curriculum changes that met

Earl E. Thorpe, "The Untold Story of the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People," Black History Month Lecture, February 2, 1981, Asa and Elna Spaulding Papers.

³²²"DCNA Executive Committee Year-End Report," August 1, 1936, box 1, folder 1, J. S. Stewart Files, North Carolina Central University Archives, 1.

³²³Ibid.

³²⁴Harry Joseph Walker, "Changes in Race Accommodations," 208 (on NCCNA); see also NCCNA newspapers; NCCNA.

similar standards already in place at the city's white schools. The leaders argued for additional opportunities for black students to receive training in vocational education.³²⁵ In 1936, the DCNA pressed the board to purchase land near Whitted School for "recreational and playground purposes." However, the board declined citing a lack of funds.³²⁶

In January 1937, the DCNA wanted a twelfth grade added to the black Hillside School, which coincided with a twelfth grade addition to the white Durham High School.³²⁷ They saw it as an economic necessity since most blacks in the city could not afford to continue their education beyond the secondary level but "at least 12 grades of public education should be available."³²⁸ In March, DCNA leaders tried unsuccessfully to convince the board to work with a black liaison to advise them on matters related to black schools. They recommended "having more vocational training for negro boys and girls in the schools, especially in the trades and industrial arts."³²⁹ DCNA representatives attended the May board meeting alongside a separate black delegation from east Durham led by tobacco worker Arthur Stanley whose interests rested in a school for blacks in that part of the city.³³⁰

³²⁵Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, 1933-1941.

³²⁶Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, July 6, September 24, 1936.

³²⁷"Negro Committee Plans to Push Civil Rights Program," *Durham Morning Herald*, December 30, 1936; Jerry Gershenhorn, "A Courageous Voice for Black Freedom: Louis Austin and the *Carolina Times* in Depression-Era North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review*, Jan. 2010, vol. 87, 72; "Negro Committee Plans to Push Civil Rights Program," *Durham Morning Herald*, December 30, 1936.

³²⁸Jerry Gershenhorn, "A Courageous Voice for Black Freedom: Louis Austin and the *Carolina Times* in Depression-Era North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review*, Jan. 2010, vol. 87, 72; "Negro Committee Plans to Push Civil Rights Program," *Durham Morning Herald*, December 30, 1936.

³²⁹Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, March 9, 1937.

³³⁰Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, May 9, 1938.

By the following May, the DCNA conducted its own investigative report on black school conditions. It outlined its recommendations under the headings "Improvement of Existing Schools," "New Buildings," and "General" needs in black schools. In the Lyon Park, Walltown, East End, and Hickstown Schools, the DCNA demanded the board add more classrooms, construct cafeterias, install a heating plant, water fountains, and restrooms for teachers. They made an "urgent" plea for the board to move forward with plans to build an upgraded East Durham School and a new junior high school to accommodate students matriculating from Lyon Park, Hickstown, and Walltown Schools. The board needed to make the Whitted School the city's second black high school complete with an "auditorium, additional classrooms, and a gymnasium," to make it a "first class high school." The board approved a twelfth grade at Hillside, but the DCNA wanted assurance that "adequate teachers and facilities [would also] be provided to insure vocational education and guidance for children." Finally, they pleaded with the board to employ a "Negro as Supervising Principal in charge of Negro schools" alongside "an advisory committee of interested and public spirited Negro citizens, [who] would be able to sense the problems, [and] bring them to the Board of Education with constructive recommendations as to how they should be handled."³³¹ In July, the Durham city and county school boards met in a joint session to discuss capital outlay expenditures for school buildings and agreed on a few DCNA's recommendations, including a four-room addition to Lyon Park school at \$16,800.00, and a new seven-room school for blacks in East Durham for \$21,000.000. In keeping with the status quo to speak of educational inequality, both boards agreed to build the white East Durham Junior High School with twenty rooms at a cost of \$176,000.000, more than three

³³¹Ibid.

times the estimated cost for black school improvements combined.³³² The board also used funds from the Works Progress Administration to maintain these inequalities.

By the next decade very little changed. In April 1941, the DCNA asked the city council to appoint a black board member because “it has not been able to get a hearing before the board in matters concerning the Negro schools.”³³³ The DCNA pointed to blacks making up a third of the city’s population as a reason why they deserved some representation on the board. The DCNA also believed black citizens understood the problems in their own neighborhoods better than white board members. They argued that since there was no black board member, then the “committee [DCNA] had a right to object when it was not consulted in Negro school matters.”³³⁴ DCNA chairman C. C. Spaulding also maintained the board’s continued “disregard” for the black community’s recommendations concerning black schools “was resulting in an attitude of indifference on the part of Negroes toward their schools.”³³⁵ Up against a defiant board, the DCNA yielded minor concessions, but it was progress nevertheless.

By the late 1930s, the DCNA continued its mission to obtain equitable job opportunities for blacks. In certain instances, it pressed city leaders to hire qualified blacks in previously all-white positions. In 1937, for example, Durham's Alcohol Beverage Control (ABC) opened a liquor store in Hayti and initially employed two black store clerks alongside a white manager. The black clerks had college educations and by all accounts "respectable

³³²Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, July 7, 13, October 24, 1938.

³³³“Council will be asked to put Negro on City School Board,” *Durham Morning Herald*, April 13, 1941.

³³⁴*Ibid.*

³³⁵*Ibid.*

citizens in the community." The DCNA, taking its cue from the black community, preferred a black manager and expressed their concerns to the board. Afterwards, the board promised black management at the Hayti store. However, before the board hired a black manager it had to seek a transfer for the white manager at another location. The board did not want to simply replace the white manager with a black person outright—so as not to defy the South's local customs—there had to be a legitimate opening at a separate location. DCNA executive committee member L. E. Austin called the group's negotiations in the matter a "moral victory." He also went on to tell his readers that a "dawn of a new day" had not come "simply because two Negroes have been given jobs clerking in a liquor store." "There are hundreds of other jobs," Austin continued, "which Negroes should have in Durham that they do not, merely because no effort has been made to obtain them for the race."³³⁶ In the few months that followed, the board failed to make the personnel change and Austin reminded both parties about their previous agreement. He claimed to have had nothing against whites working at the Hayti store but "the white manager...is able to get in many places [of employment] which Negroes are not." Austin made a larger point about the shameful state of black employment in city government. Moreover, "the white manger of the Hayti store might be able to get a job on the police force or in the fire department of Durham." "None of these jobs," balked Austin, "awaits the Negro who awaits the [job] opening which was promised by the A. B. C. officials."³³⁷

³³⁶"The Liquor Store Appointments," *Carolina Times*, June 19, 1937; "Just A Reminder," *Carolina Times*, August 28, 1937; Harry J. Walker, "Changes in Race Accommodations," 213.

³³⁷"Just A Reminder," *Carolina Times*, August 28, 1937; Robert Joseph Cannon, "The Organization and Growth of Black Political Participation in Durham, North Carolina, 1933-1958," 52-53.

In 1935, the DCNA finally obtained a black manager at the ABC store. At a DCNA executive committee meeting following the appointment, everyone agreed the board “ ‘could not bring themselves to the place where they could replace a white man with a Negro.’ ”³³⁸ Furthermore, once the board hired a black manager, they refused to hire the person suggested by the DCNA to avoid being told what to do by a black organization. DCNA leaders concurred that the man they hired was “ ‘an easy-going fellow’ ” who “ ‘never says anything.’ ” The DCNA believed him to be “ ‘more nearly the kind of [black] man white people want[ed]’ ” because “ ‘he never says anything and is not as outspoken.’ ”³³⁹ Nevertheless, they counted the appointment as a victory and the DCNA's goal was to obtain jobs for qualified blacks in city government and other institutions.

The contention related the ABC liquor store appointment unmasked several underlying problems when it came to the ABC liquor board and alcohol police enforcement. It highlighted police brutality and the need to employ black police officers in Durham. On at least two previous occasions, DCNA leaders asked the city council to make provisions for hiring black officers. Well before the DCNA's started, African Americans lobbied the city council to increase police protection. They petitioned the leaders to hire black officers to handle the rising crime rate in Hayti as well. In response to one request the white police chief simply sent in more white officers who blacks criticized for “loaf[ing]” on the job.³⁴⁰

In 1938, James McNeal's murder brought tensions to a boiling point. On May 28, ABC police squad officers led by T. D. Wilkie barged into McNeal's Hayti residence.

³³⁸Harry Joseph Walker, "Changes in Race Accommodations," 213.

³³⁹Ibid.; Robert Joseph Cannon, "The Organization and Growth of Black Political Participation in Durham, North Carolina, 1933-1958," 52-53.

³⁴⁰*Durham Morning Herald*, 1933.

According to eye-witness accounts, Wilkie forced his way into McNeal's home without an arrest or search warrant. Then Wilkie allegedly struck the unsuspecting McNeal and struck him with his Billy club and then shot him. McNeal's bloody body lay lifeless. Wilkie's forced entry and subsequent beating of McNeal was indeed among the worse crimes perpetrated by the Durham police force. Yet, it was also par for the course, as the same could have happened at the home of any black man living in Hayti, the routine liquor raids targeted local bootlegging operations. The Durham police officers continuously served as the aggressors in rising brutality cases. McNeal's murder by a white police hired to protect rather than victimize, signaled a desperate appeal for black Durham to stand up and demand justice. The murder represented a major turning point for the DCNA, as it helped the group garner support. As John Wheeler recalled years later “ ‘police brutality was one of the major problems we had’ ” and the McNeal murder “ ‘was one of the major organizing incidents that spread the Durham Committee's support among the masses of Blacks.’ ” The DCNA continued to pressure the city council to add black police officers to the department's ranks. Despite blacks' regular pleas, however, the city refused to hire black police officers until 1944 when James B. Samuel and Clyde Cox joined the force.³⁴¹ Two months after the McNeal murder, an all-white, all-male, twelve-member jury acquitted Wilkie, despite what the *Carolina Times* described as “the preponderance of evidence, presented by the prosecution.” Wilkie's acquittal in the case came as no surprise to most blacks because whites were rarely found guilty for crimes against blacks in the South. As devastating as

³⁴¹“Should Be Investigated,” *Carolina Times*, June 3, 1938; “The Wilkie Case Closed Issue,” *Carolina Times*, July 30, 1938; Robert Joseph Cannon, “The Organization and Growth of Black Political Participation in Durham, North Carolina, 1933-1958,” 49-52.

McNeal's murder was to Durham's black community, it shed light on the rising incidences of police brutality against black men in particular.³⁴²

The DCNA was just as vocal with city leaders when it came to public accommodations and used every instance to obtain improved access for blacks. In 1938, the DCNA threatened city officials with a court injunction after bathroom facilities were locked in the local Armory rented by a black fraternity for a dance. After a DCNA lawyer met with city manager H. A. Yancey, the latter offered to open up restrooms to the "business and professional class" but refused to lend those same concessions to the broader black community. The DCNA lawyer rejected such notions, saying " 'why these Negroes around here would raise hell if we made a deal like that.' "³⁴³ Yancey eventually agreed to let women use the indoor restrooms while " 'men would still have to use those outside,' " a policy the city manager said he would apply to whites as well. Yet when a black women's sorority hosted another dance that April, the only facilities made available to women were the men's restrooms, not all facilities as previously agreed upon. During the years leading to World War II, the DCNA would time and again raise the issue of unequal public facilities in order to remove the physical barriers to racial segregation.³⁴⁴

In June 1941, the DCNA considered taking legal action against the Carolina Coach Company over discrimination in transportation related to the bus company's newly planned downtown station. The DCNA's primary concern hinged on an entrance location for the new

³⁴²Ibid; "Should Be Investigated," *Carolina Times*, June 3, 1938; "The Wilkie Case Closed Issue," *Carolina Times*, July 30, 1938; Robert Joseph Cannon, "The Organization and Growth of Black Political Participation in Durham, North Carolina, 1933-1958," 49-52.

³⁴³"Negro Committee and Carolina Times Win Armory Fight," *Carolina Times*, April 2, 1938; Harry Joseph Walker, "Changes in Race Accommodation," 211-212.

³⁴⁴Ibid.

bus station's black waiting room. The organization struck an earlier compromise where the company "had agreed to three other demands of Negroes regarding facilities. The plans had been altered to include a lounge for Negro women, restaurant facilities and a newsstand." The DCNA and its leaders, namely attorney M. Hugh Thompson, pushed the bus company even further and wanted it to adhere to the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* mandate, which called for "separate but equal" in public transportation facilities. Afterwards, the DCNA took its concerns to the Raleigh-based North Carolina Utilities Commission. After losing the appeal with the Commission, the DCNA's attorney M. Hugh Thompson dropped the case. The public transportation and accommodations remained a hot-button issue, which intensified during World War II.

The DCNA also made significant advanced in politics. Richard McDougald led an important voter registration effort in 1935, which yielded about 1,000 registered black voters. Although Spaulding became DCNA chair, he was more or less a figurehead; in many ways this represented the emergent new leadership.³⁴⁵ The DCNA endorsed white political candidates in the late 1930s. During this time, they wrestled political control away from Durham's ward heelers. Once white candidates recognized the DCNA's effectiveness, they wanted the organization's endorsement and support. Increasingly, the DCNA endorsed its own candidates during and after World War II. In 1942, the DCNA backed attorney M. Hugh Thompson for County Commissioner. In 1944, the organization got behind John L. Holloway in his run for County Commissioner. In 1945, they supported Louis Austin for a city council seat in the third ward. In every year following World War II, the DCNA endorsed black candidates who, though unsuccessful, received increased black votes. The

³⁴⁵C. O. Pearson interview.

DCNA's rise politically during and directly after World War II put the organization in the forefront of post-war politics in North Carolina, which one writer called "the theme of the DCNA" from that point on.³⁴⁶ John Wheeler's political activities became more pronounced on the local level as well. At a black County Democratic Convention in 1938, he announced the main speakers.

CONCLUSION: THE MARCH TOWARD FULL CITIZENSHIP

In examining the history of M&F, a main factor behind the financial institution's success can be attributed to its cautious business practices. This ultimately helped the bank steer clear of economic collapse during the Great Depression. The organizers of the bank and their successors carried the company's business philosophy into how they handled race relations in the community. These leaders struck a delicate balance in their approach in obtaining expanded opportunities for the black community. While economic independence placed them in a position to press for greater freedom, they failed to realize how unlikely that was unless blacks had racial equality. The move toward aggressively seeking racial and economic equality rested with a younger generation of African American leaders who recognized that economic advancement alone would not be enough. Indeed there would continue to be limited economic prosperity without full citizenship.

John Wheeler came to Durham fresh out of college and soon became aware of what his new employers at M&F expected from him in terms of responsibility to community. His superiors at the bank would have encouraged him to actively participate in all community endeavors. Wheeler particularly followed in the footsteps and was inspired by the examples

³⁴⁶Harry Joseph Walker, "Changes in Race Accommodations," 208.

shown to him by M&F president C. C. Spaulding and vice president Richard McDougald. They would have trained and prepared Wheeler to take on expanded leadership roles as he made his own observations based on their activities. They demonstrated the all important skill of behind-the-scenes negotiations with white power-brokers. While historians writing about black business during this era typically focus on the influence of C. C. Spaulding's leadership when discussing black business in Durham, it is equally important that attention be given to Richard McDougald. He, more so than Spaulding, proved instrumental in helping Wheeler become a black business activist. Moreover, McDougald laid the groundwork in the linkages between full citizenship and its centrality to economic power. The DCNA's emergence marked a significant turning point in Durham for widespread community activism and fueled the march toward full citizenship.

CHAPTER 3

“AMERICA’S NUMBER 1 OPPORTUNITY”: THE BATTLE FOR FULL CITIZENSHIP IN ENSURING THE SOUTH’S ECONOMIC FUTURE, 1940-1954

The South of the future...is a South freed of stultifying inheritances from the past. It is a South where the measure of a man will be his ability, not his race; where a common citizenship will work in democratic understanding for the common good; where all who labor will be rewarded in proportion to their skill and achievement; where all can feel confident of personal safety and equality before the law; where there will exist no double standard in housing, health, education, other public services; where segregation will be recognized as a cruel and needless penalty on the human spirit, and will no longer be imposed; where, above all, every individual will enjoy a full share of dignity and self-respect, in recognition of his creation in the image of God.³⁴⁷

—“The South of the Future,” Southern Regional Council, 1951

In a November 1945 issue of the *Tarheel Banker*, John Wheeler wrote, “That the South’s popular designation has quite recently been changed from ‘America’s Number 1 Problem’ to ‘America’s Number 1 Opportunity,’ is the occasion for jubilation on the part of many, but careful scrutiny of our present situation presents a number of sobering considerations.” Wheeler made a compelling argument at an important time in the country’s history, as World War II ended. The postwar period represented a pivotal moment in the South’s economic growth but Wheeler warned, “Indeed such an opportunity may not appear

³⁴⁷“The South of the Future: A Statement of Policy and Aims of the Southern Regional Council,” December 12, 1951, James McBride Dabbs Papers #3816, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 3.

again in this century.”³⁴⁸ As a black banker he tried “to interpret to the remainder of the banking profession not only the ambitions and latent abilities of colored people, but also the true meaning of the impact which full and unhampered developments of these abilities will make upon our economy.” He offered a vision for the postwar South and what he believed to be the path to New South prosperity.³⁴⁹

Wheeler called on the South’s business leaders to change their “ ‘colonial economy.’ ” This outdated economy still “exported its wealth of raw materials or partly processed goods to other regions for fabrication and thereafter found itself unable to repossess the full benefits” because it continued to rely on an “unskilled and low wage labor” system.³⁵⁰ The exploited laborers, many of them African Americans, found themselves in a perpetual state of economic inferiority due to segregation and discrimination. Thus, they could never expand their purchasing power to fully contribute to the South’s economic advancement. Wheeler insisted that because blacks made up one-fourth of the region’s 42,000,000 citizens, the South had to improve their economic viability. Otherwise, “the South [could not] hope to participate fully in the [economic] benefits of the approaching [postwar] period without first committing itself to the full integration of its Negro population into all phases of its economy.”³⁵¹

John Wheeler directed his essay at North Carolina’s white bankers in a language they could understand. He presented them with data on what the white South missed out on by

³⁴⁸John Hervey Wheeler, “A Negro Banker Speaks to the South,” *The Tarheel Banker*, vol. 24, no. 5, November 1945, North Carolina Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 7, 27.

³⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 7.

³⁵⁰*Ibid.*

³⁵¹*Ibid.*, 7, 27.

restricting black citizenship rights. He reported, “in 1940, 750,000 Negro families owned their own homes valued at one billion dollars, and in the South alone, 700,000 Negroes owned 8,325,000 acres of farm land valued at \$850,000,000 plus farm implements worth \$40,000,000.” Black businesses accounted for “approximately 32,000 retail stores having an annual sales volume of approximately \$100,000,000. In all, about 60,000 business enterprises in over 200 different lines [were] conducted by Negroes, among which [were] 55 life insurance companies reporting total assets of more than \$45,000,000 and total insurance in force of approximately \$600,000,000.” In addition, “The income of all Negroes in the United States [would] reach \$8,500,000,000 in 1945 and out of this figure they [would] be expected to spend at least 6 billion dollars for goods and services.”³⁵²

Despite all the limitations placed on blacks, they managed to steadily improve their economic status since emancipation. In other words, Wheeler took pride in the accomplishments blacks made with limited resources, but he also believed that if given equal opportunities, they could achieve so much more. Their economic status alone should have “dispel[led] any doubts as to [their] full citizenship capacity and economic value to our society.” In the larger scheme of things, “The so-called Negro ‘problem’ is one which we cannot ignore if for no other reason than the fact that it deals with one-fourth of our entire population to whom the course of [the South’s] economy is inextricably bonded.”³⁵³

In his New South prosperity message, Wheeler explicitly linked full citizenship rights to economic power. If blacks went without full citizenship rights—in a system perpetuated

³⁵²John Hervey Wheeler, “A Negro Banker Speaks to the South,” 26-27.

³⁵³*Ibid.*, 26-27.

by Jim Crow in every area of life—there would be no black economic power. This meant blacks deserved of opportunity in health, housing, employment, education, politics, and public accommodations. Wheeler boldly pointed to integration as the best way to accomplish this objective—what he referred to as “freedom of movement” in all facets of society. If the African American lacked decent educational opportunities to obtain better paying jobs, they could never enjoy full citizenship. If they had the necessary training and education, but prospective employers discriminated against them or refused to let them apply, they did not have full citizenship. Unless the artificial barriers collapsed, blacks would never gain full citizenship rights and could never play a supporting role in ensuring the South’s economic future. In the end, if a large segment of American society could not participate fully in the southern economy, then the South would suffer because it could not compete economically with other regions.

On the one hand, the U. S.’s entrance into World War II represented a moment for African Americans to show loyalty and support and an opportunity to express their dissatisfaction at not having their full citizenship rights on the other. They vividly remembered the heightened racial tensions and discrimination experienced by black soldiers who sacrificed for their country during war. Thus, black leaders remained silent about their domestic grievances to show their loyalty to the larger war effort, which they hoped would lead to first-class citizenship. Nevertheless, blacks still held second-class status. The Second World War provided another opportunity to demand full citizenship while pointing to the country’s hypocrisy for the entire world to see. Moreover, blacks prepared themselves to

take part in America's postwar prosperity without any restrictions placed on their freedom.

African Americans pressed for full citizenship during the war, while at the same time preparing for the larger postwar battle for civil rights and everything to come during that period. Wheeler and business leaders in Durham showed their support for the war effort by doing things such as purchasing war bonds. In the larger Durham community, blacks capitalized on the wartime fervor to persuade the city's white power-structure to increase black citizenship rights. They agitated for educational equality with an eye toward employment opportunities in wartime defense industries. During the war, the DCNA—of which Wheeler became an executive committee member—highlighted blacks' desires for vocational education to allow them to obtain skilled jobs while also contributing to the larger war effort. They hoped to unearth what the continued denial of those rights for blacks meant to the overall fight for democracy and New South prosperity. On an individual level, Wheeler contributed to these goals through his involvement in developments that articulated blacks' demands for full citizenship, enrolled in law school both as a way to support the war effort and prepare for the postwar battle for citizenship, and became the DCNA's education committee chair in 1943.

Once the war ended, as Wheeler argued in the *Tarheel Banker*, blacks hoped to reap the full benefits of being American citizens. However, it became clear that despite their overwhelming support during the war and their demands for equality of opportunity, blacks had to seek full citizenship through more militant and aggressive measures—by ultimately waging an all-out attack on Jim Crow segregation. In Durham, blacks' battle for educational equality represented a significant factor in the overall struggle for full citizenship. It was a

crucial step toward obtaining better educational opportunities for blacks so they would have the chance to earn a decent living and ultimately contribute to the South's postwar prosperity.

DOUBLE V: VICTORY AT HOME, VICTORY ABROAD

In January 1940, as the new decade began, John Wheeler received a promotion to cashier at M&F during its annual stockholders meeting. Richard McDougald also received a promotion and became the bank's executive vice president. According to the *Carolina Times* newspaper, "The elevation of both these two men to higher positions in the local bank is considered a tribute to the fine manner in which they have conducted the affairs of the nation['s] largest Negro bank," as the business had over \$1.2 million in assets.³⁵⁴ As Wheeler's tenure began as M&F's cashier, he hoped to move the bank forward. The decade also began on a sad note, as his family suffered a significant loss. His father-in-law, Dr. Stanford L. Warren, died in late January. Wheeler, his wife Selena, and her mother Julia Warren, comforted one another at his bedside when he passed. Dr. Warren's death represented a major loss for M&F—he chaired the bank's board at the time of his death. In 1908, Dr. Warren helped found M&F and held the bank's presidency from president from 1920 to 1921. Dr. Warren had also provided Wheeler with another example of community leadership as he was heavily involved in a number of other institutions. Dr. Warren had a

³⁵⁴“Wheeler and McDougald Elevated,” *Carolina Times*, January 13, 1940; Hans Dominique Lassiter, “A History of Mechanics and Farmers Bank 1908-1969” (M.A. thesis North Carolina Central University, 2000), 16.

hand in expanding the city's only black library, which was eventually named in his honor.³⁵⁵ Despite the loss, 1940 stood to be a promising year for the bank.

In July, Wheeler and other M&F officers reached another milestone, which aided the bank's progress in North Carolina. Wheeler, along with C. C. Spaulding and Richard McDougald, attended the white North Carolina Bankers Association's annual conference, the first interracial meeting for the organization. The M&F and NCM executives were the only blacks represented. The week-long conference, sponsored by UNC and the state banking department, included daily workshops and panel sessions by industry leaders such as state banking commissioner Gurney P. Hood. The M&F group wanted to strengthen their cooperative relationship with the state's white bankers to discuss financial principles and North Carolina's economic future.³⁵⁶

As the Second World War escalated in Europe, it opened up new opportunities for blacks to press for full citizenship rights. Wheeler took up the challenge to obtain full citizenship rights for blacks with his involvement with the DCNA and its battle for racial equality. That same year, the DCNA completed an extensive report aimed at inequalities between white and black schools in Durham. At a school board meeting in August 1940, the DCNA's political committee chairman Rencher N. Harris outlined significant disparities. The report highlighted the preponderance of white teachers throughout the school system, including an art teacher at each white school compared to only one art teacher for all eight

³⁵⁵“Dr. Stanford L. Warren Succumbs: Pioneer Doctor Dies After Long Period of Illness,” *Carolina Times*, February 3, 1940; “Commissioners Pass Resolutions for Dr. Stanford Warren,” *Carolina Times*, February 10, 1940; Hans Dominique Lassiter, “A History of Mechanics and Farmers Bank,” 16-17.

³⁵⁶“Durham Bankers Attend Carolina Conference,” *Carolina Times*, July 20, 1940; “Race Bankers Take Part in Carolina Conference,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, July 20, 1940; “Interracial Goodwill, As Well As Business Efficiency, Achieved by North Carolina Bankers,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, July 20, 1940.

black schools; it was the same for physical education teachers. They pointed that white schools had several junior high schools, while black schools had none.³⁵⁷

The report called special attention to major disparities in buildings and equipment between the black Hillside High School and the white Durham High School. The document pointed to inadequate spaces available for teaching the proper science, commerce, art, and music classes at Hillside. The group wanted improvements in vocational education at Hillside. Teachers at Durham High School taught courses in wood and metal work in “well equipped” laboratories for practical training. Hillside, on the other hand, offered those same courses, but “the building used for the class in wood work [was] inadequate,” and “the equipment [was] poor and limited.” Hillside’s “Auto Mechanics Department [was] in name only” as the “department [had] no shelter to protect [students] while they [were] working.” Harris and the DCNA recommended a remedy to improve several school buildings and to add better libraries, and more teachers in black schools. The vocational issue remained an important matter toward preparing black students for skilled jobs that would lead to economic stability once they graduated from high school and possibly defense industry employment during World War II.³⁵⁸

During the 1930s, vocational curriculum at the secondary and post-secondary levels became more advanced due to technological innovations. Once this happened, modernized vocational training became more exclusively for white students, whereas before, whites championed this for African Americans. While blacks had access to vocational education

³⁵⁷Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, August 24, 1940; Kam Owen Carver, “The Role of the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People in the Pursuit of Equal Educational Opportunities, 1935-1954,” 35-36.

³⁵⁸Ibid.

they received “outdated forms of industrial instruction” for “menial ‘black’ jobs.” Unless blacks went to college after high school to obtain training in the profession, which most did not, without skilled training in high school handicapped their economic futures.³⁵⁹ It was for that reason that blacks in Durham demanded the school board add a twelfth grade to Hillside High in 1937. By World War II, blacks increasingly sounded the alarm for improved vocational training for black students.

During this same time, Durham’s white civic groups made special appeals to the board about vocational education. The Durham “Kiwanis” and “Monarch” Clubs submitted identical letters explaining that “by reason of the present National emergency and the program now in operation for National Defense, there [was] great need for skilled workers.” The groups recommended that the school board “take appropriate action as may be proper, looking to the early erection of a vocational building in which proper training may be given those [white] boys and girls desiring vocational courses and which may likewise help relieve the present congested conditions.” Several students from Durham High taking “Diversified Occupations,” and “Co-operative” classes joined in the appeal stating, “Vocational training [would] help to furnish trained workers for the skilled trades, thereby aiding in national defense which is of vital importance at this time.” The outlined several that new facilities and equipment could possibly have on Durham’s economic future since “Durham [was] an industrial city. More than fifty percent of the employable population [was] engaged in mechanical and manufacturing fields of work” and “there [was] a scarcity of skilled workers.” Moreover, the city’s “demand for [white] high school students who have had

³⁵⁹Sarah Caroline Thuesen, “Classes of Citizenship: The Culture and Politics of Black Public Education in North Carolina, 1919-1960” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2003), 298-299.

vocational work [was] good. More than ninety percent of [white] vocational graduates have been placed in jobs.”³⁶⁰ The skilled job opportunities appeared highly accessible to whites, while the same jobs were completely unavailable to blacks. Yet, as Sarah Caroline Theusen has also concluded, the actions blacks took when it came to vocational education proved “important for understanding how education figured into a larger black vision of economic citizenship.”³⁶¹ John Wheeler pointed to education as a central element in ensuring North Carolina and the South’s economic future. In the postwar years, Wheeler and others believed gains won during World War II would transition into greater economic and educational opportunities afterwards. They held out hope that better vocational education would also lead to better employment opportunities for blacks.

By early 1941, defense industry employment for black Americans became a topic of concern for the nation’s black leaders. In January, labor leader A. Philip Randolph spearheaded the March on Washington Movement (MOWM) to bring attention to continued discrimination in the military. Another problem stemmed from unequal jobs in defense industries by government contractors and private companies involved in wartime related production. Randolph threatened to hold a large-scale march where about 100,000 blacks would descend on the nation’s capital in July to protest the inequalities.³⁶²

³⁶⁰Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, September 24, 1940.

³⁶¹Sarah Caroline Thuesen, “Classes of Citizenship,” 301.

³⁶²Jerry Gershenhorn, “Double V in North Carolina: The *Carolina Times* and the Struggle for Racial Equality during World War II,” *Journalism History* 32:3 (Fall 2006), 160; Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1992* (Canada: Harper Collins, 1993), 12; Robert Samuel Smith, *Race, Labor, and Civil Rights: Griggs versus Duke Power and the Struggle for Equal Employment Opportunity* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press,) 16; David Hamilton Golland, *Constructing Affirmative Action: The Struggle for Equal Employment Opportunity* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 11-12; Philip F. Rubio, *A History of Affirmative Action, 1619-2000* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 108; Glenda Gilmore, *Defying*

The MOWM's objective was to push President Franklin D. Roosevelt to enact an executive order designed to eliminate discrimination in defense jobs for African Americans. During a meeting with Randolph and others near the date for the march, Roosevelt tried to convince Randolph to abandon the mass protest, but the president initially rejected an executive order. However, Roosevelt also had to consider the international implications if black Americans protested against the government at a time when American decried fascism abroad while ignoring its own domestic issues related to racial inequality. Once Randolph and other leaders reaffirmed their position and made their goals clear to Roosevelt, the president passed Executive Order 8802 on June 25, 1941, creating the President's Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), which forbade discrimination in defense industries; the FEPC had the responsibility to monitor race-based discrimination in defense industry employment during the war. Although Randolph and other leaders viewed the executive order as too weak, he canceled the July demonstration.³⁶³

By that summer, Wheeler and the DCNA more directly connected their demands for educational equality with broader calls for democracy and equal employment opportunities in defense industries during the war. In July, Wheeler and other DCNA leaders attended a Durham county commissioners meeting where they asked the body to "earmark certain funds for the building of a Technical High School for the training of Negro boys and girls in manual skills." The group asked the commissioners to set aside the funding, "in light of the

Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950 (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 2008), 359-360.

³⁶³Ibid.

present world crisis.”³⁶⁴ That October, DCNA education committee chairman Dr. Alphonse Heningburg led DCNA members before the board “in the interest of Vocational Education opportunities for negro youth.” The group asked the board to “allot funds in the next school budget, as may be appropriated by the County Commissioners, for the expansion of Vocational facilities at Hillside High School.”³⁶⁵ They not to support a bond issue to help build a white technical high school for whites unless “the essential needs of colored school[s] are met first.”³⁶⁶ Two months later, the country went to war after the December 7 attack on Pearl Harbor.

By February 1942, blacks adopted the “Double V. Campaign,” an approach first promoted by the black *Pittsburgh Courier* newspaper and then by other black newspapers across the country. The Double V strategy—a two-pronged approach by blacks—articulated their strong support for the war effort, while criticizing the U. S. for denying full citizenship rights to its black citizens. African Americans would seek *victory* at home against racial inequality and *victory* abroad against fascism and other forces, which threatened democracy. In Durham, the *Carolina Times*’ fiery editor and DCNA executive committee member became a vocal about black North Carolinians supporting the war, while at the same encouraging them to actively fight for their full citizenship rights at home.³⁶⁷

³⁶⁴“Negro Committee Petition City for Technical School,” *Durham Morning Herald*, July 4, 1941; Kam Owen Carver, “The Role of the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People in the Pursuit of Equal Educational Opportunities, 1935-1954,” 36.

³⁶⁵Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, October 23, 1941.

³⁶⁶“Durham Group Asks Equitable School Situation,” *Afro-American*, May 3, 1941.

³⁶⁷Jerry Gershenhorn, “Double V in North Carolina,” 156, 162.

Wheeler and the DCNA maintained their determination to obtain black rights by connecting by directly connecting education to economic justice. In April 1942, C. C. Spaulding appealed to the U.S.'s heightened wartime status, when he wrote to school board chairman William H. Wannamaker "regarding Defense Classes for negroes." In letter, Spaulding explained that the DCNA "made a preliminary survey of the facilities which exist[ed] at Hillside High School for training for national defense, and [they] noted with regret that there were no courses offered at this school which could [have] be[en] considered a part of the national defense training program." Spaulding went on to write "it is particularly to be regretted that during these times of national emergency, when concerted effort is expected of every American regardless of race, that inequality of opportunities offered to Negro and white youth is operating in such a way as to deny to Negro youth such training as [would] be necessary for those who wish[ed] to place themselves in position to make their rightful contribution in the present emergency."³⁶⁸

In highlighting the need for vocational education and full citizenship more broadly as a prerequisite to job opportunities, Spaulding reminded the board chairman about the principles of democracy. He said "the loyalty of America's fourteen million Negro citizens is a fact which has established itself beyond question. At this time we feel it the duty of every community in our democratic nation, and especially those responsible for the educational program, to make available for the Negro youth the [economic] opportunities available to other groups." He went on to explain that the "committee [felt] that some immediate provision should be made whereby Negroes will have an opportunity to attend at

³⁶⁸Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, April 1, 1942.

least one shift of all classes now being conducted in defense training at the [white] Central High School.”³⁶⁹ At the April meeting, the board considered securing federal funds for a vocational building for whites and discussed defense classes in aviation woodwork for white women along with a welding class for blacks. The board later informed Spaulding that “plans [were] being worked out whereby a Defense Class [would] be established for negroes.”³⁷⁰ In May, however, Louis Austin angrily criticized the board for its continued discriminatory policies in vocational defense training for blacks, calling board members “blockheads,” and “contemptible jackasses.” Austin continued by explaining that “in spite of consistent pleas made to it by honest, law-abiding and patriotic Negroes of this community,” the board was “so hell-bent on keeping Negro boys, girls and men from learning trades, that will fit them for work in defense industries, they cannot see one inch from their noses.”³⁷¹

While Wheeler and the DCNA waited for the vocational education defense training courses for blacks, Durham’s whites already had access to those same opportunities. State vocational education director Dr. T. E. Browne thanked the Durham school board for doing such a good job with the vocational education program, calling it “one of the best in North Carolina.” They were “particularly proud,” Browne continued “of what has been accomplished in the program of vocational training for defense workers as a part of [the city’s] vocational training program under the administration of the City School Board.” In June, Wheeler alongside Dr. A. Heningburg, R. L. McDougald and, --representing the DCNA—went before the board again “in the interest of more vocational training for negro

³⁶⁹Ibid.

³⁷⁰Ibid.

³⁷¹“What is it Worth,” *Carolina Times*, May 9, 1942.

youth, with special emphasis on this type of training in the Hillside High School.” Before the meeting concluded, the board chairman appointed a committee “to examine carefully the status of the Negro schools with reference to vocational or other [skilled job] training and [to] make a report.”³⁷² Nevertheless, at the next board meeting in July, the committee made no recommendations about vocational training for blacks, but planned only “to call a meeting sometime soon for further study.” The DCNA had to wait until the next, when the board “‘authorized a careful study and possibility of securing a site [for a technical building for blacks]...when money [became] available.’”³⁷³

John Wheeler did not serve in the military during World War II—likely due to his asthmatic condition—but he supported the war effort while trying to secure full citizenship for blacks in many ways. Camp Butner opened in August 1942 as an infantry training camp just ten miles north of Durham. With such close proximity, Durham became a regular destination for soldiers stationed at the Army barracks. Camp Butner housed about 7,500 African American soldiers during wartime.³⁷⁴ To assist with the activities of soldiers during their downtime away from Camp Butner, the United Service Organizations (USO) set up locations throughout Durham—three separate sites for white soldiers and one for black soldiers. Wheeler NCM executive William D. Hill helped get USO facilities for black

³⁷²Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, June 11, 1942.

³⁷³Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, July 28, 1942; Kam Owen Carver, “The Role of the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People in the Pursuit of Equal Educational Opportunities, 1935-1954,” 36.

³⁷⁴ Jean Bradley Anderson, *Durham County: A History of Durham County, North Carolina* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 384; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 11.

soldiers.³⁷⁵ Moreover, black business served on the Durham County draft board—M&F also held fundraisers and purchased war bonds. By December 1942, M&F and NCM each purchased in \$100,000 in war bonds; the Mutual Building and Loan Association purchased \$15,000 worth, while the Bankers Fire Insurance Company contributed another \$5,000.³⁷⁶ Besides the USO facilities, blacks in Durham contributed their share to support the war effort in several other ways. African American women established organizations and volunteer services that helped sustain to help sustain soldiers and their families during World War II. Along with Camp Butner, Durham and its workforce benefited economically from the war because of increased skilled job opportunities and production from war industries, which helped the city make good on government contracts.³⁷⁷

The DCNA's agitation for educational equality with respect to vocational training in defense industries paid some dividends. In September, DCNA economic committee chairman W. D. Hill sent "special memorandums" to Durham's black ministers who were "perhaps familiar with the fight which the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs has been waging to obtain adequate technical [job] training for Negro youth." Hill detailed the DCNA's success up to that point, saying "thus far, [their] efforts have been rewarded by the establishment of a Welding School which graduated its first class two weeks [prior]. All

³⁷⁵Jean Bradley Anderson, *Durham County*, 384; Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South: A Social History of the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1973), 197.

³⁷⁶"C.C. Spaulding Calls on Negro Residents to Aid Stamp Drive," *Durham Morning Herald*, May 3, 1942; "Negro Insurance Firms will Sponsor War Bond Campaign," *Durham Morning Herald*, December 5, 1942; "220,000 Worth of Bonds Bought by Negro Institutions," *Durham Morning Herald*, December 10, 1942; "Local Negroes Plan rally at Armory Tonight," *Durham Morning Herald*, December 19, 1942; "Negro war Bond rally Here Results in \$75,000 Business," *Durham Morning Herald*, December 18, 1942.

³⁷⁷Jean Bradley Anderson, *Durham County*, 385; Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 12-14.

seven members of this class have already been employed at wages in the neighborhood of \$75 PER WEEK.” Hill assured the ministers the DCNA would not stop there, “In order that we may be able to show state and federal officers that there is sufficient interest among our people in this kind of training and in order that we may secure the establishment of additional facilities and types of technical training, we are making an appeal to the church-going people of Durham to see to it that our younger and middle-aged people who are interested in this type of training” applied for courses in “Machine Shop Practice,” “Airplane Woodworking,” “Airplane Riveting,” and “Radio Communications and Repairs.” Hill concluded by outlining the DCNA’s ultimate civil rights objective, as the organization had “no interest in the matter other than its usual desire to improve the training and general income level of our people.”³⁷⁸

On top of their support for the war effort, Wheeler and other black southerners refused to let time pass without collectively articulating their larger civil rights concerns. On October 20, 1942, a group of prominent African American leaders from the South convened on the campus on the NCC campus in Durham. The Southern Conference on Race Relations, or the “Durham Conference” as it became known as, culminated several meetings led by Gordon B. Hancock, sociology and economics professor at Virginia Union University, and others earlier that summer in Richmond, Virginia. The leaders articulated their views and demands of the Jim Crow South because, as they put it, “many things have been spoken for him and against him, to him and about him; but the southern Negro [was] today speaking for himself.” The offered a plan on “just what the Negro wanted and [was] expecting of the post-war South and nation” and to deal with American inequality toward postwar New South

³⁷⁸DCNA Memorandum, September 5, 1942, R. N. Harris Papers, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Durham, N. C.

prosperity. They wanted “a New Charter of Race Relations in the South” because they saw “the old charter [as being] paternalistic and traditional.” The group asserted, “The Negro ha[d] paid the full price of citizenship in the South and nation, and the Negro want[ed] to enjoy the full exercise of this citizenship, no more and no less.” The Durham conferees proclaimed, “We therefore need not cringe and crawl, tremble or truckle or even tip-toe, as we deliberate on a possible way to relieve a pressure that is already becoming critical”³⁷⁹

As Hancock recalled, John Wheeler was “one of those who met with [them] at Durham on that memorable morning when [they] set in motion the movement that eventuated into our now great Southern Regional Council.”³⁸⁰ The development outlined blacks’ demands for their full citizenship rights on the path to New South prosperity. The Durham Conference attendees consisted of prominent educators—Dr. James E. Shepard and James T. Taylor represented NCC. Others in attendance included Drs. Rufus E. Clement and Benjamin E. Mays who were presidents at Morehouse College and Atlanta University, respectively. Wheeler frequently worked with both Clement and Mays as trustee at both schools. M&F president C. C. Spaulding attended the meeting as well. At the conference, the group divided themselves into several working groups designated to identify problems and propose solutions in seven major areas. The areas included: education, agriculture, military service, industry and labor, service occupations, political and civil rights, and social welfare and health. In a final suggestion made by Dr. Mays, the group agreed to issue a

³⁷⁹ Southern Conference on Race Relations pamphlet, Gordon Blaine Hancock Papers, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Durham, N. C., 3-4.

³⁸⁰ Letter from Gordon Blaine Hancock to John Hervey Wheeler, March 18, 1964, John Hervey Wheeler Papers, Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center, Atlanta, Georgia.

formal statement. They appointed a subcommittee headed by sociologist Dr. Charles E. Johnson. The subcommittee later compiled the most recurring themes outlined in into “A Basis for Inter-racial Cooperation and Development in the South: A Statement by Southern Negroes,” which they issued to the press on December 15.³⁸¹

In the Durham Statement or “Durham Manifesto,” the group tactfully insisted on full citizenship rights for blacks promised to them by the U. S. Constitution. Although the statement did not call for an immediate end to segregation, it did take a position in opposition to it. They said, “We are fundamentally opposed to the principles and practices of compulsory segregation in our American society, whether of races or classes or creeds, however, we regard it as both sensible and timely to address ourselves now to the current problems of racial discrimination and neglect and to ways in which we may cooperate in the advancement of programs aimed at the sound improvement of race relations within the democratic framework.”³⁸²

The Durham Manifesto’s most daring demands came in areas such as political and civil rights, industry and labor, and education. The Durham Manifesto demanded abolition of the “poll tax,” “white primary,” and “all forms of discriminatory practices...and intimidation of citizens seeking to exercise their right of franchise.” The statement pointed to the war’s economic importance by demanding equal employment opportunities for blacks because “the only tenable basis of economic survival and development for Negroes is inclusion in unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled branches of work in the industries or

³⁸¹Raymond Gavins, *The Perils and Prospects of Southern Black Leadership*, 120-124.

³⁸²Southern Conference on Race Relations pamphlet, Gordon Blaine Hancock Papers, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Durham, N. C., 6.

occupations of the region to the extent that they are equally capable.” The group endorsed the FEPC as “sound and economically essential” to improving job opportunities for blacks. To this aim, the document demanded “the same pay for the same work” and wanted fair participation for blacks in organized labor unions. The Durham Manifesto emphasized improvements in black education within the “separate but equal” framework. The Durham conferees demanded equal salaries for black school teachers, better equipped buildings for black schools, and revised school programs that included identical school terms for black and white children. Last, they wanted training for blacks in graduate and professional schools and black representation on school boards³⁸³

As Raymond Gavins concluded, those at the Durham Conference cannot be judged retrospectively without understanding “never before in Southern history had black people made such a comprehensive and lucid declaration of what they expected from white people. Despite its purposeful ambiguity on segregation, the statement indicated that Southern Negro leaders were not mere accommodationist. They were dead set against the status quo. As one variation on the theme of rising racial aspirations during World War II, the Durham statement projected a vision of equality and projected the changing mind of the black South.”³⁸⁴ The Durham conference proved consistent with Wheeler’s belief that full citizenship in all areas would lead to economic improvements for blacks and economic advancement for the South and nation. The Durham Conference, along with follow-up meetings in Atlanta and Richmond laid the foundation for the Southern Regional Council, an

³⁸³Ibid., 6-7.

³⁸⁴Ibid., 9; Raymond Gavins, *The Perils and Prospects of Southern Black Leadership*, 127.

interracial civil rights organization that consisted of southern blacks and white liberals.³⁸⁵ Since SRC's in 1944, the organization pledged itself to "the ideals and practices of equal opportunity for all peoples in the region; to reduce race tension, the basis of racial tension, racial misunderstanding, and racial distrust; to develop and integrate leadership in the South on new levels of regional development and fellowship."³⁸⁶ From SRC's beginning, Wheeler became a vice president with the organization and in the next decades became its most influential leader.

By early 1943, John Wheeler chaired the DCNA's economic committee. He kept blacks informed about available job training and employment opportunities in defense industries. In previous years the National Youth Administration opened a training center in Durham and was "equipped by the federal government to train" skilled workers.³⁸⁷ In January Wheeler sent out a memorandum to black churches, reminding congregations, that "from time to time, the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs has prosecuted a program of trying to place our people in the best jobs we can find for them and in addition thereto we have been trying to point out places where Negroes may obtain training necessary for a great

³⁸⁵ To learn more about the circumstances surrounding the Durham Conference and the establishment of the SRC, see also Jacqueline Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry: Jesse Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), especially chapter 9; Henry Lewis Suggs, *P.B. Young Newspaperman: Race, Politics, and Journalism in the New South, 1910-1962* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1988), especially chapters 8-9; Julia Anne McDounough, "Men and Women of Good Will: A History of the Commission on Interracial Cooperation and the Southern Regional Council, 1919-1954" Ph.D. diss. University of Virginia, 1993, especially chapters 2-3; Paul Houser, "The Southern Regional Council" M. A. thesis, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1950.; Raymond Gavins, *The Perils and Prospects of Southern Black Leadership*, see especially chapters 5-6; Michael Dennis, *Luther P. Jackson and a Life for Civil Rights* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 90-96.

³⁸⁶ "The Southern Regional Council," *The Southern Frontier*, March 1944, 1, in the Guy Benton Johnson Papers #3826, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

³⁸⁷ Jean Bradley Anderson, *Durham County*, 383.

many of these jobs.” “At the present time,” explained Wheeler, “the National Youth Administration Resident Center...is trying to form classes in welding, sheet metal work, and machine shop practice with 30 students in each class.”³⁸⁸ Young adults under twenty-five could take the courses, which paid students \$24 a month. Wheeler had confidence that “graduates [would also] be able to obtain jobs at different points throughout the country, paying a minimum of \$1 an hour.”³⁸⁹ Wheeler pleaded with the black community to “see to it that [their] young people [took] advantage of this opportunity whereby they [could] obtain jobs in places where we have not been permitted to work before.” Wheeler linked these available job opportunities during wartime to blacks’ postwar hopes because “the manner in which [their] people respond to this opportunity [would] have much to do with the future opportunities for [job] training which may be provided for us.”³⁹⁰

John Wheeler and M&F responded to appeals from black leaders to lend support to calls to lend their support and cooperation to the war effort wartime food production. In September 1942, Major R. R. Wright—the National Negro Bankers Association founder—contacted the nation’s black banks. The “production of food, feed, fiber and other agricultural commodities,” explained Wright, “is as essential to victory as tanks, guns and planes.”³⁹¹ In March 1943, Wheeler and the bank assisted black farmers—4-H club

³⁸⁸DCNA Memorandum , January 9, 1943, R. N. Harris Papers, Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Durham, N. C.; “Learn a Trade,” *Carolina Times*, January 16, 1943.

³⁸⁹*Ibid.*

³⁹⁰*Ibid.*

³⁹¹“Nation’s Bankers to Help Push Wartime Production: Are Urged to Cooperate with Farmers,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, September 19, 1942; “Urges Banks to Assist Farm Youth,” *The Chicago Defender*, September 19, 1942.

members—n purchasing “a carload of high grade calves at a total cost of \$2,400.”³⁹² By year’s end, M&F issued a \$300,000 check from NCM’s account to purchase more war bonds. The purchase, according to one newspaper, “brought forcibly to public attention the remarkable manner in which Negro capital is supporting the country’s war effort.” The check itself, explained another newspaper, was “said not only to mark the largest single purchase of war bonds by a Negro business but is also the largest check ever to be issued against a Negro bank” up to that point. Between M&F and NCM, they purchased \$200,000 and \$2,120,300 in war bonds, respectively.³⁹³

Despite continued loyalty from black Americans and calls from black leader for equality of opportunity and “freedom of movement,” they received continuous reminders that they did not have full citizenship. In March 1943, for example, sixteen year-old Doris Lyon, a student at Hillside High School, boarded a city bus and sat in the only available seat toward the back. After another black passenger exited the bus, W. E. Gates, who did not identify himself as a police officer, demanded that Lyon move further back. Before she could make it to the seat, someone else beat her to it, so Lyon remained seated. Gates then told Lyon to move to the back, but she informed him that there were no other available seats. Dissatisfied with her response Gates yanked Lyon by her arm, while knocking her books to the floor; he then kicked the books and yelled obscenities at the young girl. He also tried kicking in the

³⁹²“Bankers Help Farmers Purchase Carload of Calves,” *Carolina Times*, March 6, 1943; “Bankers Help Farmers Purchase Carload of Calves,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, March 20, 1943.

³⁹³“Two Race Firms Put \$900,000 in Third War Loan Bonds,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, October 2, 1943; “Bond Drive Soars in N.C.,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 2, 1943; “Durham Firms Buy 2 ½ Millions Worth of Bonds,” *Chicago Defender*, October 2, 1943.

leg, but she dodged him. Only at the end of the scuffle did Gates identify himself as a police officer, at which point he escorted her from the bus and to the police station.³⁹⁴

At the police station, Gates refused to let Lyon call her mother and not until later that another officer let her call home. The police booked Lyon and a judge set her bond at seventy-five dollars. Before her bond posted, NCM executives William Jesse Kennedy, Jr. and W. D. Hill got Lyon released without bail under their names. The Lyon incident sparked outrage among black Durhamites, “many of whom [had] expressed their resentment of the manner in [which] she was treated.” Though Durham’s black leaders like Kennedy and Hill came to Lyon’s aid, a judge later found her guilty for striking a police officer and for disobeying North Carolina’s segregation policies on public transportation, while officer Gates got off scot-free.³⁹⁵ Moreover, the incident highlighted the abhorrent disregard for black citizenship and revealed the indignities caused by segregation. Also, it underscored the black community’s ongoing concerns over police brutality, an issue they had collectively called on city leaders to address for over a decade.

Despite their service to the country, black soldiers could not escape being denied full citizenship rights, which often came with increased racial conflict during World War II. In

³⁹⁴ “Sixteen-Year-Old School Girl Attacked, Jailed by Officer,” *Carolina Times*, April 3, 1943; Jerry Gershenhorn, “Double V in North Carolina: The *Carolina Times* and the Struggle for Racial Equality during World War II,” *Journalism History* vol. 32, issue 3, fall 2006, 159; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina*, 17; Osha Gray Davidson, *The Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 75.

³⁹⁵ “Sixteen-Year-Old School Girl Attacked, Jailed by Officer,” *Carolina Times*, April 3, 1943; “Negro Bus Seating Case is Continued to 2 P.M. Thursday,” *Durham Morning Herald*, June 2, 1943; “Ruling Will Be Given Today in Local Bus Case,” *Durham Morning Herald*, June 4, 1943; “Local Bus Case is Appealed to Superior Court,” *Durham Morning Herald*, June...1943; Jerry Gershenhorn, “Double V in North Carolina: The *Carolina times* and the Struggle for Racial Equality during World War II,” *Journalism History* vol. 32, issue 3, fall 2006, 159; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina*, 17; Osha Gray Davidson, *The Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 75.

April, a riot broke out in Durham after a black serviceman entered the local ABC store and attempted to purchase liquor with one too many ration books. The clerk demanded that the soldier give-up the additional ration books and used a knife to make his point; the soldier responded by taking out his own knife. The altercation escalated when an ABC officer assaulted the soldier, at which point other soldiers approached the officer. The altercation angered African Americans who pushed back and a riot ensued, where several people got injured; one the local police force and soldiers from Camp Butner came they helped end the melee. In Durham, the riot again highlighted black frustrations at continued police brutality—a few years earlier police murdered James McNeil—and reinforced their plea for Durham to hire black police officers. It also shed a light on blacks’ refusal to take the unjust treatment and hostility against them without fighting back. That summer, major race riots similar to the one in Durham happened in other American cities such as Detroit, Michigan.³⁹⁶

In July, Wheeler and the DCNA kept pressure on vocational education with the technical school building in the forefront; they sent another delegation to meet with the school board.³⁹⁷ At the meeting, business committee chairman C. T. Council reported that his committee was “continuing to study the matter of securing a lot for a Vocational Building for the Negro community.” On July 26, the DCNA also sent a group to appear at a county

³⁹⁶“Negro Bus Seating Case is Continued to 2 P.M. Thursday,” *Durham Morning Herald*, June 2, 1943; “Ruling Will Be Given Today in Local Bus Case,” *Durham Morning Herald*, June 4, 1943; Jean Bradley Anderson, *Durham County: A History of Durham County, North Carolina*, 386; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina*, 18; Jerry Gershenhorn, “Double V in North Carolina,” 162; Osha Gray Davidson, *The Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South*, 75-76; Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 38.

³⁹⁷ Kam Owen Carver, “The Role of the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People in the Pursuit of Equal Educational Opportunities, 1935-1954,” 36; Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, July 26, 1943.

commissioners meeting to discuss the vocational and technical school building. By August, C. T. Council again reported “negotiations were still being carried on with reference to a lot for a Vocational and Technical School for Negroes.” By November, the board contacted individual property owners “regarding the securing of a lot adjacent to the Hillside High School property as a place for the erection of a Vocational and Technical Building.”³⁹⁸

By September 1943, Wheeler could begin to consider legal tactics as a way to obtain full citizenship rights for Durham’s blacks. That month, he enrolled in law school at NCCN.³⁹⁹ NCCN’s law school opened in 1940, in an attempt by the North Carolina State Legislature to meet the “separate but equal” mandate in response to the 1938 U.S. Supreme Court ruling *Gaines ex rel. Canada v. Missouri*, which required Missouri to establish a separate law school for blacks at Lincoln University, since no other program existed for them in the state.⁴⁰⁰ Wheeler’s entrance to law school happened as a move to keep the fledgling law school in operation given the war caused a shortage of male students due to the military draft. This forced the school to schedule its law classes at night. Dr. James Shepard personally selected Wheeler and other talented students because Shepard believed they could help raise the law school’s standing. While attending law school, Wheeler worked at the

³⁹⁸ Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, July, 1943; Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, August 2, 1943; Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, November 2, 1943; Kam Owen Carver, “The Role of the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People in the Pursuit of Equal Educational Opportunities, 1935-1954,” 36.

³⁹⁹ *North Carolina College Annual Catalogue*, 1943-1944, North Carolina Central University Archives, Durham, North Carolina, 143.

⁴⁰⁰ *Apocrisarius*, June 1950, published by the North Carolina College Law School Phi Delta Pi Law Society, tenth anniversary edition, North Carolina Central University Archive, Durham, North Carolina, 4, 23; Deborah J. Braswell, “A History of North Carolina Central University’s Law School, 1939-1968,” M. A. thesis, North Carolina Central University, 1977, 12-13; Mark V. Tushnet, *The NAACP Legal Strategy Against Segregated Education, 1925-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 70-77.

bank during the day. His “rigorous schedule meant...four hours sleep a night.”⁴⁰¹ Wheeler’s enrollment into law school represented a patriotic call to duty, it also prepared him with the added weapons he needed for the postwar battle for full citizenship.

In October, Wheeler won the the DCNA’s education committee chairmanship alongside John Sylvester “Shag” Stewart who became the organization’s second permanent chairman; Stewart succeeded Rencher Harris who served as acting chairman when C. C. Spaulding left the post in 1942.⁴⁰² As education committee chairman for the remainder of World War II, Wheeler committed himself and the DCNA to the cause of educational equality with renewed determination. At the top of his list: “ ‘the earmarking of adequate funds for [the] erection of a Technical High School for negroes in the City of Durham.’ ”⁴⁰³ The school board eventually purchased land for building a vocational and technical high school for blacks but for whatever reasons delayed the project. To this end, Wheeler wanted city leaders to make good on their own promises, especially “ ‘the tentative promise from members of the Board of County Commissioners that funds will not only be earmarked before the end of 1944[,] but that every effort will be made to insure simultaneous construction of [technical high] schools for both races.’ ”⁴⁰⁴ He embraced a more militant

⁴⁰¹“Decision led to Banking,” *Durham Morning Herald*, August 2, 1952, Wheeler Vertical File, Stanford L. Warren Library, Durham, N.C.; 7; *Apocrisarius*, North Carolina College Law School publication, tenth anniversary edition, 1950, 5.

⁴⁰²*Carolina Times*, October 16, 1943.

⁴⁰³Kam Owen Carver, “The Role of the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People in the Pursuit of Equal Educational Opportunities, 1935-1954,” 37.

⁴⁰⁴*Ibid.*

stance by September 1944, when he warned DCNA leaders that “ ‘nothing short of legal action [would] change’ the ‘numerous inequities in the present [educational] system.’ ”⁴⁰⁵

In 1944, African Americans in Durham witnessed more racial conflict on public transportation. On July 8, Herman Lee Council—a white city bus driver—murdered black serviceman Booker T. Spicely. The bus driver became angered by what he saw as the soldier’s disrespect after being ordered to the back of the bus. Then Spicely reportedly called Council’s patriotism into question for not serving his country during the war. In Spicely’s mind, Council had all the citizenship rights defended by soldiers like him, while he had none. Incensed at this point, Council pulled out his gun—a .38 special—and shot Spicely dead as soon as he stepped off the bus. The murder rallied black Durhamites but black leaders, most notably Dr. James E. Shepard and M&F president C. C. Spaulding, hesitated to seek assistance from the national NAACP to get the bus driver convicted. The trial ended with Council’s acquittal, but the verdict itself mobilized blacks and prompted them to reinvigorate its local NAACP branch.⁴⁰⁶ Given Wheeler’s inclination toward attacking racial segregation through legal tactics, he probably supported an appeal to the NAACP for help.

In October, Wheeler and M&F received unsettling news when the bank’s executive vice president Richard McDougald died suddenly from an apparent heart attack—he was only forty-eight years old. After his mentor’s death, Wheeler became the bank’s executive vice president and second in command. His first project the executive vice president honored McDougald’s legacy by establishing a pension plan for M&F employees—McDougald’s

⁴⁰⁵Ibid.

⁴⁰⁶Christina Greene, *Out Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina*, 18-21; Jerry Gershenhorn, “Double V in North Carolina,” 164; Osha Gray Davidson, *The Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South*, 75-76.

longtime brainchild. Wheeler wanted the pension plan as an incentive for employees who spent their careers working at the bank; the pension plan supplemented employees' social security benefits.⁴⁰⁷

Despite everything that happened to African Americans during World War II, by war's end, they held an optimistic outlook on the South's future and prepared themselves for the task ahead. In speaking to NCCN students during the school's thirty-fifth anniversary in October 1944, M&F president C. C. Spaulding predicted "an era of unparalleled opportunity [would] exist for all racial groups in the postwar period," and "it [would] be this opportunity that [would] lend itself to the elimination of segregation."⁴⁰⁸ As an organization, the DCNA clarified its postwar objectives in a year-end report it called "Suggestions for Action." The DCNA "declare[d] itself publicly [and] unequivocally opposed to segregation and discrimination in *all* its forms." The group planned to "initiate a movement, the object of which [would] be to arouse interest in and support for [the] repeal of segregation [particularly] in public transportation in the state of North Carolina." The organization pledged to "appoint [a] Post-War Planning Committee...to study ways and means whereby returning Negro soldiers may receive fair consideration along social, educational and and economic lines."⁴⁰⁹ When Wheeler presented his postwar plan for New South prosperity by articulating his civil rights and economic agenda in the pages of the *Tarheel Banker*, he posed a challenge while pointing to the South's greatest opportunity. His words were not

⁴⁰⁷"Death Claims R. L. McDougald," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, October 7, 1944.

⁴⁰⁸"Spaulding Sees End of Jimcrow," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, October 21, 1944.

⁴⁰⁹Letter from R. N. Harris to DCNA members, October 25, 1944, folder 1, box 1, John S. "Shag" Stewart Papers, School of Library and Information Sciences Library, North Carolina Central University.

only meant for white bankers in North Carolina, but he indeed spoke to the *entire* region, declaring that the South was at a crossroads where it had to “choose between perseveration of many of its time honored mores [or] taking its full place in the American economy. To have both would be like eating its cake and having it too.”⁴¹⁰

TO SECURE THESE RIGHTS DURING POST-WORLD WAR II

As World War II ended, the postwar period seemed very promising to African Americans. In the first order of business, the nation had to ensure that returning veterans re-entered the workforce and continued the transition to their private citizens. John Wheeler and M&F helped to fulfill the needs of black GIs. In November 1946, Wheeler took pride in the bank’s role in granting approximately \$600,000 in loans to about 3,000 people. He told his friend and bank board member Asa Spaulding that “these loans have been for the purpose of financing almost every conceivable kind of operation including construction of numerous homes for returning war veterans and it [was their] hope that in the future [they might] find even greater means of contributing to the growth and development of Durham and its surrounding areas.”⁴¹¹ As one write notes, the bank’s home loan financing program for returning war veterans became “one of the greatest accomplishments of the bank” in the late 1940s. A main factor behind the bank’s interest in lending to war veterans again reflected

⁴¹⁰John Hervey Wheeler, “A Negro Banker Speaks to the South,” 27.

⁴¹¹Letter from John Wheeler to Asa T. Spaulding, November 25, 1946, Asa and Elna Spaulding Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.



Figure 3.1 Durham Committee on Negro Affairs (DCNA) meeting. 1950s-1960s. John Hervey Wheeler is seated on the left next to the wall near the first window. M. Hugh Thompson is seated in the first row on the left with arms and legs folded (*Photograph courtesy of Durham County Library*)

the thinking of the bank's late vice president Richard McDougald, himself a World War I veteran.⁴¹² Moreover, in December President Harry S. Truman signed Executive Order 9808 establishing the President's Committee on Civil Rights, which a year later submitted the report *To Secure these Rights*. The report argued that "every mature and responsible person must be able to enjoy full citizenship and have an equal voice in government."⁴¹³ The report later served as Truman's civil rights platform.

⁴¹²Hans Dominique Lassiter, "A History of Mechanics and Farmers Bank 1908-1969," (M. A. thesis North Carolina Central University, 2000), 21.

⁴¹³"To Secure these Rights: the Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights," October 1947, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/civilrights/srights1.htm>.

During wartime demobilization, John Wheeler used other means to accomplish his larger goal of seeking full citizenship rights for black Americans. Since 1944, Wheeler held membership on the Durham Recreation Advisory Committee (RAC), the body responsible for guiding Durham's recreation department. Wheeler became the first African American appointed to the RAC that May. This appointment put Wheeler in a strategic position to make sure blacks received equality in publicly-owned facilities and to ensure the department addressed blacks' recreational concerns after World War II. In early 1946, for example, the RAC discussed purchasing the Morris and Fayetteville Street USO buildings from the federal government. Wheeler played a central role in the development, suggesting that any purchasing bids made by the city should include acquiring all equipment in the buildings.⁴¹⁴ Once the RAC formally advised the city to purchase the two buildings, it included Wheeler's request.⁴¹⁵

Wheeler and DCNA leaders wanted the city to purchase the black Fayetteville Street USO to use it as a youth center for black children. In late 1946, when the city council decided to purchase the USO buildings, it could only buy the black Fayetteville Street building because the federal government wanted to set the Morris Street building aside for a Veterans Administration sub-regional office.⁴¹⁶ In 1947, after purchased the Fayetteville Street building, DCNA representatives led by its chairman John Stewart, attend an RAC

⁴¹⁴Letter from James E. Shepard to Wheeler, May 12, 1944," North Carolina Central University Archives; Letter from Wheeler to Mayor W. F. Carr, April 21, 1948.

⁴¹⁵Durham Recreation Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes, April 3, 1946, Recreation Advisory Committee folder 3 of 4, in unprocessed miscellaneous box, John Hervey Wheeler papers, 1; "Recreation Group Advises Purchase of Negro USO Plant," *Durham Morning Herald*, August 29, 1946.

⁴¹⁶"Recreation Group Advises Purchase of Negro USO Plant," *Durham Morning Herald*, August 29, 1946; "Negroes want city to purchase USO Building," *Durham Morning Herald*, November 3, 1946.

where he asked that “a highly qualified and responsible person be placed in charge of the Fayetteville St. Building.”⁴¹⁷ DCNA leaders wanted a comparable operational budget to maintain the standard set by the USO.⁴¹⁸ As the RAC’s only black member, Wheeler kept such concerns in the forefront and could properly guarantee fairness in private deliberations.

As the naming committee chairman, Wheeler had a hand in naming the Fayetteville Street building. Besides consulting the RAC naming committee, Wheeler turned to Durham’s other black leaders to get a consensus about the building’s name, something he routinely did and advised others to do before making important decisions affecting the entire black community. Wheeler’s committee unanimously supported naming the Fayetteville Street building after William Hill, the deceased NCM executive. Hill played a huge part in bringing the USO to Durham, so it made sense to name the former Fayetteville Street USO the W. D. Hill Recreation Center. Throughout his life, Hill also had an interest in “recreation, youth activities, and community betterment activities.”⁴¹⁹ As Wheeler explained to an audience in attendance at a dedication ceremony for a new recreation building several years later, it was important for young Americans to have access to public recreational facilities because it would go far in “preserving the ideals of American Democracy.” It was through recreational activities early in life, Wheeler believed, that people learned to respect one another, which then paved the way for “effective citizenship.” He saw open admittance

⁴¹⁷“Negroes want city to purchase USO Building,” *Durham Morning Herald*, November 3, 1946.

⁴¹⁸ Recreation Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes, January 29, 1947, Recreation Advisory Committee folder 1 of 4, unprocessed miscellaneous box, John Hervey Wheeler papers, 1.

⁴¹⁹Letter from Wheeler to C. C. Spaulding, February 4, 1947, Recreation Advisory Committee folder 1 of 4, unprocessed miscellaneous box, John Hervey Wheeler papers; Recreation Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes, February 26, 1947, Recreation Advisory Committee folder 1 of 4, unprocessed miscellaneous box, John Hervey Wheeler papers, 1.; Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South*, 197.

to recreational facilities as “one of the means by which many customs of the south which now deny equal opportunity to Negro citizens may be changed in order that everyone may have the same chance for achievement.”⁴²⁰

The battle for full citizenship in Durham, especially with respect to educational equality, looked to be moving in the right direction. In November 1946, the school board’s “Committee on the Needs of the City Schools,” which Wheeler became a member on, presented a new report to the board about the most urgent improvements for city schools. The report stressed two building needs at both Durham High and Hillside High Schools. In reference to Durham High, the report suggested “at the first opportunity the Technical Vocational High School building, for which [they] already [had] complete plans, should be erected.” Though the board had no building blueprints for Hillside, it agreed the “first addition to be made [to Hillside] should be a Technical Vocational building to be erected on the adjoining property which ha[d] been purchased for that purpose. In this building should be housed the various shops now in the temporary metal High School building.”⁴²¹ Once the war ended, they recognized the need to start with vocational training first.

During the war, both black and whites in Durham kept constant pressure on the board to make building upgrades to house vocational education programs, to better prepare high school students for skilled employment. From Wheeler and the DCNA’s perspective, the building and equipment needs for Hillside’s vocational curriculum fell far behind the more

⁴²⁰“Dedication of the E. D. Mickle Recreation Building,” February 26, 1955, box 89, Wheeler papers, 3; original underlining.

⁴²¹Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, November 4, 1946.

advanced buildings and equipment at Durham High. Nevertheless, the board cited the war for halting their building program, which meant they “necessarily had to mark times as neither money or materials were available during the war dominated period.” Although the “Committee on the Needs of the City Schools” agreed about the details of the building improvements for Durham schools, the committee left the door open for the school board to use its discretion in how best to address those needs. The committee believed “the Board of Education under th[ose] circumstances should not be restricted to an iron clad schedule in which each item is tagged with a specific and definite figure, but...should be given reasonable discretion in the exercise of its best judgment as to the time schedule and as to the amount of money that shall be allocated and spent on each item in the general program.” Despite the latter statement by the committee—as a member—Wheeler must have felt some assurance the school board would approach each need on an equal basis. To make the suggested improvements, the board’s building committee proposed a \$3 million bond issue for 1947 to pay for their improvements plan.⁴²²

Despite what Wheeler and Durham’s black community expected from the postwar New South, and what looked to be a promising improvements program for schools, things returned to the status quo. Yet this time, blacks had no intentions of returning to their prewar status as second-class citizens and would no longer accept incremental concessions in their battle for freedom and full citizenship. In 1947, a watershed moment presented to the DCNA as the organization intensified the attack on education inequality. Their public demands and petitions to the school board and city council came more frequently and in many ways

⁴²²Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, December 9, 1946; Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, January 3, 1947.

reached a breaking point. That year, several failed attempts by the DCNA to negotiate the terms of black education turned into decisive moments. In late March, Joseph N. Mills—a black physician and DCNA member—wrote to Mayor Warren F. Carr and the school board suggesting they appoint NCCN professor James T. Taylor to the board.

A few days after Mills' request, John Wheeler contacted Carr and city council members, and again called for a black appointee to the board. He pointed to negotiations years along with numerous petitions by the DCNA to get the board to make the educational opportunities available to blacks equal to those for whites. Wheeler reminded the city council about discussions held “on a previous occasion [and] [they] were assured that it would be both desirable and expedient to place a Negro on the Board of Education when the next vacancy occurred.”⁴²³ The most recent requests centered on two open school board vacancies that year.

In his letter, Wheeler condemned the poor conditions in black schools. “Through the years,” he argued “the inequality between facilities provided for Negro and White students ha[d] widened to such proportions that our city is or should be greatly embarrassed by the present differential between these facilities.”⁴²⁴ The inequalities existed despite the “separate but equal” mandate, as the school board spent \$494 per white child and only \$190 per black

⁴²³“Taylor Suggested to Mayor W. F. Carr for City Education Board,” *Durham Morning Herald*, March 28, 1947; William A. Dula and A. C. Simson, *Durham and Her People: Combining History and Who's Who in Durham of 1949 and 1950* (Durham: Seeman printer, 1951; “Durham Committee on Negro Affairs again seeking to put Representative on City Board of Education,” *Durham Morning Herald*, April 1, 1947; Letter from Wheeler to A. E. Burcham (city council member), March 31, 1947, box AO031, DCNA folder 1947-1967, Asa and Elna Spaulding Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, 1.

⁴²⁴ “Durham Committee on Negro Affairs again seeking to put Representative on City Board of Education,” *Durham Morning Herald*, April 1, 1947; Letter from Wheeler to A. E. Burcham, March 31, 1947, Asa and Elna Spaulding Papers, 2.

child. Wheeler warned them that blacks would no longer allow their full citizenship rights to be ignored or offered on a piecemeal basis in the postwar period. Thus, “The present inequalities in [their educational] system...[were] such fertile ground for litigation which would be embarrassing to Durham and the entire south.”⁴²⁵

In their final large-scale attempt to find a reasonable compromise, Wheeler and DCNA leaders appeared at a city council meeting in early April. Speaking in a room filled with around fifty blacks, Dr. James Shepard, James Taylor, and Wheeler gave speeches that the *Durham Morning Herald* newspaper called “eloquent” appeals. Shepard’s appearance represented the black community’s mounting frustrations with an unyielding white power-structure. It showed that blacks would not back down from their insistence that they be given representation on the board so they could obtain full citizenship rights. In uncharacteristic public move to convince the city council to appoint a black person to the board, Shepard explained, “a Negro underst[ood] better what [was] best for his people.”⁴²⁶ The elderly educator acknowledged that “this [was] the first time in 50 years that [he] appeared before the City Council.” “I did not know,” he continued, “where it met and had to be directed [to] the place of meeting.”⁴²⁷ In more conservative tone, Shepard assured the council that, if by chance, it appointed a black board member, there “would not be a single sigh of prejudice. I am not asking that you displace a single man on the school board, but if and when there is a vacancy I am asking that my people have representation. I am only asking that you give us

⁴²⁵Ibid.

⁴²⁶“Basil Watkins, K. C. Stone Re-Named on School Board; Eloquent Appeals for Representation When Vacancy Exists are made by Negro leaders,” *Durham Morning Herald*, April 3, 1947.

⁴²⁷Ibid.

one-sixth representation for one third of the population.”⁴²⁸ Both Taylor and Wheeler insisted that they did not come to the council meeting to “protest against the board of education,” or to lobby for any one individual, but only “for representation.”⁴²⁹ Despite the appeals, the city council bypassed appointing a black board member and re-appointed Basil M. Watkins and K. C. Stone.⁴³⁰

The public stance taken by Shepard, which insisted that blacks be granted their deserved role in guiding Durham’s schools, forecasted a shift in tactics. In the previous decades, Shepard had dissuaded black North Carolinians from taking legal action in the battle for educational equality, in turn for more subtle, cautious, and behind-the-scenes maneuvering to strengthen his own institution. Although Shepard did not go as far as advocating a school suit as an alternative for being denied citizenship, shows the black community’s collective move from incrementalism toward a broader postwar push for full citizenship; Shepard’s death that October also made a legal push more likely as well.

In May, Wheeler and other DCNA leaders went before the board again to get changes to the educational system. They pleaded with the board to “ ‘appoint a supervising principal of Negro schools.’ ” Wheeler defended himself and the organization against claims they “ ‘tried to dominate’ ” the school board’s decisions when it came to black schools.⁴³¹ They

⁴²⁸Ibid.

⁴²⁹Ibid.

⁴³⁰Ibid.

⁴³¹Kam Owen Carver, “The Role of the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People in the Pursuit of Equal Educational Opportunities, 1935-1954,” 38.

“ ‘simply wanted to make [good] suggestions,’ ” Wheeler told them, in the best interest of black school children.⁴³² Their appeal made little difference and another ten years passed before African Americans received an appointment on the board. Moreover, Wheeler and the DCNA carefully weighed their options on the proposed \$3 million school bond referendum, which, if passed, would go toward constructing the long-awaited technical high schools, one for blacks and one for whites.⁴³³ On June 2, Wheeler graduated among the first law school students at NCC. His law degree ensured his readiness to take on larger and more significant civil rights battles in the years to come. A day after graduation, Wheeler drafted an application letter to take the North Carolina State Bar Exam, which he promptly passed that August.⁴³⁴

The time had not come for Wheeler and the DCNA to take their battle to the next level by initiating a school equalization suit, but the time was ripe in other North Carolina cities. It began in late 1946, when hundreds of black students at the Lumberton City Schools defiantly left class to protest their deplorable school conditions. The strike, spearheaded by the local NAACP’s National Youth Council, represented bottled-up. Wheeler’s former law professor, Herman L. Taylor, filed a lawsuit on behalf of the Lumberton students. Taylor pledged his legal expertise to the Lumberton Movement after attending a speech given by the NAACP’s national youth secretary, Ruby Hurley, in the weeks following the strike. In July 1947, Taylor filed the school equalization with support from the NAACP’s national office

⁴³²Ibid.

⁴³³Ibid., 38-39.

⁴³⁴“North Carolina College Commencement Program,” June 2, 1947, North Carolina Central University Archives, Durham, North Carolina; Letter from Wheeler to E. L. Cannon, Jr. (Secretary, N.C. Board of Law Examiners), June 3, 1947, Folder Correspondence – Personal, 1952-1952 (22 of 22), Wheeler Papers; Letter to

against the Lumberton City Schools, the Robeson County Board of Education, and other city leaders to seek equality within the tenets of “separate but equal.”⁴³⁵

Herman Taylor resigned from NCC that summer because he wanted to an active role in the battle for civil rights rather than serving as a casual observer. In considering his employment at NCC, and Dr. James E. Shepard’s views on school litigation, he believed that leaving his position at the law school would free him from these constraints. Taylor remained committed to fighting educational inequality in North Carolina, turning down a \$6,000 a year salary to teach at a law school in Texas.⁴³⁶ In recognizing his law professor’s bent toward activism, as a law student, Wheeler probably held informal conversations with Taylor about educational inequality. The Lumberton case no doubt influenced Wheeler, as it became the first school equalization challenge in the state. Nevertheless, because of several legal obstacles in court and the NAACP’s waning interest in the suit itself, by 1949 Taylor dropped the lawsuit. Also, the Lumberton School Board had made significant improvements to its schools before litigation could move forward.⁴³⁷ Nevertheless, as Sarah Caroline

E. L. Cannon, Secretary, Board of Law Examiners (N.C.), June 14, 194, , Folder Correspondence – Personal, 1952-1952 (22 of 22), Wheeler Papers.

⁴³⁵“Parents Sue School Board, Charge Inferior Facilities: Students in Strike Last Fall,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 12, 1947; “Separate But Equal Schools Face Test,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, July 19, 1947; “Suit in N. C. Hits School Facilities,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 24, 1948; “N. C. Parents Win Point in Suit: Request Better School Facilities, Buses,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 7, 1948; Sarah Caroline Thuesen, “Classes of Citizenship: The Culture and Politics of Black Public Education in North Carolina, 1919-1960” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2003), 275-276; 283-284; Mark V. Tushnet, *The NAACP’s Legal Strategy against Segregated Education, 1925-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 105-106.

⁴³⁶“He refused a \$6,000 Job,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, August 28, 1948.

⁴³⁷Sarah Caroline Thuesen, “Classes of Citizenship,” 285-287; Mark V. Tushnet, *The NAACP’s Legal Strategy against Segregated Education, 1925-1950*.

Thuesen has noted, the Lumberton case “galvanized blacks across the state to pursue similar battles for equalization.”⁴³⁸

In 1947, Wheeler and the DCNA made significant headway in Durham politics. Wheeler, DCNA chairman John Stewart, and political committee chairman Dan B. Martin formed a coalition with labor groups and white liberals from Duke University. The black-white political coalition—Voters for Better Government (VBG)—helped strengthen the DCNA’s political power. Wheeler had especially played a critical role in advocating the political alliance in the years after World War II.⁴³⁹ Thus, his support for the cooperative relationship between the DCNA and labor comes as no surprise. In his 1945 article in the *Tarheel Banker*, Wheeler remained adamant about the role he believed labor could have in ending racial segregation. He believed it would increase the economic status of African Americans in the region on the road to New South prosperity. “First,” Wheeler explained, it would be “perhaps easier to integrate skilled Negro workers into any given industry now than it may be ten years hence” and “that the South’s great opportunity will not wait very long to be embraced, because competition from other regions is much too keen to permit a leisurely solution to our present problems.”⁴⁴⁰ Wheeler’s battle educational equality during and after World War II was in large measure an extension of his desire to get blacks skilled training in

⁴³⁸Ibid., 288.

⁴³⁹Lewis Bowman and G. R. Boynton, “Coalitions as Party in a One-Party Southern Area: A Theoretical and Case Analysis,” *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Aug., 1964), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2108956>, 278, 281-283; Walter B. Weare, *Black Business*, 261; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 274.

⁴⁴⁰John Hervey Wheeler, “A Negro Banker Speaks to the South,” 27.

order to prepare them for integration in the workplace. In this way, Wheeler can certainly be considered a civil rights unionist.⁴⁴¹

The VBG came about as a direct response to the June passage of the Taft-Hartley Act by Congress, a law that placed restrictions on labor unions and paved the way for “right to work” laws in the South.⁴⁴² Initially vetoed by President Truman, the act curbed requirements for unions to force employers to sign workers up for unions automatically and have them pay membership dues; however, Congress overturned the subsequent presidential veto. Despite the national labor movement’s support for Truman’s veto, politicians such as North Carolina’s Senator William B. Umstead supported the law. Umstead—appointed to the senate in 1946—held partnership the Durham-based law firm "Fuller, Reade, Umstead, and Fuller," which carried significant political weight in the city. As VBG member and labor leader Wilbur Hobby recalled, when Umstead ran for his own term in the U.S. senate in 1948, the labor movement “defeated him [Umstead] that year, because he [had] voted for the Taft-Hartley law [the previous year] and the labor movement really went out pretty strong...and J. Mel Broughton was elected to take his place.”⁴⁴³

⁴⁴¹ Robert Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism*; Korstad details the shared vision and goals between blacks’ struggle for civil rights and the labor movement’s struggle for workplace democracy.

⁴⁴² Lewis Bowman and G. R. Boynton, “Coalitions as Party in a One-Party Southern Area: A Theoretical and Case Analysis,” 282-283; Rubio, *A History of Affirmative Action*, 93; Philip F. Rubio, *There’s Always Work at the Post Office: African American Postal Workers and the Fight for Jobs, Justice, and Equality*, 33; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 23; Robert R. Korstad and James L. Leloudis, *To Right these Wrongs: The North Carolina Fund and the Battle to End Poverty and Inequality in 1960s America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 170.

⁴⁴³ Interview with Wilbur Hobby by William Finger, interview transcript, March 13, 1975 #E-0006 in the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007), Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/utills/getfile/collection/sohp/id/10868/filename/10910.pdf>, 15.

As John Wheeler and the DCNA geared up for battle and inched closer to a legal showdown with the Durham school board, the VBG political alliance solidified its leadership in Durham County politics. More and more, the organization paid close attention to the organizational structure and developments taking place within the county Democratic Party with the idea to help solve problems on the local level. In April 1948, the VBG sent several committees across the city to attend various precinct meetings. To their surprise, no precinct meetings took place, as no one showed up for them. In fact, several lawyers typically came together at the law firm of "Fuller, Umstead, Reade, and Fuller" precinct meetings to name precinct and party officials. To-boot, the lawyers were viewed as an extremely conservative faction. Once at the “no show” precinct meetings, by default, seventeen VBG members became precinct chairmen out of a total of thirty. That group consisted of ten union representatives from VBG, alongside the DCNA’s John Stewart and Dan Martin—both elected as precinct chairmen.⁴⁴⁴ Wilbur Hobby explained exactly how the VBG succeeded in this instance, saying the “opposition was afraid to contest the thing because it would show that they had been filling out the precinct applications and running the [county] Democratic [P]arty from the law offices of...[Senator] Umstead.”⁴⁴⁵ The VBG helped elected one of its

⁴⁴⁴Interview with Wilbur Hobby by William Finger, interview transcript, March 13, 1975, 13-14; Lewis Bowman and G. R. Boynton, “Coalitions as Party in a One-Party Southern Area: A Theoretical and Case Analysis,” 281, 283; Terry L. Mosley, “ ‘Let’s Keep the Big Boys Honest’: Wilbur Hobby, the life of a North Carolina labor leader, 1925-1992 (M. A. thesis, North Carolina Central University, 2006), 11-12.

⁴⁴⁵ Interview with Wilbur Hobby by William Finger, interview transcript, March 13, 1975, 14.

leaders, insurance agent Leslie Atkins to the chairmanship of the county Democratic Party at its annual convention.⁴⁴⁶

A year later, the VBG political alliance won huge gains helped elect Dan K. Edwards as Durham's mayor, defeating longtime incumbent mayor Warren F. Carr. It was also responsible for electing labor organizer Ernest R. "Sparky" Williamson to the city council. That same year, the VBG supported black businessman and former DCNA political committee chairman Rencher Harris during the primary for city council, but the labor side of the coalition failed to deliver votes on his behalf in the general election. In this respect, according to civil rights lawyer and later DCNA political committee chairman Conrad Pearson, the VBG was not a sure thing for black candidates during elections as the political coalition "didn't [always] pan out, because whenever a Negro ran for office the white unions would endorse him but wouldn't support him [with their votes]."⁴⁴⁷

In late 1947, during the months leading to the school bond referendum, John Wheeler and the DCNA pledged their support because of the proposed improvements for black schools. Nevertheless, once the final calculations for the school bond became available to the public, it only totaled \$2 million for city schools, and \$1 million for county schools—\$3 million school bond total. The city schools initially asked for \$3 million and county schools

⁴⁴⁶ Lewis Bowman and G. R. Boynton, "Coalitions as Party in a One-Party Southern Area: A Theoretical and Case Analysis," 283; W. C. Dula, *Durham and Her People: Combining History and Who's Who in Durham of 1949 and 1950* (Durham, The Seeman Printery, 1951), 143.

⁴⁴⁷ Interview with Conrad Odell Pearson by Walter B. Weare, interview transcript, April 18, 1979 #H-0218 in the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007), Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <http://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/sohp/id/12022/rec/7>, 60; Anderson, *Durham County*, 398; Brandon Winford, "A History of the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs," (M.A. thesis, North Carolina Central University, 2007), 44-47.

requested \$1.5 million—\$4.5 million total. Once word reached Wheeler about the reduced amount, he contacted board chairman Basil M. Watkins to get a detailed summary on how the bond money would be spent. Wheeler wanted to know how much money would go toward black schools compared to the amount allotted for white schools. Moreover, Wheeler feared there would nothing set aside the technical building at Hillside, thereby stalling potential job training programs—with it, the economic wellbeing of black students. Taking offense to Wheeler’s hard-line query, Watkins pointed Wheeler to a recent newspaper article detailing the funding allocations.⁴⁴⁸ The bond vote took place on October 4.

On October 1—just days before the scheduled bond vote—John Wheeler and the DCNA arranged a “special” meeting with the board before deciding whether to publicly support the bond issue. At the meeting, Wheeler reiterated how one-sided the school system had been in past years in favor of whites and demanded that the board give him some “‘definite commitment’ ” stipulating how much funding would go toward black schools.⁴⁴⁹ Board chairman Watkins explained that the board could not legally hold their successors to a set funding allocation, but the board agreed in an earlier meeting to “hold to its original percentage in the distribution of the smaller amount of money to be made available by the bond issue, and to provide comparable vocational facilities for both races.”⁴⁵⁰ After discussions between Wheeler’s group and the board, everyone left with a “general understanding that matters of greatest importance [such as the technical high school

⁴⁴⁸ Kam Owen Carver, “The Role of the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People in the Pursuit of Equal Educational Opportunities, 1935-1954,” 40.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁰ Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, October 1, 1947.

buildings] should receive first attention in the proposed building program regardless of race.” Nevertheless, “there was no definite agreement reached as to any amount of money being appropriated for any project for either race.”⁴⁵¹ Despite the board’s refusal to specify funding allocations for black schools, Wheeler and the DCNA gave-in and pledged their support in “good faith” that the board would hold to its main promise to construct the technical building at Hillside.

By late 1948, a year after the school bond vote, the Durham city school board went back to county commissioners because the \$2 million would not cover their education needs. In a high-handed move, both the city and county boards met secretly to reconfigure how they would spend the bond money. Afterwards, both boards refused to discuss the funding redistribution publicly, which suggests the two boards may have decided to reduce the funding allocations for black schools.⁴⁵² In December, Wheeler and attorney M. Hugh Thompson met with the board about the bond issue one last time; however, they were still unable to get a breakdown for how the money would be spent. Before leaving the meeting, the two lawyers board chairman Watkins with something to bear in mind: they told him they were now prepared for legal action.⁴⁵³

As Wheeler and Thompson considered pursuing a school equalization case against the board going into 1949, they began litigation efforts outside away from Durham. In November 1948, Mark Sharpe—a representative from the African American Men’s Civic Club in Wilson County—met with Wheeler. The meeting was about Wheeler possibly

⁴⁵¹Ibid.

⁴⁵²Ibid.

⁴⁵³Ibid.

serving as their attorney in a potential lawsuit against the Wilson County School Board. Wheeler seized the opportunity, although C. C. Spaulding had continuously dissuaded Durham's younger cadre of black leaders from using legal pressure in the battle for educational equality. Nevertheless, a new day came and Spaulding could no longer stifle their tactics.⁴⁵⁴

During the meeting, Wheeler advised Sharpe on the best strategy to ensure victory against the Wilson County School Board. Wheeler believed they could win if they sued based on the "separate but equal" mandate as opposed to directly challenging the larger issue of segregation. The extended meeting between Sharpe and Wheeler ended with Wheeler accepting the case; he was promptly paid a \$1,000 retainer. Wheeler suggested the Wilson group hire another lawyer to take on the responsibilities as well; he then solicited Thompson's assistance. In 1949, with substantial evidence to prove the county's inequalities, the two attorneys filed a lawsuit in District Court, citing the need for two new black high schools. Wheeler's readiness to seek educational equality and full citizenship through the legal process was now official. In response to the lawsuit against them, Wilson County wanted to negotiate with the county's black leaders and proposed to adhere to their demands to build the two high schools in exchange for them withdrawing the lawsuit; Wilson's black leaders agreed to drop their lawsuit with promise they would get the new schools. Despite some stonewalling tactics by the board, by year's end, the black

⁴⁵⁴Charles W. McKinney, Jr., "Multiple Fronts: The Struggle for Black Educational and Political Equality in Wilson, North Carolina, 1941-1953," *North Carolina Historical Review*, Jan. 2011 (vol. 88 issue 1), 15-16; Charles W. McKinney, *Greater Freedom: The Evolution of the Civil Rights Struggle in Wilson, North Carolina* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010), 38-39.

community's continued legal threats forced the board to make plans to build the two high schools.⁴⁵⁵

After their December meeting with the Durham school board, Wheeler and the DCNA no longer convened at board meetings month after month requesting, to no avail, equal funding and black representation. Now their demands coincided with the broader postwar assault on school segregation, which the NAACP effectively made a pertinent legal issue carried into courtrooms across the country beginning in the 1930s. The NAACP's legal strategy gained considerable momentum during the 1940s and 1950s and culminated with the U. S. Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, which signaled a new chapter in the battle for freedom and full citizenship.⁴⁵⁶ In the late 1940s, Wheeler and the DCNA found some solace in their own legal push for school equalization, again making Durham and North Carolina battlegrounds in the struggle for educational equality and more importantly full citizenship, black economic power, and New South prosperity.

“SUCH FERTILE GROUND FOR LITIGATION”: *BLUE, ET. AL. V. DURHAM PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT*

On May 18, 1949, now armed with a law degree and license to practice in North Carolina, John Wheeler's warning to the mayor and city council two years earlier no longer remained an idle threat. Wheeler warned the board that the black community would take the

⁴⁵⁵Charles McKinney, “Multiple Fronts: The Struggle for Black Educational and Political Equality,” 17-21; Charles W. McKinney, *Greater Freedom*, 39-42.

⁴⁵⁶Genna Rae McNeil, *Groundwork: Charles Hamilton Houston and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 113-118, see also chapter 10; Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The history of *Brown v. Board of Education* and Black America's Struggle for Equality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975); Mark V. Tushnet, *The NAACP's Legal Strategy against Segregated Education, 1925-1950*.

legal route if school inequality persisted. Assisted by Wheeler, M. Hugh Thompson, and the DCNA, sixty students and twenty-six parents from Durham filed a complaint against local and state school administrators in U.S. Middle District Court in Greensboro, North Carolina. The Durham suit, formally *Blue, et. al. v. Durham Public School District* (1951), argued that school officials violated their Fourteenth Amendment rights to the U. S. Constitution since educational facilities provided for black children in Durham were unequal to the facilities provided for white children.⁴⁵⁷ Wheeler flirted with the idea to bring a school equalization case to Durham for quite some time, but now the decisive shift to legal tactics was resolute. Historian Christina Greene also notes that the bold action by Wheeler and the DCNA in the Durham suit signaled “a departure from the Spaulding-Shepard style of quiet, behind-the-scenes negotiations.”⁴⁵⁸ Wheeler stood at the forefront in this push and led the battle charge toward full citizenship in the courts.

The plaintiffs in the *Blue* case represented a cross-section of African Americans, many of whom came from working-class families who believed in community involvement. The single mother Margaret Blue, an active DCNA member, wanted better educational and economic opportunities for her three children, Carolyn J.—the first named plaintiff in the case—Donald, and Portia. Arthur Stanley worked for the Liggett and Myers (L&M) Tobacco Company when he allowed his name and that of his son, William Ernest, to be listed as plaintiffs. At the time, Stanley was also a labor leader serving as president of the Tobacco Workers International Union’s (TWIU) segregated black local 204. Stanley had also been

⁴⁵⁷*Blue, et. al. v. Durham Public School District*, 95 F. Supp. 441 (1951), U.S. Dist. LEXIS 2611; “Suit Brought Against City, State Heads: 14th Amendment Being Violated,” *Durham Morning Herald*, May 17, 1949.

⁴⁵⁸Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 25.

very active in the DCNA and the VBG political coalition and considered running for city council in 1949, before withdrawing his name to support R. N. Harris. John Lawrence Curtis also depended on his job at L&M to support his family who lived in the same neighborhood as the Stanleys. His daughter Omega Curtis, another named plaintiff in the case, remembered her father for his activism in the DCNA and the local NAACP. Her father's labor organizing with the TWIU also took him on frequent trips to Richmond, Virginia to attend union meetings. Joseph Riley, Sr. also worked in a tobacco factory and attached his name and the names of his children Nellie, Inez, Joseph Jr., and Clarence to the case. As a college student at NCC a few years later, Joseph Jr. would be arrested for defying Durham's racial segregation policies at the city-owned tennis courts.⁴⁵⁹ Riley continued his family's tradition by becoming involved in direct action protests.

On that same note, many of the plaintiffs in *Blue* also came from the black business and professional class, mainly because these parents were not economically dependent on white employers. Thus, they could avoid being subjugated to economic reprisals such as being fired from their jobs as a result of their involvement in the case. DCNA chairman Shag Stewart, secretary-treasurer for the Mutual Building and Loan Association, and his daughter Ethel Marie were named plaintiffs. Junior high student J. C. Scarborough, III and his father, who owned the black Scarborough and Hargett Funeral Home, were also plaintiffs. North Carolina Mutual executive Dan Martin and his children Carolyn, Joseph, and Winfred were

⁴⁵⁹ *Blue, et al. v. Durham Public School District, et al.*, original summons, May 18, 1949, Durham County Library; "Before Brown, there was Blue," *Herald-Sun*, December 13, 2011 http://www.heraldsun.com/view/full_story/16802777/article-Before-Brown--there-was-Blue, accessed October 17, 2012; Notes on "Before Brown V. Board, There was Blue V. Durham," 60th Anniversary of Historic Case, Durham County Library, courtesy of Jerry B. Gershenhorn, December 19, 2011; Phone Interview with Omega Curtis-Parker, by author, October 18, 2012.

plaintiffs as well. There was also DCNA member and NCM executive Babe Henderson and his daughter Ann. DCNA education committee member and NCM employee William A. Clement and his children Alexine and William rounded out the list. On the sixtieth anniversary of the case years later, many of the child plaintiffs—now retirement age adults—were unaware that their names had even appeared as plaintiffs in the case.⁴⁶⁰

The World War I veteran M. Hugh Thompson was born on May 3, 1898 in Goldsboro, North Carolina. He finished high school in Newark, New Jersey and then enrolled at Syracuse University after saving up money working as a bricklayer. After college, Thompson enlisted in the U. S. Army, where he became a lieutenant; he saw some action in Europe during the war and even suffered an injury when a piece of shrapnel pierced his leg. After World War I, Thompson attended law school at the all-black Howard University. Perhaps his decision to become a lawyer, like other black World War I veterans

⁴⁶⁰*Blue, et al. v. Durham Public School District, et al.*, original summons, May 18, 1949, Durham County Library; “Before Brown, there was Blue,” *Herald-Sun*, December 13, 2011 http://www.heraldsun.com/view/full_story/16802777/article-Before-Brown--there-was-Blue, accessed October 17, 2012; Notes on “Before Brown V. Board, There was Blue V. Durham,” 60th Anniversary of Historic Case, Durham County Library, courtesy of Jerry B. Gershenhorn, December 19, 2011; Other plaintiffs in the case included: W. A. Kenney, Jr. by W. A. Kenney, Sr., his father; Arthur Lee James, Raymond Edward James, Irene James, Richard James, Jr., and Robert Jones James, by Richard James Sr., their father; Mildred Dawson, Jean Dawson and Milton Dawson, Jr., by Roberta B. Dawson, their mother; Dora Carrington, Emily Carrington and Walton Carrington, by James Carrington, their father; Doris Rowland and Grace Rowland, by T. L. Rowland, their father; Elizabeth Harvey, by Oliver Harvey, her father; Mary Jane McCrae, by Aggie McCrae, her mother; Louie Pittman, Jr., by Louie Pittman, Sr., his guardian; Alfred Thompson, Martha Thompson, Niles Thompson, Jr., and Ruth Thompson, by Niles Thompson, Sr., their father; Cleveland Thomas, Jr., and Janie Mae Thomas, by Cleveland Thomas, Sr., their father; Annie Cobb, Jean Cobb and Ruth Cobb, by C. C. Cobb, their father; Bennie Booker, by Benjamin B. Booker, her father; Doris Jean Curtis, Omega Curtis and Cornelius Curtis, by J. L. Curtis, their father; Sarah Louise McNeil, John H. McNeil, Jr., James McNeil, Charles Thomas McNeil and Virginia McNeil, by John H. McNeil, Sr., their father; Ella Docena Richmond and Raymond Richmond, Jr., by Raymond Richmond, Sr., their father; Helen Reid, by D. F. Reid, her father; Yvonne Lee Miller, by Felix Miller, her father.

such as NAACP legal pioneer Charles Hamilton Houston, stemmed from discrimination he suffered as a black soldier.⁴⁶¹

Thompson came to Durham in 1923 and established his law practice and career as a civil rights lawyer. During the 1930s, as one of the few black lawyers in the state at the time, Thompson daringly confronted racism in North Carolina. Prior to the Durham suit, Thompson handled countless cases across the state. In one case during the early 1930s, Thompson barely escaped death while defending a black Henderson man for his alleged role in kidnapping and raping a white woman. At one point while traveling back and forth between Durham and Henderson, Thompson and white attorney Reuben O. Everett were fired upon by an unknown assailant; the incident prompted Governor John Ehringhaus to dispatch state patrols to guard the lawyers until the case ended.⁴⁶²

To no surprise, the final nail in the coffin, which prompted Wheeler and Thompson to file the lawsuit dealt directly with the planned technical high school for blacks at Hillside. A specific concern came from reports about construction starting on the vocational building and

⁴⁶¹M. Hugh Thompson Obituary, in the William Jesse Kennedy, Jr., Papers, #4925, Southern Historical Collection of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the African American Resources Collection of North Carolina Central University; Interview with Robinson O. Everett by author, February 29, 2008 #U-0285 in the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007), Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Genna Rae McNeil, *Groundwork: Charles Hamilton Houston and the Struggle for Civil Rights*,⁴⁵; Houston's biographer, Genna Rae McNeil, points to World War I as a main reason why he went to law school. During the war Houston encountered the harshest form of racism from Red Cross workers, white enlisted soldiers, and his fellow white officers. However, this treatment paled in comparison to the unwelcoming reception he and other black soldiers received from the U. S. government after fighting on the country's behalf. Houston's military experience awakened his "consciousness" and once leaving the Army, he explained that " 'I felt damned glad I had not lost my life fighting for this country.' " Between the 1930s and 1940s, Houston devised and engineered the NAACP's legal assault on education. In the years leading up to his work for the NAACP, Houston served as Dean at Howard University's law school where he transformed the school's law program into one of the best in the country, dedicated primarily to training African American lawyers. At Howard, Houston put forward his idea of social engineering whereby he sought to use the U.S. constitution to directly challenge segregation. Houston trained a generation of civil rights lawyers, most notably Thurgood Marshall, James Nabrit, and Durham's own Conrad O. Pearson.

⁴⁶²M. Hugh Thompson Obituary.

gymnasium at the white Durham High School, widening the existing disparities between white and black schools. Previous improvement plans dating back to World War II, centered on building technical high schools for both groups before moving forward with any other projects.⁴⁶³ Prior to filing the Durham suit Wheeler and Thompson contacted the board on May 7, notifying the board about their intent to file a formal complaint. Once again the lawyers reminded the board of repeated attempts at negotiations by the DCNA and other black leaders in years past to improve conditions in school facilities for black children. However, Wheeler and Thompson bypassed another potential rejection by the board to deal with black school conditions. They informed the board about their decision to take matters beyond the local level the board again put black education on-hold.

In his response to the lawsuit, board chairman Basil M. Watkins dismissed the case as being without merit. He maintained, “the Negroes responsible for bringing this suit were fully advised and knew before its initiation that the Board of Education had been working for a long time upon plans for a new [technical] high school plant for Negroes that would include all necessary facilities for a modern and fine school.”⁴⁶⁴ Within thirty days, noted Watkins, contract bids for the new black high school would begin; but by then it was too little, too late. Watkins defended the board, explaining that, in the previous twenty years, they provided black children with more school facilities than white children. In a response to Wheeler and Thompson before they filed their complaint, Watkins and the board hoped the attorneys

⁴⁶³“Two Letters Concerning Negro Suit Made Public,” *Durham Morning Herald*, May 21, 1949.

⁴⁶⁴*Ibid.*

would re-consider, but explained “the decision will have to be made by you.”⁴⁶⁵ As the board planned to stand its ground, Watkins, “if the Negro pupils of Durham are delayed in their enjoyment, or ultimately deprived of their enjoyment of the Negro high school building and other school facilities which the Board of Education is preparing to furnish them, it will be the fault of some (not by all by any means) of the Negro citizens of Durham and not the fault of the Board of Education.”⁴⁶⁶

While the case hinged on questions of educational equality, economic justice implicitly hung in the balance. In other words, the civil rights lawyers pursued the case on economic grounds because to ignore vocational education meant putting New South prosperity on the backburner. Moreover, the child plaintiffs—mostly junior and high school students at Hillside—were only a few years away from graduating and closer to entering college or the workforce. So it made it all the more important for improvements to begin. Therefore, the decision to litigate was based in part on economic grounds. It is plausible that had the board began construction on the black technical high school at the same time it began construction on the white technical high school, Wheeler, Thompson, and the DCNA might have decided against taking legal action. Wheeler and other attorneys placed the technical high school issue, and with it economic equality, at center stage during the trial.

In addition to the earlier Lumberton and Wilson cases, the Durham case joined a growing list of school equalization challenges that sprang up in the South. Like the NAACP

⁴⁶⁵“Two Letters Concerning Negro Suit Made Public,” *Durham Morning Herald*, May 21, 1949.

⁴⁶⁶*Ibid.*

had in previous cases, the organization used Durham as a “test case,” in a statewide effort aimed at eliminating educational inequality. State NAACP chairman Kelly Alexander told reporters “we want equal schools on the elementary, secondary and college level,” and that “if necessary, there will be many suits in cities and towns of North Carolina.”⁴⁶⁷ Despite claims that the NAACP was behind the Durham case, M. Hugh Thompson maintained that the actions were initiated by the local group and had no connections to the state NAACP. However, he did agree that because of the case’s nature, the NAACP would be interested in it as “the opening gun” in North Carolina. On top of that, the Durham followed NAACP school equalization cases in states such as Virginia. When trial began the following year, NAACP attorneys Oliver W. Hill, Martin A. Martin, and Spottswood W. Robinson III, joined Wheeler and Thompson as lawyers for the plaintiffs.⁴⁶⁸ The Durham had designation as the first case in North Carolina to reach the final stages of full-scale litigation.

Hill, Martin, and Robinson were all partners in a law firm located in Richmond, Virginia. They handled the earlier school equalization cases in Virginia in the years prior to the Durham case. The three civil rights lawyers worked cooperatively with the NAACP and played significant roles in the organization’s battle for educational equality in Virginia and the Southeast.⁴⁶⁹ During this time, Robinson became the southeastern regional director for

⁴⁶⁷“Suit Charging Inequality in Education Means Filed: Action Entered in U. S. Court at Greensboro; Order May be Tried at September Term of Court in City”; *Durham Morning Herald*, May 20, 1949; “Suit Asking ‘Equal Schools’ Without Fact, Official Says: City Officials are notified of Negro Suit,” *Durham Morning Herald*, May 20, 1949.

⁴⁶⁸“Two letters concerning Negro Suit Made Public,” *Durham Morning Herald*, 21, 1949.

⁴⁶⁹*Alston v. School Board of City of Norfolk* (1940), 112 F.2d 992, LexisNexis, see Oliver W. Hill as counsel for the case; *Corbin v. County School Board of Pulaski County* (1949), 177 F.2d 924, LexisNexis, see Oliver W. Hill, Spottswood Robinson III, and Martin A. Martin as counsel for the case; *Carter v. School Board of Arlington County, Va.* (1950), 182 F.2d 531, LexisNexis, see Robinson, Martin, and Hill as counsel for the case;

the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund (LDF), an organization established in 1940 as a separate entity and NAACP offspring. Robinson became a lead attorney during the NAACP's *Brown* case alongside LDF chairman Thurgood Marshall. In subsequent years, the LDF became a primary legal arm for young civil rights activists during the 1960s.⁴⁷⁰ In later years, Wheeler and other Durham attorneys handle local cases funded by the LDF.⁴⁷¹

Because the Durham case did not represent the first of its kind in North Carolina, Wheeler and Thompson could rely on their own knowledge from the Wilson case and draw on the experiences of people such as Herman L. Taylor from the Lumberton case. Likewise, they could also depend on the expertise and previous lessons learned from their colleagues—Hill, Martin, and Robinson. The groundwork and precedent set by the triumvirate's successful school litigation in Virginia between 1940 and 1950 made victory in North Carolina plausible. In 1940, school teachers in Norfolk, in conjunction with the black Virginia Teachers Association, filed suit against the city school board, which highlighted race-based discrimination in teacher salaries. In contrast, the black North Carolina Teachers Association (NCTA) failed to take similar actions. After World War II, Oliver and Hill argued several well known cases, which centered on differences in school facilities and curriculum between white and black schools in their state. In 1947, African Americans in

"In Memoriam: Spottswood W. Robinson III, 1916-1998," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 31 (winter 1998-1999), 39.

⁴⁷⁰Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The history of Brown v. Board of Education* (New York: Vintage Press, 1977), 221; Mark V. Tushnet, *The NAACP's Legal Strategy against Segregated Education, 1925-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 100; Gilbert Ware, "The NAACP-Inc. Fund Alliance: Its Strategy, Power, and Destruction," *The Journal of Negro Education*, vol. 63, no. 3 (summer 1994), 325.; Jack Greenberg, *Crusaders in the Courts: Legal Battles of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Twelve Table Press, 2004), 17.

⁴⁷¹"In Memoriam: Spottswood W. Robinson III, 1916-1998," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, no. 31 (winter 1998-1999), 39.

Gloucester County filed suit against the school board after failing to convince the board to resolve major educational disparities. Blacks in King George County filed a similar lawsuit against their school board that same year. In both cases, plaintiffs won court injunctions against the board, ordering the two boards to remove the inequalities between black and white high schools. In May 1949, a judge held the Gloucester County board in contempt and fined board members \$250 each after they failed to comply with the earlier court order.⁴⁷²

The Durham school board hired attorneys R. P. Reade and former North Carolina senator and future governor William B. Umstead as their legal counsel. State officials requested, unsuccessfully, that charges against them be dismissed because they had no control over decisions made by administrators at the local level.⁴⁷³

In the meantime, DCNA and NAACP attorney Conrad Pearson filed another lawsuit against UNC. In the previous decade, Pearson—the lead attorney for Thomas Hocutt in 1933—gained a reputation as a radical but also a pioneer for his legal attacks aimed at Jim

⁴⁷²Doxey Wilkerson, “The Negro School Movement in Virginia: From ‘Equalization’ to ‘Integration,’ ” *Journal of Negro Education*, vol. 29, no. 1 (winter, 1960), 20-22; “Equalization of Educational Facilities: Review of Litigation to Provide Equal School Opportunity in Virginia,” *Durham Morning Herald*, May 22, 1949; Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 472-473.

⁴⁷³“Umstead and Reade to Represent Local Education Officers,” *Durham Morning Herald*, May 29, 1949; “Motion Instituted Seeking to Dismiss School Suit in City: Attorney General Presents Papers in Federal Court,” *Durham Morning Herald*, June 7, 1949; “Hearing on School Suit is Postponed,” *Durham Morning Herald*, June 9, 1949.; “Motion Filed Here for Local Negroes to Survey Schools,” *Durham Morning Herald*, July 31, 1949.



Figure 3.2 *Blue v. Durham School Equalization Suit Attorneys, 1950.* From left to right: M. Hugh Thompson, Oliver W. Hill, John Hervey Wheeler, and Martin A. Martin with briefcase. (Photograph courtesy of Durham County Library)

Crow. The new case had been in the works since March 1949, when NCC law school students picketed the state Capital in Raleigh to publicize the unequal facilities between The two law schools. Pearson and the NAACP took up the students' cause and filed a lawsuit against the University for denying two NCCN law students' applications.⁴⁷⁴

In October 1950, Judge Johnson J. Hayes ruled in UNC's favor asserting that the NCC law school was "equal to and in some ways, surpassed, opportunities offered students at

⁴⁷⁴ *Apocrisarius*, June 1950, published by the North Carolina College Law School Phi Delta Pi Law Society, tenth anniversary edition, 23; Deborah J. Braswell, "A History of North Carolina Central University's Law School, 1939-1968," 19-21; Alphonso Stewart Powe, "The Role of Negro Pressure Groups in Interracial Integration in Durham City, North Carolina," (Ph.D. Diss.: New York University, 1954), 123-125.

the University.”⁴⁷⁵ On appeal, the law students won their case on appeal and an order came down from the courts for UNC to desegregate its law school. The reversal came on the heels of *Herman Sweatt v. Painter* (1950), a similar case in Texas decided by the U. S. Supreme Court earlier that June. In the *Sweatt* case, the Court ruled against the University of Texas Law School had to admit Sweatt because the state’s black law school in no way compared to the education available at the flagship institution.⁴⁷⁶ The *Sweatt* decision made John Wheeler more determined than ever in his battle for freedom, as he believed the victory proved “conclusively that Negroes must, by their own bootstraps, lift themselves to the level of total citizenship and that to depend on their so-called friends in other groups for that purpose is futile.”⁴⁷⁷ A year later, Floyd B. McKissick, Harvey E. Beech, J. Kenneth Lee, and James Lassiter became the first black law students admitted to UNC.⁴⁷⁸ While the *Sweatt* decision affirmed the Supreme Court’s sincerity to enforce its separate but equal doctrine, it also revealed that separate was not entirely equal as it related to the law schools. Therefore, the ruling became a major step in the NAACP’s eventual decision to attack the larger issue of racial segregation head-on.

Nevertheless, the Durham case still centered on school equalization within the segregated educational system. The trial began on June 26, 1950, just over a year after its

⁴⁷⁵“Verdict on Admitting Negroes to U.N.C. Expected Monday,” *Durham Morning Herald*, October 8, 1950; “4 Negro Students Appeal Decision of Lower Court,” *Durham Morning Herald*, October 31, 1950.

⁴⁷⁶Mark V. Tushnet, *The NAACP’s Legal Strategy against Segregated Education*, 125-134; Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 282; Alphonso Stewart Powe, “The Role of Negro Pressure Groups in Interracial Integration in Durham City, North Carolina,” 123-125.

⁴⁷⁷“Leaders Accept High Court Ruling Calmly,” *Carolina Times*, June 17, 1950.

⁴⁷⁸“4th Negro Student Is Admitted to Law School at Carolina,” *Durham Morning Herald*, June 9, 1950.

initial filing. The plaintiffs wanted relief on the grounds that Durham schools discriminated against black children when it came to expenditures, courses of study, facilities, teachers, equipment, and furniture. The original complaint pointed to differences between Durham High and Hillside High Schools, underscoring economic bias. Durham High had “well-equipped science laboratory, sufficient vocational equipment, adequate space and facilities, [a] gymnasium, [a] swimming pool, [a] football field, [a] cafeteria, four tennis courts, [an] outdoor tract and a Home Economic cottage.” In contrast, at Hillside “practically none of these advantages are offered to or provided for Negro school children. The vocational shop equipment is completely inadequate.” Wheeler and his team asked the one-judge panel to grant a “permanent injunction forever restraining and enjoining the defendants...from denying, failing or refusing to provide for the Negro school children of the City of Durham...such courses of study, modern facilities and opportunities for physical and cultural developments as are provided for white school children...similarly situated.”⁴⁷⁹

In understanding the steep obstacles they faced trying to convince a white judge in the South that school conditions in Durham were indisputably unequal, Wheeler and other attorneys meticulously compiled a mountain of evidence in preparation for their case; the lawyers wanted the evidence to speak for itself as much as possible. They hired a photography company to produce nearly 600 photographs that gave visual representation to educational inequality—individual prints of buildings, classrooms, other multipurpose facilities, equipment, furniture, and relevant miscellaneous items. In large storage trunks, Wheeler’s group also hauled into court thousands of documents comprising fifty years of

⁴⁷⁹“Lawyers Gird for Battle in Long-Awaited School Case,” *Carolina Times*, June 24, 1950; *Blue, et al. v. Durham Public School District, et al.*, original summons, May 18, 1949, Durham County Library, 6-8.

official reports generated by the Durham school board, superintendents, school principals, and other school administrators. These documents included school board meeting minutes, statistical reports to the state department of public instruction, capital outlay expenditure reports, and appraisal reports. The lawyers also submitted into evidence documents that detailed a history of attempts by the DCNA to get the board to improve school conditions for blacks. Wheeler's group hired a three-person committee of education experts, all African Americans with Ph.D. degrees and years of experience in the field of education, to personally inspect every nook-and-cranny of every black and white school in the system. Using the documents provided by the school board, along with their own observations, Drs. J. Rupert Picott, Stephen J. Wright, and Ellis O. Knox produced a 135-page statistical analysis, which highlighted all major disparities. The committee focused on several categorical areas such as courses offered, curriculum, instruction, facilities (including libraries, art and music rooms, auditoriums, and cafeterias), as well as buildings with the purpose of "looking at this thing from every possible angle, as objectionable as possible."⁴⁸⁰

During the ten day trial, Wheeler's team relied J. Rupert Picott's testimony, as he wrote most of the 135-page report based on evidence extracted from materials generated by Durham city school over the years. Picott, the executive secretary for the black Virginia Teachers Association, had a critical role in the school equalization cases in Virginia.⁴⁸¹ Picott's conclusions based on the report focused on perhaps the most significant findings and struck at the heart of school board chairman Watkins' insistence that in the previous twenty

⁴⁸⁰*Blue, et al. v. Durham Public School District, et al.*, court transcript, vol. 1, June 26, 27, 1950.

⁴⁸¹"Report Compiled by 3 Negro Educators Comes Under Heavy Crossfire in Court," *Durham Morning Herald*, June 29, 1950; *Blue, et al. v. Durham Public School District, et al.*, court transcript, vol. 1, June 26, 27, 1950.

years the board spent more money on black schools due to an increase in population, while the population at white schools decreased in the same number of years. Picott reported that during the 1928-1929 school year, the Durham School Board spent \$454,937.58 on white schools and \$123,505.56 on black schools. The differentials remained virtually unchanged during the 1948-1949 academic year, when the school suit was filed; that year the board spent \$901,914.44 on white schools compared to \$575,326.13 on black schools. Despite the difference in monetary expenditures, an alarming factor in the latter academic year was that the black school population increased from 2,801 in 1928-1929 to 4,187 in 1948-1949; that compared to 5,684 in 1928-1929 and 5,073 in 1948-1949 for white children. Nevertheless, the majority of the funding went overwhelmingly to white schools.⁴⁸²

During the trial, Wheeler's team shed light on the major disparities, a point the defense had to eventually concede. However, the defense countered by blaming school inequalities on rationing and construction halts during World War II. The defense claimed the war made it difficult for them to construct the much needed facilities to accommodate a rapid increase in the black school population, which they said soared between 1930 and 1940. In his testimony, school board chairman Watkins noted that before the war, the board met increased demands by building the Whitted School in 1935, an addition to Lyon Park School in 1938, the Burton School in 1939, and East End and Walltown Schools in 1940. Watkins maintained that during that same time, they only built a home economics building at the white Durham High School and, with insurance money, rebuilt the Fuller School because

⁴⁸² "Report Compiled by 3 Negro Educators Comes Under Heavy Crossfire in Court," *Durham Morning Herald*, June 29, 1950; *Blue, et al. v. Durham Public School District, et al.*, court transcript, vol. 1, June 26, 27, 1950; court transcript, vol. 2, June 28, 29, 1950.

it burned down in 1937. They built the white East Durham Junior High School with bond money, but Watkins noted that the county commissioners initiated the move after pressure from white citizens.⁴⁸³ Superintendent L. Stacy Weaver also testified that the rapid increase in the black school population, in addition to the economic challenges caused by World War II, made it difficult to build at the rate needed. Moreover, Weaver explained that the period after World War II was the first and most reasonable time when “intelligently planned schools could be built.”⁴⁸⁴ Weaver ultimately stressed the board’s current building program stood to relieve other structural inadequacies at black schools. He also explained that white schools had better furniture and equipment than black schools because Parent Teacher Associations at white schools donated items and he did “not think that just because another school P.T.A. does not do this the school with the initiative should be penalized.”⁴⁸⁵ In its defense, the state’s lawyers placed blame for the inequalities in Durham schools on local school authorities, arguing that the state only had responsibility for enforcing the “minimum” standards.

On January 26, 1951, six months after the Durham trial concluded, Judge Johnson J. Hayes ruled in the plaintiffs’ favor. He dismissed all charges against the state, noting that state administrators only had a responsibility to ensure minimum standards were met, which he believed they did given the state’s “broad general powers over the public school

⁴⁸³“Watkins Asserts Possible Racial Inequality Exists,” *Durham Morning Herald*, June 30, 1950; *Blue, et al. v. Durham Public School District, et al.*, court transcript, vol. 1, June 26, 27, 1950; court transcript, vol. 2, June 28, 29, 1950.

⁴⁸⁴“Discrimination Trial Here Recessed Until July 10th: Motion to Dismiss Charges against State Defendant Denied by Judge Johnson Hayes,” *Durham Morning Herald*, July 1, 1950; *Blue, et al. v. Durham Public School District, et al.*, court transcript, vol. 1, June 26, 27, 1950; court transcript, vol. 2, June 28, 29, 1950.

⁴⁸⁵*Ibid.*

system.”⁴⁸⁶ Hayes held the school board responsible, citing “unequal plant facilities.”⁴⁸⁷ In dismissing the board’s reasoning, he concluded that “these circumstances are plausible...[but] they do not afford a legal excuse or justification for not furnishing the negro school children substantially equal educational facilities to those furnished white children.”⁴⁸⁸ He continued by pointing to the overcrowded conditions in black schools as well as the “advantages” that white students had: “better supervision, greater extra curricular opportunities, better laboratory equipment and facilities, in music and art, lighter teacher load, better recreational facilities and better accommodations.”⁴⁸⁹ To no surprise, Hayes cited the Virginia school equalization cases to support his opinion that “plaintiffs have been, and are, discriminated against on account of their race and that they are entitled to injunctive relief.”⁴⁹⁰

The Durham case is significant in many ways. Despite the victory in the case, Judge Hayes offered no substantive or concrete plan for how injunctive relief should be achieved in the Durham schools. In addition, the board did not appeal Hayes’ decision, which begs the question of how far the case would have gone. Nevertheless, the decision by Judge Hayes was important because it gave Wheeler and the DCNA the legal leverage they needed to push the Durham school board to finally take corrective actions to bring black schools up to par

⁴⁸⁶Ibid.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁸Ibid.

⁴⁸⁹*Blue, et. al. v. Durham Public School District*, 95 F. Supp. 441 (1951), U.S. Dist. LEXIS 2611; “Local School Suit Decision Nearly Ready,” *Durham Morning Herald*, January 23, 1951; “Federal Judge Rules Discrimination Exists in City Schools,” *Durham Morning Herald*, January 27, 1951.

⁴⁹⁰Ibid.

with white schools. In other words, they could bring possible contempt charges against the board if they failed to comply with the court ruling. The decision also set a legal precedent in North Carolina where black North Carolinians gained the confidence they needed to continue the battle for full citizenship by shifting to legal tactics, especially when it came to educational equality. The significance of the *Blue* case can also be seen as having larger implications in another important way as well. Some have even argued that had Durham's *Blue* case been appealed to the higher courts, we would point to *Blue v. Board*, and not to *Brown v. Board* as the namesake for arguably the most significant court case in the 20th-century. In December 1950, just as the school equalization movement gained momentum in North Carolina, NAACP and LDF leaders changed their litigation policies and resolved to focus legal efforts on cases that directly challenged the Jim Crow system.⁴⁹¹ The *Blue* case had been a direct precursor to *Davis et al. v. County School Board of Prince Edward County, Virginia* (1952). The *Davis* case became very next suit handled by NAACP attorneys Oliver W. Hill, Martin A. Martin, and Spottswood W. Robinson III after *Blue*, and one of five cases consolidated to become the Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), a ruling that struck down racial segregation.⁴⁹²

“BELLIGERENT AND MILITANT WORKER” ON THE SCHOOL BOARD?

The experience and success in litigating the *Blue* case made Wheeler an expert on school segregation, particularly on the conditions that existed in Durham. So when the city

⁴⁹¹Doxey Wilkerson, “The Negro School Movement in Virginia,” 25; Mark V. Tushnet, *The NAACP's Legal Strategy against Segregated Education*; Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice*.

⁴⁹² “Before Brown, there was Blue,” *Herald-Sun*, December 13, 2011.

council seriously considered appointing a black school board member in April 1951, Wheeler's name surfaced as the most qualified applicant. The DCNA backed Wheeler and, in a unified position, informed the city council that unless it appointed Wheeler, "no other Negro would serve" because the black community would "rather not have a Negro representative on the Board if any other person besides Wheeler is appointed."⁴⁹³ In addition to the DCNA's endorsement, Wheeler also had support from the VBG labor coalition.

Some city council members such as Walter A. Biggs came out in strong opposition to Wheeler's nomination because he and others feared him as being too radical and aggressive. Given Wheeler's role as counsel for the plaintiffs in the recent school suit, a few council members translated Wheeler's potential selection on the board as being a way for him to represent only black interests rather than the entire city.⁴⁹⁴ The *Durham Sun* newspaper supported this contention, explaining that Wheeler "has not concealed the fact that he is a belligerent and militant worker for political power by the Committee on Negro Affairs and Parrish Street."⁴⁹⁵ In addition, the newspaper reasoned that "however able he [Wheeler] may be, he is not concerned for any of Durham's citizens except the Negro residents and that he would represent only them, rather than the whole of Durham."⁴⁹⁶ Instead, the council wanted someone who they saw as less problematic—someone easier to control or manipulate while maintaining the status quo. Other black leaders such as C. C. Spaulding objected to Biggs'

⁴⁹³ "Wheeler is Pushed for School Board Post: Selection is Opposed by Biggs: Has Backing of Labor, Negroes; 21 Names Offered," *Durham Sun*, March 22, 1951.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁵ "Opportunity," *Durham Sun*, April 8, 1951.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

claim that Wheeler would be biased against white children, calling Wheeler's nomination a "forward step that would advance the educational program of the entire City of Durham." Spaulding clarified that Wheeler was unanimously supported above all other possible candidates "on the basis of his firsthand knowledge of school conditions."⁴⁹⁷ A day before the city council announced its decision, *Carolina Times* editor Louis Austin spoke to the council's fears about appointing Wheeler, predicting that "we don't believe there is enough fairness on the City Council to elect any Negro who is not considered 'safe' by certain powers that-be in Durham." Austin also addressed why the black community unanimously wanted Wheeler on the board, stating, "since the suit we are of the opinion that if one is appointed who is not familiar with all of the intricacies involving the educational machinery that it would be far better that no negro be given the appointment."

The city council split in its final decision on whether or not to appoint Wheeler. Aside from Biggs' opposition, councilmen M. F. Johnson and E. R. "Sparky" Williamson initially agreed to support Wheeler's appointment, but when time came to vote Johnson back peddled after "talking with numerous people" who convinced him to switch his position.⁴⁹⁸ Williamson, on the other hand, maintained his support for Wheeler, regretting "a missed opportunity to promote race relations" four years earlier (in 1947) when the city council failed to appoint a black member to the board after an appeal by Wheeler and the DCNA.⁴⁹⁹ Williamson, a VBG member who Wheeler and the DCNA helped elect in 1949, believed

⁴⁹⁷Ibid.

⁴⁹⁸"C. C. Spaulding is Appointed to Durham Education Office: Local Council Gives Action Unanimous Vote" *Durham Morning Herald*, April 8, 1951.

⁴⁹⁹Ibid.

“Durham [was] ready to support a Negro on the Board.”⁵⁰⁰ Williamson, a main VBG figure, supported Wheeler in part because of the VBG political alliance formed among labor, the DCNA, and white liberals. Williamson also dismissed the notion that Wheeler could not perform his duties objectively as a board member because of his role in the school suit. Drawing on old battle lines stemming from the VBG’s 1948 political takeover of the county’s Democratic Party leadership, Williamson reminded the council that despite Frank Fuller being a board member, his law firm “Fuller, Reade, Umstead, and Fuller” represented the board in the school equalization case without there being any grumblings about a conflict of interest. If for no other reason, Williamson saw “no more reason to object to Wheeler than to object to that law firm representing the Board.” Although council members like Williamson supported such an important issue to the black-white labor coalition, Wheeler lost the appointment by one vote.⁵⁰¹

Once the city council removed Wheeler’s name as an appointee, they immediately voted unanimously for appointing Spaulding, though Spaulding warned them he would not accept their appointment. Councilman Watts Carr, Jr. also opposed Wheeler from the beginning and nominated Spaulding, advising the city council to approach the issue with caution because “electing a Negro to a school board in the south is a serious thing. Some white people have prejudices which they just [couldn’t] overcome.”⁵⁰² Prior to the council’s vote, Carr went to the DCNA in an effort to convince the organization to reverse its

⁵⁰⁰Ibid.

⁵⁰¹“C. C. Spaulding is Appointed to Durham Education Office: Local Council Gives Action Unanimous Vote,” *Durham Morning Herald*, April 8, 1951.

⁵⁰²Ibid.

endorsement of Wheeler in return for someone who could get a unanimous vote in favor of their appointment. Carr made a personal visit to Wheeler and asked him to withdraw his name, a request Wheeler firmly rebuffed.⁵⁰³ Carr was right when he told the city council that some whites, himself included, held prejudices they could not do away with so easily. White prejudice and opposition, especially from white leaders in Durham and across North Carolina, made this point strikingly clear after the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision.

In the end, Spaulding respectfully declined the appointment, claiming that it went against his doctor's advice. He also reflected on his fifty-two year career as a leader in Durham and his role in training the next generation of black leadership, saying he "tried to select and train several young persons [who were] qualified to serve in almost any capacity."⁵⁰⁴ In reality, Spaulding no longer handled the day-to-day operations at NCM, M&F, or any other business where he served as president. But his words here, and his decision not to accept the appointment in favor of black solidarity, also suggests without question that he understood that blacks' struggle for educational equality necessitated a level of aggressiveness that he was unable to provide. Furthermore, Spaulding recognized that the city council viewed him as far less troublesome than Wheeler.⁵⁰⁵ Although blacks failed to get one of their younger leaders on the school board, the city council's move at trying to suppress black Durham's desires justly failed in this instance. The momentum toward civil

⁵⁰³Ibid.

⁵⁰⁴ "Wheeler Nominations Here is Called 'Forward Step': Two Negro Leaders Claim Selection Would Advance Education Program of Entire City," unidentified newspaper clipping.

⁵⁰⁵Weare, *Black Business in the New South*, 278, n. 245.

rights and the larger battle for freedom had begun to move in blacks' favor in the years following World War II.

CONCLUSION

In December 1951, John Wheeler became president of the National Negro Bankers' Association. A year later, with the passing of C. C. Spaulding in August 1952, Wheeler became president of M&F. The changing of the guard in black Durham was complete.⁵⁰⁶ In Wheeler's relentless determination to see that the Durham school board complied with the 1951 court injunction, he and the DCNA continued to keep pressure on the board by regularly threatening them with more legal action.⁵⁰⁷ In May 1953, as Wheeler continued his fight to end educational inequality, he and the DCNA helped elect Rencher N. Harris as Durham's first black city councilman. By that September, construction had finally begun on the long-awaited technical high school building at Hillside. Nevertheless, Wheeler kept pressure on the board particularly "to advise that although Judge Hayes' decision was handed

⁵⁰⁶ "Wheeler Nominations Here is Called 'Forward Step': Two Negro Leaders Claim Selection Would Advance Education Program of Entire City," unidentified newspaper clipping.

⁵⁰⁷ Letter from Martin A. Martin of Hill, Martin and Robinson Law Firm to Wheeler, October 27, 1951, *Wheeler v. Durham City Board of Education* folder, unprocessed school desegregation box 17, John Hervey Wheeler papers; Letter from Wheeler to the Board of Education of the City of Durham, October 26, 1951, unsorted correspondence folder, unprocessed personal correspondence box, 1952-1953; 1959-1961, John Hervey Wheeler papers, 1-2; Letter from Martin A. Martin of Hill, Martin and Robinson to Wheeler, October 23, 1951, *Wheeler v. Durham City Board of Education* folder, unprocessed school desegregation box 17, John Hervey Wheeler Papers; Letter from H. Spurgeon Boyce (school board chairman) and L. Stacy Weaver (school superintendant) to M. Hugh Thompson and Wheeler, November 13, 1951, *Wheeler v. Durham City Board of Education* folder, unprocessed school desegregation box 17, John Hervey Wheeler papers, 1-2; Kam Owen Carver, "The Role of the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People in the Pursuit of Equal Educational Opportunities, 1935-1954," 50.

down approximately three years ago,” major school inequalities still existed in Durham.⁵⁰⁸ Wheeler vowed to “press this matter...unless prompt action [was] taken to remedy” those injustices.

In addition to John Wheeler’s observations about the failures of the Durham school board to close the educational gap, a DCNA report from 1958 tells a surprising and not so surprising story. In the years directly following the Durham school suit, through May 31, 1955, “capital outlay expenditures ran 44% for white pupils,” which represented “the only time in Durham school history when more than half of Durham’s school building money was spent on Negro schools.”⁵⁰⁹ On the other hand, those figures do not indicate that educational equality became a reality in Durham, but that school administrators recognized they had to improve black school conditions in order to avoid having to desegregate schools. Moreover, once the *Brown* decision came down overturning the “separate but equal” doctrine as it applied to public education, Wheeler and the DCNA focused their attention on immediate school integration (which was on par with Wheeler’s civil rights and economic objectives). Although the Durham city school board increased expenditures for black education following the school suit, after *Brown* the board “seems to have reverted to its old, historic separate but unequal practice.”⁵¹⁰ The battle for freedom continued.

⁵⁰⁸Kam Owen Carver, “The Role of the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People in the Pursuit of Equal Educational Opportunities, 1935-1954,” 51.

⁵⁰⁹“A Durham Committee on Negro Affairs Report on the Question of Reopening the Old Morehead School as a Negro School,” 1958, folder 619, in the William A. Clement Papers #4024, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 3.

⁵¹⁰“A Durham Committee on Negro Affairs Report on the Question of Reopening the Old Morehead School as a Negro School,” 1958, folder 619, in the William A. Clement Papers #4024, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 3.

CHAPTER 4

“SKIRTING AROUND THE [REAL] PROBLEM OF INTEGRATION”: AFRICAN AMERICANS’ RESPONSE TO *BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION*, 1954-1959

We have the task of ridding the South of its pattern of racial segregation. Until it is abolished, there can be no material prosperity for either the white or colored people living in our region.

—John Hervey Wheeler

Speaking at the eighth annual North Carolina Editorial Writers Conference on May 17, 1957, John Wheeler detailed blacks’ disappointment at the slow process of school desegregation in a talk he called the “Penalties of Segregation.” He participated on a panel titled “Three Years After the May 17 Supreme Court Decision, What Next in N.C.?”⁵¹¹ He joined the panel alongside two white state leaders, Winston-Salem attorney Irving Carlyle and William T. Joyner, a state legislator and co-chair of the second Pearsall Committee. In 1955, Governor Luther H. Hodges appointed the second Pearsall Committee in response to the Supreme Court’s follow-up ruling to *Brown*, known as *Brown II*, which explained that states had to implement the decision “with all deliberate speed.” The second Pearsall Committee had the responsibility to study the ruling and recommend specific legislation to the North Carolina General Assembly. Despite calls from black spokesmen like Wheeler and civil rights organizations such as the NAACP not to move forward with the committee’s recommendations because it was “economic suicide,” in July 1956 the legislature adopted an

⁵¹¹“Penalties of Segregation,” May 17, 1957, Personal Correspondence Box, Wheeler Papers.

amendment to the North Carolina constitution shrewdly designed to further delay school desegregation; the new measure passed in a statewide referendum vote that fall.⁵¹²

During his critical and unapologetic indictment of the legislative acts to an audience of North Carolina newspaper editors, a vital group in the state's progress, Wheeler explained the consequences of what continued segregation ultimately meant to North Carolina's economic future. He warned them that North Carolina's "economy, therefore, cannot possibly grow as it should if the earning power of one-fourth of the population is held down because of enforced racial segregation."⁵¹³ "Without question," he asserted "employment and training barriers set in motion by segregated schools have operated to retard the development of manpower skills of the Negro population." Wheeler effectively made the point that racial segregation continued to serve as an obstacle to equal education for blacks, which was the key to full access to employment opportunities. Wheeler blamed North Carolina's attempts to avert school desegregation in the years following *Brown* on "pro-segregationist forces in North Carolina [who] have worked with determination, and with some degree of success, to create a number of mechanisms or devices which may be used to slow down, or prevent entirely, integration of the races in our public schools."⁵¹⁴

⁵¹²"Penalties of Segregation," May 17, 1957, Personal Correspondence box, Wheeler Papers; "Penalties of Segregation," *Greensboro Daily News*, June 16, 1957; "Penalties of Segregation Discussed," *Durham Morning Herald*, June 23, 1957; William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 48, 59; Luther H. Hodges, *Businessman in the Statehouse*, 83; Davison M. Douglas, *Reading, Writing, Race*, 37; "Economic Suicide is Predicted by Group if Plan Becomes Law," *Carolina Times*, July 28, 1956.

⁵¹³"Penalties of Segregation," May 17, 1957, Wheeler Papers, 8.

⁵¹⁴*Ibid.*, 7; Original underlining.

Wheeler concluded his talk by articulating blacks' immediate desire for full citizenship, making the larger point that went beyond just school segregation. He reminded the group that:

Now, however, it is increasingly difficult if not impossible to convince a Negro citizen who has served in an integrated army, and who has experienced the genuine fraternity and respect of his fellow soldiers, that he is anything less than a full blown American citizen entitled to freedom of movement into every area of American life. To him, his immediate family, and his uncles, his aunts and cousins, holding back the process of integration would be like trying to hold back the dawn.⁵¹⁵

Wheeler applauded mass, direct action protests and made specific reference to the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott and other "mass movements for greater freedom" that had taken place in the previous two years. He told the audience that it was "commendable" that blacks had been willing to bypass violence in favor of seeking justice through the prescribed legal methods set forth in the U.S. Constitution, despite violent reprisals "practiced against [them] by various hate groups throughout the South."⁵¹⁶

John Wheeler and North Carolina's other black leaders were firmly convinced by the hopes and expectations they held in response to *Brown*. They wanted immediate school desegregation and believed they could get there by pointing to the negative effects that continued segregation had on the state's overall economy. As a businessman, Wheeler considered any effort to forestall school desegregation as an obstacle to its economic progress. In recognizing this fact, understood how North Carolina's "progressive" image depended significantly on how it reacted to *Brown*. He appealed to the same reasoning often used by white leaders on the local and state levels: North Carolina had to be careful to

⁵¹⁵"Penalties of Segregation," May 17, 1957, Wheeler Papers, 10.

⁵¹⁶*Ibid.*

choose the right path so as not to interfere with the state's economic development. Thus, state leaders chose a path that, on its face was compliant with the *Brown* decision, but was even more effective in forestalling school desegregation than more blatant defiance. State leaders believed that the passage of the Pupil Assignment Act (1955) and Pearsall Plan (1956) shielded them from damaging their economic relationships with various industries.

Wheeler reminded state leaders that North Carolina's new school laws did the exact opposite of what they hoped because those measures perpetuated segregation, and the real problem of integration was that whites failed to comprehend how segregation hurt them as well. In other words, running away from it also jeopardized the future for white North Carolinians. Their efforts to avoid school desegregation by way of new legislation completely missed the point in the eyes of Wheeler since these laws did nothing to remove segregation. As a result, white leaders focused their efforts solely on implementing moderate measures to avoid bringing negative attention to North Carolina, but they turned a blind eye to the more important element in the state's economic prosperity. In other words full citizenship for blacks, absent from the restrictions of segregation meant increased economic power for both blacks and whites, which would ultimately sure up New South prosperity.⁵¹⁷

⁵¹⁷Several historians have published works that center on North Carolina's school desegregation process in the years directly following *Brown*. Both William H. Chafe and Davison M. Douglass have especially written well documented and notable community studies, which partly examine desegregation in piedmont cities such as Greensboro and Charlotte, respectively.⁵¹⁷ Both works insightfully reveal how North Carolina's white local and state political leaders responded to the *Brown* decision. In doing so, they point to North Carolina's "politics of moderation," particularly on the part of the state's business leaders, who represented a large sector of the state's political leadership. By stressing the connection between North Carolina's business leaders and their political reach, these works detail how local and state political leaders understood how the wrong approach to desegregation threatened North Carolina's economic underpinnings which depended on the state's longstanding "progressive" reputation, and sought to avoid the negative economic consequences that came along with open defiance of the Supreme Court's ruling. Therefore, these leaders craftily implemented "moderate," or middle ground legal measures to North Carolina's public school laws, which effectively delayed and resisted complete desegregation in the post-*Brown* era. Although Chafe and Douglass detail how whites and blacks in these respective cities responded to *Brown*, in many ways there is a larger emphasis on the actions of white local and state leaders. Christina Greene, in examining women's activism in Durham, North Carolina, has shed

As a result of the *Brown* decision, on the local level, John Wheeler and the DCNA's education committee had to shift their battle from one that firmly argued for school equalization based on the "separate but equal" doctrine, to one that pushed for complete and immediate school desegregation. In their unrelenting efforts to obtain educational equality in accordance with the new public school laws, Durham's black community agitated for change through private negotiations, public appeals to state and local leaders, petitions, and community mobilization. Once they realized school desegregation as mandated by the Pupil Assignment Act and the Pearsall Plan would most likely never happen if left to local and state officials, they again resorted to more aggressive legal measures to get the local school board to desegregate once and for all. It is no small wonder, then, that in the months after Wheeler gave his "Penalties" speech, essentially threatening legal action, a few school boards in the state agreed to desegregate their schools on a token basis. In Durham, Wheeler—through the DCNA, the NAACP, the black PTA Council, and affiliated organizations—battled with the Durham school board to obtain compliance to *Brown*. Wheeler and others called on the Durham school board and other civic leaders to outline a specific plan for school desegregation and offered their collaboration to make this a reality. Nevertheless, the Durham school board, in contrast to comparable piedmont city school boards in Charlotte, Winston-Salem, and Greensboro, served as a direct obstacle to desegregation, full citizenship, and New South prosperity.⁵¹⁸

significant light on the central role played by women in helping to achieve desegregation in the city. Greene correctly points out that "An examination of black women's efforts to desegregate Durham schools reveals the links between legal strategies, grassroots organizing, and mass, direct action protest," and that "Although men dominated most of the visible leadership positions of groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs, women did not simply follow the male leaders. African American women were active participants in these groups." Black women did the "spade work" – the day-to-day, nuts-and-bolts work that kept organizations functioning." Historians David S. Cecelski and more recently Charles W. McKinney, Jr. have both provided excellent community studies that focus on

PEARSALL COMMITTEE AND AVOIDING THE IMMEDIATE IMPLEMENTATION OF *BROWN*

On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court handed down the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision. It was a resounding death-blow to the Supreme Court's 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, a ruling that upheld state laws in Louisiana and provided the legal justification for Jim Crow segregation.⁵¹⁹ The *Brown* decree stated, "in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."⁵²⁰ The higher court affirmed that segregated schooling for blacks and whites could never be equal. Despite this monumental directive, the Supreme Court in its ruling withheld any judgments on how its decision should be implemented until the following year. Once the first *Brown* ruling settled, southern states like North Carolina took a more cautious and less hostile approach, but ultimately avoided implementing the court decision in favor of preserving separate public schools.⁵²¹ In its opinion, the Supreme

school desegregation in rural eastern North Carolina, specifically examining local grassroots movements in Hyde and Wilson Counties, respectively. All of these works do an excellent job in also examining more broadly the complexities of the black freedom struggle in North Carolina between the 1940s and 1970s. William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, see chapter 4, "The Politics of Moderation," especially 67-70; Davison M. Douglass, *Reading, Writing, Race: School Desegregation in Charlotte, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 64, see also chapters 1-3; David S. Cecelski, *Along Freedom Road: Hyde County, North Carolina and the Fate of Black Schools in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994.), see especially 17-30; Charles W. McKinney, *Greater Freedom: the Evolution of the Civil Rights Struggle in Wilson, North Carolina* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010), see especially chapters 1-3.

⁵¹⁸Ibid.

⁵¹⁹Mark V. Tushnet, *The NAACP's Legal Strategy Against Segregated Education, 1925-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 21-22.

⁵²⁰*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), from appendix section in Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 782.

⁵²¹Letter from Thomas J. Pearsall to Curtis Briggs, September 13, 1954, in the Tomas Jenkins Pearsall papers #4300, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Court also opened the door for attorneys general from individual states to appear amicus curiae and to file briefs on the best way to implement the decision. North Carolina's attorney general Harry McMullan later petitioned the Supreme Court accordingly.⁵²²

Initial responses to the *Brown* ruling by North Carolina's state and local officials indicated that they would fully comply with the higher court decision. Although displeased with the outcome, which he regarded as an infringement on states' rights, Governor William B. Umstead was not convinced that he should openly disregard the decision.⁵²³ Lieutenant Governor Luther H. Hodges wanted North Carolina to take a level-headed approach until they could more precisely understand the specifics of the decision. In Durham, Mayor Emanuel J. "Mutt" Evans expressed an interest in solving the problem in a way that would benefit all residents.⁵²⁴ While the Durham school board gave no indications that it would adhere to the Supreme Court ruling, the Greensboro planned to fully comply with *Brown*.⁵²⁵ In the interim, between the Supreme Court's initial *Brown* decision and its anticipated follow-up ruling, Umstead called on the Institute of Government at the University of North

⁵²²Letter from Charles F. Carroll to County and City Superintendents, October 5, 1954, Thomas J. Pearsall Papers; "Petition of Harry McMullan, Attorney General of North Carolina, to Appear Amicus Curiae before the Supreme Court," September 9, 1954, Thomas J. Pearsall Papers.

⁵²³Jack Michael McElreath, "The Cost of Opportunity: School Desegregation and Changing Race Relations in the Triangle Since World War II," (Ph.D. diss. University of Pennsylvania, 2002), 130; William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 48.

⁵²⁴Ralph Karpinos, " 'With all Deliberate Speed': The Brown v. Board of Education Decision, North Carolina and the Durham City Schools, 1954-1963," 3-5.

⁵²⁵"Congratulations for Greensboro," *Carolina Times*, May 29, 1954; William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 13, 42.

Carolina to conduct a careful study to outline the state's options when it came to the path the state could take in response to *Brown*.⁵²⁶

African American leaders across North Carolina were very pleased with the *Brown* decision and hoped it would compel state leaders to put their concern for the state's economic future above maintaining racial superiority. John Wheeler wasted little time highlighting *Brown's* significance in boosting North Carolina and the South's economic outlook, commenting that the judgment would "prove to be a social and economic bonanza for the southern states." He pointed out that southerners who wanted to continue racial segregation "have not realized that it looms as the greatest single barrier to lasting prosperity and to social maturity in the South." Not only that, but eliminating segregation would "do much to free the white south from the ever increasing burden of having to earn enough to support itself and an additional fourth of its population which, through segregation, has been denied the opportunity to become self supporting." This was the "only path" for North Carolina and that the Supreme Court decision presented the South with another "golden opportunity to reach new social and economic heights—an opportunity which we must not fail to grasp."⁵²⁷

Other black leaders from Durham pointed to the Supreme Court's decision as an advantage in promoting true democratic principles. DNCA chairman John S. Stewart said the decision laid "the ground work for the extension of democracy all over the world. Any form of discrimination in the United States works against the best interest of this nation's

⁵²⁶Davison M. Douglass, *Reading, Writing and Race*, 27-28; Jack M. McElreath, "The Cost of Opportunity," 130-131.

⁵²⁷"Citizens Continue their Praise of Supreme Court's Decision," *Carolina Times*, May 29, 1954.

program of selling democracy to other nations.”⁵²⁸ Conrad O. Pearson was pleasantly surprised at the Supreme Court’s decision, saying “the clearness of this decision not only represents a step forward for Negro citizens alone; it also represents a trend toward unity of all American citizens in upholding the basic principles of our democratic form of government.”⁵²⁹ Nathan B. White, DCNA economic committee chairman and president of the Durham Business and Professional Chain, commented: “those who would seek to circumvent the decree may delay the God-given rights of freedom and equal opportunity for all, but they cannot stop this onward march to make real the [democratic] ideals set forth in the constitution by the founders of our great country.”⁵³⁰

Wheeler also made his perspective on *Brown* and the need for its rapid adoption clear in other leadership circles. In a North Carolina Council on Human Relations (NCCHR) executive committee meeting following *Brown*, he expressed his concern that the NCCHR was “trying to skirt around the [real] problem of integration and that we are in danger of abdicating our responsibility. We need courage in this organization...and we need courage among ou[r] state officials at the top where policies are made.”⁵³¹ Wheeler pointed to states like New Jersey as “example[s] of what wisdom and courage can do in facilitating the process of integration.”⁵³² During the meeting, Wheeler also made a motion, which passed, that the NCCHR contact Governor Umstead regarding his move to set up an advisory

⁵²⁸Ibid.

⁵²⁹“Prominent Citizens Hail Supreme Court Decision,” *Carolina Times*, May 22, 1954.

⁵³⁰“Citizens Continue their Praise of Supreme Court’s Decision,” *Carolina Times*, May 29, 1954.

⁵³¹North Carolina Council on Human Relations Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, July 9, 1954, 2, in the North Carolina Council on Human Relations Records #4300, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁵³²Ibid.

committee to counsel him on the necessary steps to take in North Carolina's response to *Brown*. They wanted the governor to pay attention "particularly [to] our concern that the committee should be composed so as to be truly representative of the best talents in North Carolina."⁵³³

In the early 1950s, Wheeler helped revive the former North Carolina Commission on Interracial Cooperation in its transition to the newly created NCCHR, the state's Southern Regional Council (SRC) affiliate. He served as its treasurer from 1954 to 1961. He increased his involvement with the SRC's work in the 1950s and joined its executive committee in 1958.⁵³⁴ His growing participation in NCCHR and SRC programs intensified because of their emphasis on the school desegregation issue via active membership, academic research, and publications. As the SRC made a concerted effort to strengthen its base at the local and state levels, Wheeler willingly gave his time, financial resources, and expertise. As a civil rights lawyer, he regularly sat on panels at general meetings alongside educators and sociologists offering his insights on a range of issues including segregated schooling. In the years following *Brown*, the banker also volunteered as a consultant with the SRC's consultative services program, helping to mediate school desegregation crises.⁵³⁵

⁵³³North Carolina Council Human Relations Executive Meeting Minutes, July 9, 1954, 4.

⁵³⁴Letter from Guy B. Johnson to Wheeler, November 12, 1952, SRC folder 1952, John H. Wheeler Papers; Letter from Harry S. Jones (NCCHR executive secretary) to members of the nominating committee, December 4, 1961, North Carolina Council on Human Relations Records; Wheeler continued to serve on the executive committee when he resigned as treasurer.

⁵³⁵Letter from Nat R. Griswold (Arkansas Council on Human Relations) to Wheeler, January 19, 1960; Letter from Wheeler to Paul Rilling (SRC field director), February 10, 1960; In the years following school desegregation in Little Rock, Arkansas, the Arkansas Council on Human Relations invited Wheeler to Little Rock to advise them on community leadership. Wheeler explained to Paul Rilling in a brief report about his recent trip to Little Rock that "Some of the fears and disappointment expressed to me by leading citizens [in Little Rock] seem to indicate that instead of lacking the desire for responsible civic activity, the community is still suffering from the shock imposed upon it by the 1957 debacle and events which still follow in its wake."

Wheeler worked with interracial organizations such as the NCCHR and the SRC because he saw them as useful tools in helping to convince North Carolina's state and local leaders that immediate school desegregation was the best path for North Carolina and its economic wellbeing.

The Institute of Government at UNC completed its report to Governor Umstead that August. The report analyzed school desegregation from several angles and emphasized a number of directions that North Carolina could take. It considered the possibility of private schools supported by state funds, but reasoned that the Supreme Court would view it as an off-shoot of public schools; the report viewed giving state grants to students to pay for private schools in that same light. The author's offered theoretical, but reasonable, arguments that North Carolina's attorney general could make to the Supreme Court in *amicus curiae* hearings that had the potential to go over well with the justices. The report especially emphasized the idea of "gradual adjustment" to desegregation, which included a relatively flexible timetable for implementing the decision. The report proposed that if the Supreme Court accepted a gradual approach, then North Carolina had to have a well-structured plan. That plan had to consider criteria such as assignment, redistricting, and school choice as ways to realistically desegregate schools. The document also called on the state to enact broad, but consistent legislation to produce a desegregation plan so that it could be applied across the board.⁵³⁶ Interestingly enough, the Institute's report said nothing about the possible advantages, if any, that *immediate* desegregation would bring to the state.

⁵³⁶ Albert Coates and James C. N. Paul, *The School Segregation Decision: A Report to the Governor of North Carolina on the Decision of the Supreme Court of the United States on the 17th of May 1954* (Chapel Hill: Institute of Government, 1954) 38-63; 65-86; 87-116; Davison M. Douglass, *Reading, Writing and Race*, 27-28; Jack M. McElreath, "The Cost of Opportunity," 130-131.

In addition to the Institute's report, Umstead—the former senator and Durham school board's attorney in *Blue v. Durham* (1951)—set-up the Governor's Special Advisory Committee on Education on August 10, 1954. He selected Thomas J. Pearsall, a Rocky Mount attorney and former state legislator, to chair the committee. The nineteen-person committee also had three African Americans: Drs. F. D. Bluford and J. W. Seabrook, presidents of North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State College and Fayetteville State Teacher's College, respectively and Hazel S. Parker, an Edgecombe County home agent from Tarboro. Because of their positions as state employees, the three black leaders could only go so far in advocating immediate school desegregation.⁵³⁷ The Pearsall Committee had the responsibility to review the school issue in light of *Brown* and the recent UNC report; it also had the task to recommend specific actions for the governor to take.⁵³⁸

Wheeler continued to articulate why it was imperative that North Carolina and the South meet the *Brown* decree by concentrating on the region's general economic advancement above anything else. In September, he outlined his New South prosperity message in a speech to an audience attending a New Farmers of America Convention in Atlanta, Georgia. Wheeler explained to the group that it was “an economic truth that with the rapid industrialization of the South, white workers cannot possibly earn enough money to support the remaining one-fourth of the population which a few years from now will be impoverished by the lack of opportunity unless the mandate of the Supreme Court is followed wholeheartedly. To my way of thinking, therefore, the South cannot prosper under

⁵³⁷ Report of the Governor's Special Advisory Committee on Education,” December 30, 1954, Tomas J. Pearsall Papers, 2, 5; William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 50; Jack M. McElreath, “The Cost of Opportunity,” 134; Davison M. Douglass, *Reading, Writing, Race*, 28; Ralph Karpinos, “ ‘With all Deliberate Speed,’ ” 6.

⁵³⁸“Report of the Governor's Special Advisory Committee on Education,” December 30, 1954, Tomas J. Pearsall Papers, 2.

segregation.” Wheeler also felt that since the *Brown* case was affirmatively decided, the issues involved were political, rather than legal questions. “Formerly, we were concentrating upon the task of getting down in black and white in the Constitution-in the Statutes, and the mandates of the Supreme Court, the broad principles and machinery by which we may live above our prejudices.” “Now,” Wheeler continued, “we are concerned with the task of winning the battle for the minds of men that we may learn the secret of living together in brotherhood with mutual respect for one another.” This meant letting the nation and world know “The American Negro wants no special trains, no special buses, no special schools, [and] no special factories in which to work. He simply wants the same job opportunities in industry and other lines of employment with the right to be promoted and paid on the same basis as other Americans.”⁵³⁹

As the Pearsall Committee prepared its final report, Governor Umstead died in office that November. Lieutenant Governor Luther Hodges took over as governor and pledged his continued support to the Pearsall Committee. On December 30, the Pearsall Committee issued its report to Hodges. They concluded that school integration in North Carolina could not be “accomplished and should not be attempted.”⁵⁴⁰ The Committee determined that racial customs precluded any likelihood that integrated public schools could operate effectively. The Committee also recommended that the state find a way to comply with *Brown* within the segregated school structure. Furthermore, the Committee suggested that state officials place authority solely in the hands of local school boards and urged the 1955

⁵³⁹“New Farmers of America Convention Speech,” September 30, 1954, Box 89, Wheeler Papers; “Tells N.F.A. Youngsters to ‘See What America Is,’ ” *Atlanta Daily World*, October 1, 1954.

⁵⁴⁰“Report of the Governor’s Special Advisory Committee on Education,” December 30, 1954, Tomas J. Pearsall papers, 2-3.



Figure 4.1 Durham Committee on Negro Affairs (DCNA) meets with Governor Luther Hodges, February, 1955. Wheeler is standing, with newspaper editor Louis Austin sitting to his right, and Hodges seated at desk.) (*Photograph courtesy of the Durham County Library*)

General Assembly to pass legislation along those lines.⁵⁴¹ In January 1955, the state legislature worked to modify North Carolina's public school laws in accordance with *Brown* and the Pearsall Committee's December report.

Once the North Carolina legislature drafted new school laws, Wheeler and other black leaders from across the state hoped to convince the state's political leaders not to pass the proposed legislation in its current form because it would have devastating consequences on the state's economic future. On February 22, Wheeler led a 300-person delegation of the state's black leaders to Raleigh, where he and a small group met face-to-face with the governor. The group—while not a formal organization—included leaders from several

⁵⁴¹Ibid., 3-4.

statewide organizations such as the Prince Hall Masons, the North Carolina Teachers Association, the General Baptist State Convention, and the North Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs. During their meeting with Hodges, Wheeler told the governor they believed integration was possible and could happen without any problems if state leaders took a "forthright position leading to integration of the schools"⁵⁴² Afterwards, the entire group attended a public hearing held by the Joint Committee on Education of the North Carolina Legislature, where they lobbied for immediate compliance with *Brown*. The delegation made its visit to protest the proposed school bills that were up before the lawmakers. The proposed legislation had the potential to determine the direction and timetable that North Carolina's public schools would take in view of *Brown*.⁵⁴³ Three days earlier, Wheeler told students attending his Morehouse College founder's day address "More people must know the score." There could be "No prosperity here [in the South]," he continued, "unless [the] negro has [an] opportunity to earn his way," because the "Dual System of Education is sapping the financial strength of our southland."⁵⁴⁴

On the delegation's behalf, Wheeler gave a speech before the Joint Committee to advocate for immediate integration aimed at releasing the state from economic bondage. The "progress of all people in North Carolina," explained Wheeler, "has been seriously retarded by the shackles of segregation and that the removal of these shackles through a State policy

⁵⁴²"Report to the Joint Committee on Education of the North Carolina Legislature," February 22, 1955, North Carolina Central University Archives, Durham, North Carolina, 1; "300 Protest Segregation Bill," *Carolina Times*, February 26, 1955, The full text of the "Report to the Joint Committee" is also included in the same issue; "Durham Banker Calls for End of 'Shackles of Segregation,'" *Durham Morning Herald*, February 23, 1955; "Can North Carolina Lead the Way?," *New South*, March 1955, 8; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 70.

⁵⁴³*Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁴Morehouse College, Founders Day Speech, 1955.

on integration...will enable us to make great strides of progress, proudly and to the advantage of all citizens.” He saw the proposed legislation as “a means to avoid the execution of the Supreme Court’s decision and to slow down or retard the process of integration.”⁵⁴⁵ He maintained that restricting black citizenship rights would “backfire” as usual because it “not only limited the opportunities of negroes but hampered the total progress of our State in industry, economics and education.” Wheeler believed the most efficient way for North Carolina to desegregate its public schools successfully would be centralizing operating authority, meaning he wanted the State Board of Education to oversee the desegregation process with the assistance of local school boards.⁵⁴⁶ This would also eliminate fiscal waste as North Carolina struggled “to carry a burden which exceeds our [economic] ability.” Wheeler referred the legislators to several school studies, which indicated, “North Carolina [put] forth great financial effort but [received] a disappointingly small return on its educational investment” since the state still produced low-performing white and black students when compared to other states. He worried that putting the issue solely in the hands of local school boards would be “perpetuating and encouraging educational inefficiency through legislative enactments that [instead] skirt the real problems of public education in North Carolina: small schools, small administrative units, and the dual education systems.”⁵⁴⁷ In other words, North Carolina could save money on administrative

⁵⁴⁵“Report to the Joint Committee on Education of the North Carolina Legislature,” 3; “300 Protest Segregation Bill”; “Durham Banker Calls for End of 'Shackles of Segregation’”; “Can North Carolina Lead the Way?,” 8.

⁵⁴⁶“Report to the Joint Committee on Education of the North Carolina Legislature,” 3-7; “300 Protest Segregation Bill”; “Durham Banker Calls for End of 'Shackles of Segregation’”; “Can North Carolina Lead?,” 8.

⁵⁴⁷“Report to the Joint Committee on Education of the North Carolina Legislature,” 6; Original underlining.

expenditures and improve student performance by combining separate school systems, especially those with smaller populations.⁵⁴⁸

During his appeal, the M&F president pounded his message that desegregation was economically beneficial to whites as well as blacks. Wheeler argued that “Racial segregation in the public schools and in employment [was] producing a burden which is becoming too heavy for the economy of our state.” African Americans had “a deep and understandable yearning to prove its economic worth to our economy.”⁵⁴⁹ In addition, “The tremendous tax burden which must be assumed by the remaining three-fourths of the population [which was white] also looms as a block to real prosperity for any segment of our population.” Thus, Wheeler explained, “It is our considered opinion that if there is to be lasting prosperity in North Carolina, all of us must learn to work and live together in an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding which cannot be attained as long as there are barriers which prevent us from knowing and understanding one another.” For Wheeler, desegregation was the “key to [the] improved industrial growth of North Carolina and is an essential element for prosperity within our State.”

In case Wheeler’s economic reasoning for demanding immediate school desegregation failed to strike a chord with state lawmakers, he ended by reminding them that a failure to desegregate would also damage North Carolina’s “progressive” reputation. The “enactment of the proposed legislation,” Wheeler went on to say “would not be in keeping with North Carolina’s traditional respect for law and order and government in accordance

⁵⁴⁸“Report to the Joint Committee on Education of the North Carolina Legislature,” NCCU Archives, 10; “300 Protest Segregation Bill”; “Durham Banker Calls for End of 'Shackles of Segregation’”; “Can North Carolina Lead the Way?”, 8.

⁵⁴⁹“Report to the Joint Committee on Education of the North Carolina Legislature,” 7; “300 Protest Segregation Bill”; “Durham Banker Calls for End of 'Shackles of Segregation’”; “Can North Carolina Lead the Way?”, 9.

with the ideals of our democracy.” “Moreover,” he said “what we do in North Carolina has an important bearing on the position of the United States in the rest of the world.” Wheeler warned them that “we feel assured that no one will be proud of what may happen if North Carolina’s record of progressiveness and enlightenment is besmirched by a long period of bickering, litigation, and unpleasantness occasioned by efforts to avoid the decision of the Court.”⁵⁵⁰ He urged lawmakers to “reaffirm North Carolina’s tradition of enlightened leadership through a fair, positive and forthright policy of integration of schools in accordance with the mandate of the U. S. Supreme Court.”⁵⁵¹

Wheeler’s February 22 appearance before the Joint Committee on Education placed him at the forefront of North Carolina’s desegregation crisis, and he made every effort to expose the state’s citizens to the real problem of integration and the stakes involved in failing to desegregate. A month after the delegation’s visit to the state legislature, the SRC’s *New South* magazine followed up with an article asking, “Can North Carolina Lead the Way?” The essay included excerpts from Wheeler’s speech.⁵⁵² The potential exposure that his ideas would receive once leaders throughout the country read the *New South* article was immeasurable. By then, the SRC had active state and local branches in all eleven ex-Confederate states. The latter point was not lost on Wheeler as he moved to keep blacks’ desire for immediate school desegregation, and improved economic conditions for whites and blacks burning in the minds of North Carolinians. Wheeler attempted to use the March *New South* article and other publicity surrounding his February 22 appearance to pressure state

⁵⁵⁰ Report to the Joint Committee on Education of the North Carolina Legislature,” 10; “300 Protest Segregation Bill”; “Durham Banker Calls for End of ‘Shackles of Segregation’”; “Can North Carolina Lead the Way?,” 12.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵⁵² “Can North Carolina Lead?,” *New South*, March 1955, 8-12.

and local school board officials to move beyond their stalled efforts to desegregate public schools in North Carolina because they stood to lose so much economically. He personally ordered and paid for fifty copies of the March issue to distribute them to leaders he knew around the state. He also suggested that the NCCHR and the SRC send free copies to local school boards and city officials in select North Carolina cities. Wheeler explained, “it strikes me that this is a good time for us to circularize [it to] some of the important persons in North Carolina.”⁵⁵³

Some NCCHR and SRC leaders saw Wheeler’s actions as moving too swiftly and wanted instead to appeal to southern leaders’ attitudes indirectly. Harry S. Jones, executive secretary for the NCCHR, felt that “while it would probably be a good move...my experience in talking with many business and civic leaders leaves me with some doubt as to whether the results would be what we would hope for.”⁵⁵⁴ He saw circulating the March article as “ ‘beating the drum’ pretty loudly for integration, and this is what many of these people want to avoid or delay as long as possible.”⁵⁵⁵ Although white leaders wanted to avoid desegregation, Wheeler’s point was to show them that North Carolina really had no future without making these concessions to its black citizens. From Wheeler’s perspective, if he could get whites to comprehend the potential economic consequences involved in continuing segregation, then he would succeed at achieving his overall objectives. Instead, Jones suggested they circulate NCCHR pamphlets, along with pertinent information about

⁵⁵³Letter from Wheeler to Dr. George Mitchell, April 12, 1955, Southern Regional Council Papers, microfilm reel #145, Davis Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁵⁵⁴Letter from Harry S. Jones to Program Planning Committee, April 12, 1955, Southern Regional Council Papers, microfilm reel #145, Davis Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁵⁵⁵Ibid.

the NCCHR, the SRC, and their “approach to the [school desegregation] problem.”⁵⁵⁶ Jones concluded: “it is a matter of strategy of course. We all want the same thing.”⁵⁵⁷ The SRC’s executive director, George Mitchell, had no real objections with Wheeler’s suggestion, but stressed the SRC’s importance over Wheeler’s desire for continued emphasis on school desegregation. Mitchell thought that *New South* subscriptions would instead provide “continuity of the magazine to distinguished citizens.”⁵⁵⁸ He ultimately left it up to the NCCHR’s programming committee to make the final decision. It is unclear whether the NCCHR acted on Wheeler’s suggestion.

Wheeler’s last maneuver came in response to the North Carolina General Assembly’s March 30 passage of the Pupil Assignment Act, following through with the Pearsall Committee’s December recommendations. The Pupil Assignment Act, which ran counter to the goals Wheeler expressed in his February 22 address, gave local school board administrators complete control over the desegregation process. It further stipulated that any parent or guardian could seek to enroll their child in any public school in their district by submitting a reassignment application. If a school board denied a reassignment request, the parent or guardian could then request a formal hearing with the local school board to reconsider their reassignment application. The final decision rested with the local school board, which had authority to accept or reject reassignment applications based on a number of criteria, supposedly without regard to race. If dissatisfied with the school board’s final

⁵⁵⁶ Letter from Harry S. Jones to Program Planning Committee, April 12, 1955, Southern Regional Council Papers, microfilm reel #145, Davis Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁸ Letter from Dr. George Mitchell to Wheeler, April 27, 1955, Southern Regional Council Papers, microfilm reel #145, Davis Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

decision, and after exhausting all “administrative remedies,” the parent or guardian had ten days to appeal the school board’s verdict to a superior court.⁵⁵⁹ The Pupil Assignment Act placed individual responsibility on the parent or guardian, making the task of getting one’s child reassigned on an integrated basis a difficult procedure. Moreover, that summer the General Assembly made provisions for a second Pearsall Committee to continue to study and make recommendations on school desegregation to the governor and other state leaders.⁵⁶⁰

Meanwhile, on May 31, the Supreme Court provided its follow-up ruling in *Brown II* instructing states to implement *Brown I* “with all deliberate speed,” leaving an ambiguous timeline for compliance.⁵⁶¹ The Supreme Court made its decision after hearing arguments from attorneys general from North Carolina, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Maryland, Texas, and Florida. North Carolina’s assistant attorney general, I. Beverly Lake, made the most convincing argument and was very instrumental in the Supreme Court’s final decision when it came to how states should proceed with implementing *Brown*. Lake, a firm segregationist, hinted at voluntary segregation as a solution by arguing that the Supreme Court’s ruling failed to explicitly require integration. Although Lake made no objections to the decision outlawing segregation, he strongly warned the Court that if there was immediate forced integration, there would be violent reprisals that would spell the end of public education in North Carolina. In other words, Lake wiped his hands clean from the harmful repercussions

⁵⁵⁹“Pupil Assignment Act,” folder 12, Thomas J. Pearsall Papers, 1-3; “Excerpts from Public School Laws of North Carolina, An Act to provide for the Enrollment of Pupils in Public Schools,” folder 12, Thomas J. Pearsall Papers, 1-2.

⁵⁶⁰“Report of the North Carolina Advisory Committee on Education,” April 5, 1956, Thomas J. Pearsall Papers, folder 12, Thomas J. Pearsall Papers.

⁵⁶¹ *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 349 U.S. 294 (1955).

North Carolina could potentially suffer if the Court failed to grant states complete authority in handling desegregation.⁵⁶²

Now that the Pupil Assignment Act and *Brown II* put implementation squarely in the hands of local school administrators, the only immediate move the Durham school board made following the May ruling came during their meetings in June. The board selected school board members Frank L. Fuller, Jr. and Herman Rhinehart as the only two members to a desegregation subcommittee. Fuller and Rhinehart had the responsibility to consider the recent *Brown II* ruling in conjunction with the Pupil Assignment Act and make recommendations to the school board accordingly. At the June 13 school board meeting, DCNA and NAACP leaders asked for a special meeting with the board to discuss *Brown II* and the board's plans for desegregation.⁵⁶³ In addition, Durham's black community pursued desegregation on other fronts. On June 20, Wheeler and other DCNA and NAACP lawyers including Conrad O. Pearson, Floyd B. McKissick, Sr., and William A. Marsh, Jr. filed a lawsuit on behalf of three recent graduates of Durham's black Hillside High School against the University of North Carolina to seek admission to its undergraduate program. In early April, the University rejected their applications for admission citing the school's longstanding segregation policy.⁵⁶⁴

⁵⁶²Charles McKinney, Jr., *Greater Freedom*, 85; Ralph Karpinos, "With All Deliberate Speed," 5-6; Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right these Wrongs*, 34; Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 734.

⁵⁶³Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, June 13, 20, 1955, Durham Public Schools Fuller Administration Building, Durham, North Carolina; Chris D. Howard, "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize: the Black Freedom Struggle for Civic Equality in Durham, North Carolina, 1954-1963," (Honor's thesis, Duke University, 1983), 21; "Jack M. McElreath, "The Cost of Opportunity," 141.

⁵⁶⁴Letter from Roy Armstrong (admissions director at the University of North Carolina) to John Lewis Brandon, April 28, 1955, L. B., Frasier Papers; Letter from L. B. Frasier to Bill Lofquist, July 19, 1955, L. B. Frasier Papers; *The Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina, et., al. v. Frasier*, 134 F. Supp. 589 (1955) U.S. Dist. LEXIS 2790, 1-3; *The Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina, et., al. v. Frasier* 350 U.S. 979 (1956), 1-2.

For the moment, the more polarizing race issue trumped Wheeler's New South prosperity message as state leaders took a different approach, what they believed to be in the state's best interests. Nevertheless, Wheeler took his convictions to the local school board in Durham hoping the obstinate leaders would heed his economic concerns in light of *Brown II*. The meeting came on July 11 when the DCNA submitted a written petition to the school board signed by 740 Durham blacks. The move happened in conjunction with the local NAACP, the Durham Ministerial Alliance, the Durham Business and Professional Chain, the PTA Council, the East End Betterment League, and the black AFL union local. Wheeler read the petition to the school board maintaining, "we are convinced that implementation of the [*Brown*] decision in the Durham public schools will be a progressive step designed to improve the moral, economic, and religious fiber of our community."⁵⁶⁵ Wheeler called on the board to "take immediate steps to reorganize the public schools under your jurisdiction on a non-discriminatory basis."⁵⁶⁶ The group believed that "the May 31 decision of the Supreme Court, to us, means that the time for delay, evasion or procrastination is past" and "as we interpret the decision you are duty bound to take immediate concrete steps leading to early elimination of segregation in the public schools."⁵⁶⁷ It became clear that black and white leaders held very different views about *Brown II*'s meaning. While white leaders

⁵⁶⁵"Petition to the Durham School Board," July 11, 1955, Rencher Nicholas Harris Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, 1; Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, July 11, 1955; M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 124-125.; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 70.

⁵⁶⁶*Ibid.*

⁵⁶⁷"Petition to the Durham School Board," July 11, 1955, R. N. Harris Papers, 1-2; M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 124-125.; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 70.

believed it gave them more time to avoid desegregation, blacks believed it *still* required local school leaders to produce some “good faith” tangible actions.

Wheeler argued against assistant attorney general I. Beverly Lake’s contention that immediate forced integration would bring about turmoil. Wheeler especially dismissed “predictions of violence, strikes, and racial disturbances which may occur if integration of the schools is attempted in North Carolina.” Instead, he pointed to good examples of successful school integration that had already occurred in Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Maryland, and St. Louis, Missouri.⁵⁶⁸ This would likely happen in North Carolina “as similar predictions have failed to materialize in the cities which have set out with determination to follow the mandate of the court.”⁵⁶⁹ Wheeler also pointed to the school integration that took place at North Carolina’s military bases “to see that right here in our midst, the pattern of integration, at work and in school, is operating smoothly.”⁵⁷⁰

As Wheeler had in his February 22 appearance to the Joint Committee on Education, he again stressed the importance of school desegregation to North Carolina and the South’s economic stability and the future for white North Carolinians as well. He called for black economic empowerment, “we are sure, however, that you will recognize how difficult it is for any group of people to carry its share of the economic burden if it does not have an equal and unrestricted opportunity to earn its way.”⁵⁷¹ Hoping school board members would comprehend how continued school segregation had a negative impact on whites, Wheeler

⁵⁶⁸“Petition to the Durham School Board,” July 11, 1955, R. N. Harris Papers, 1-2; M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 124-125.; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 70.

⁵⁶⁹Ibid.

⁵⁷⁰Ibid.

⁵⁷¹Ibid.

drew contrasts between the plight of white and black workers. Since 1930, white workers “gained 2,700,000 jobs in southern industry” while “Negro workers have lost 900,000 jobs.” “These figures,” Wheeler noted that “are alarming to us and should be alarming to every citizen of our State because they indicate a trend which will make it difficult for three-fourths of our population (which is white) to achieve enough prosperity to support the remaining one-fourth of our population which is represented by an impoverished Negro group.”⁵⁷²

Wheeler again warned white leaders what they could expect if they failed to heed blacks’ call for desegregation. Wheeler said, “in spite of the best efforts of leading negro citizens living in communities throughout the South, very few of these gains have been achieved by conference and mutual understanding; instead, most of the gains referred to have been achieved against the backdrop of coercive action of the courts.”⁵⁷³ Once Wheeler and others finished their comments, school board officials thanked the delegation for their concerns in the matter and left it at that. Leaving the meeting somewhat perplexed at the school board’s unwillingness to respond, Wheeler and his group received a harsh indicator about the challenges that lay ahead in their effort to achieve desegregation in Durham.⁵⁷⁴

John Wheeler’s July 11 appeal asking the school board to devise a workable plan to immediately desegregate the Durham schools for the sake of North Carolina’s economic prosperity encountered more challenges. One potential setback happened later in the month when Rencher N. Harris, Durham’s first black city councilman, made controversial statements to the press about implementing *Brown*. Harris commented that he believed “ ‘If

⁵⁷²Ibid.

⁵⁷³“Petition to the Durham School Board,” July 11, 1955. R. N. Harris Papers, 5; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 70.

⁵⁷⁴M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 125; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 70.

Negro children of the [black] Walltown section of the city were given their own choice in the matter they would walk past [the white] Durham High School to attend [the black] Hillside High School.’ ” Harris’ comments landed him in a predicament with Durham’s black leadership since he implied most black children would choose a black school over a white school if given the option, therefore, choosing voluntary segregation and unequal education. Leroy B. Frasier, Sr., DCNA executive committee member and PTA Council president, expressed his disappointment to Harris saying, “ ‘You can imagine with how much contempt and skepticism I read your recent statement in the local press concerning the problem of desegregation in our public schools.’ ” John Wheeler went further and made a personal visit to Harris’ office to caution him against making such statements, despite their veracity. In explaining why Harris’ statements could potentially hurt blacks’ appeals for immediate desegregation and full citizenship in general, Wheeler reminded him that whites would construe Harris’ words as a concession and acceptance of a continued segregated school arrangement.⁵⁷⁵ In August, the school board’s desegregation subcommittee advised them to operate the schools on a segregated basis since their assessment would not be finished before the start of the 1955-56 school year.⁵⁷⁶

On August 8, Governor Hodges gave an address to North Carolina citizens, which aired on radio and television calling for voluntary segregation. He provided little hope for groups pointing to the real problem of integration and the economic drawbacks for North Carolinians. Hodges directed his remarks at white moderates and blacks by arguing that the

⁵⁷⁵Robert Joseph Cannon, “The Organization and Growth of Black Political Participation,” 88-89; M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 119.

⁵⁷⁶Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, August 1, 1955.

independent cultures of both races would be jeopardized “unless we can...continue our separate schools voluntarily.”⁵⁷⁷ Hodges maintained that a failure to continue segregation on a voluntary basis would prematurely force the state to choose between desegregation and an end to public education altogether. He made specific reference to the NAACP and similar organizations like the DCNA by advising blacks not to let any “militant” groups dissuade them from accepting voluntary segregation. On August 26, Governor Hodges addressed an audience of black teachers representing the North Carolina Teachers Association and asked them to support his call for voluntary segregation. The next day, the North Carolina Teachers Association denounced Hodges’ plea for voluntary segregation stating, “We do not now, nor have we ever ascribed to voluntary segregation, but as good citizens we have abided by segregation because it was the law of our state. Now that the Supreme Court has ruled that this state law is in conflict with the Constitution of the United States it is our conviction that it is inconsistent with our obligations as good citizens for us to advocate voluntary segregation.”⁵⁷⁸

The prospects looked bleak for school desegregation in North Carolina’s primary and secondary schools, but things progressed for Wheeler and other lawyers in their suit against UNC. On September 16, a three judge panel from the Fourth Circuit Court ruled in the plaintiffs’ favor in the case *Frasier v. Board of Trustees* (1955), and ordered the University to admit its first black undergraduates that fall. Following the September verdict, Leroy B. Frasier, Jr., Ralph K. Frasier, and John Lewis Brandon became the first black undergraduates to desegregate UNC; the University appealed the decision to the U. S. Supreme Court.

⁵⁷⁷“Can North Carolina Have ‘Voluntary’ Segregation?” *New South*, September 1955, 7.

⁵⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 8.

Wheeler was admitted to the bar of the U. S. Supreme Court. On November 16, George E. C. Hayes, one of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education lawyers who helped argue the *Brown* case, introduced John Wheeler, Floyd McKissick, Sr., and Conrad O. Pearson to the higher court before their arguments commenced. The Supreme Court ultimately upheld the lower court's ruling in its judgment on March 5, 1956.⁵⁷⁹ The efforts by Wheeler and other attorneys, and black leaders on the whole, partly reflected their desire to see that blacks had an equal say in how the South's problems would be worked out or implemented.

THE PEARSALL PLAN AND "NO REAL PROGRESS" TOWARD SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

In April 1956, the second Pearsall Committee issued its report, offering additional desegregation recommendations to the state legislature. The overarching theme of the committee's new report was that North Carolina could only preserve its public school system through continued segregation. As for desegregation advocates like Wheeler, the committee confidently stated, "The Negro leaders from outside the State, and those who are now vocal within the State, appear to be totally indifferent to the fact that their belligerence, their attempt to use the threat of Federal punishment to achieve complete integration, will prevent Negro children from getting a public school education in North Carolina." Although the committee held tightly to the idea of segregated schools, they agreed with Wheeler on one central issue. As stated in its report:

⁵⁷⁹*The Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina, et., al. v. Frasier*, 134 F. Supp. 589 (1955) U. S. Dist. LEXIS 2790, 1-3; Letter from Wheeler to Harold B. Wiley, November 11, 1955, Correspondence Box (1952-1953; 1959-1961, #4 of 6 Personal Correspondence folders in the 1953-1956 series, Wheeler Papers; Letter from Wheeler to Thurgood Marshall, November 23, 1955, Correspondence Box (1952-1953; 1959-1961), #4 of 6 Personal Correspondence folder in the 1953-1956 series, Wheeler Papers; Letter from Wheeler to George E. C. Hayes, November 23, 1955, Correspondence Box (1952-1953; 1959-1961), #4 of 6 Personal

If the State of North Carolina is to go forward, if the white race in North Carolina is to go forward, the Negro must go forward also. The advancement of our economy and the preservation of our democracy depend in large part upon the education, the understanding, and the morality of the Negro as well as the white. If there prevails ignorance in either race, servitude in either race, hatred in either race, our economy will stall, our society will seethe, and our democracy will degenerate.⁵⁸⁰

Despite the Pearsall Committee's assessment about the economic future of North Carolina and the South, they gave only passing reference to the inherent possibilities in eliminating segregation and the positive impact it stood to have in meeting that reality.⁵⁸¹

The second Pearsall Committee suggested that the General Assembly re-convene for a special summer session to pass immediate legislation. They recommended the General Assembly make public funds available through private tuition grants to any parents opposed racial-mixing, as long a space in a segregated school could not be made available. Second, the Committee suggested that the General Assembly introduce a constitutional amendment to give local communities the option to suspend public schools in favor of private schools with a referendum vote. In a special session during the summer, the North Carolina General Assembly deliberated on the suggested legislation.

Soon after the Pearsall Committee issued its report, Wheeler compiled research material on industrial development in the South in preparation for the summer's special legislative session. He contacted Julius A. Thomas, director of the Department of Industrial Relations for the National Urban League (NUL), who relayed some confidential information to Wheeler. Thomas told Wheeler many "northern-based industries that are reconsidering

Correspondence folders in the 1953-1956 series, Wheeler Papers; *The Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina, et., al. v. Frasier*, 350 U. S. 979 (1956), 3.

⁵⁸⁰“Report of the North Carolina Advisory Committee on Education,” April 5, 1956, Thomas J. Pearsall Papers, 6.

⁵⁸¹“Report of the North Carolina Advisory Committee on Education,” April 5, 1956, Thomas J. Pearsall Papers, 6.

plans to set up operations in the South.” Thomas received the information from Sylvia Porter, a white news reporter, who suggested some of the companies were the largest “ ‘blue-chip’ corporations,” in the country. Porter could not divulge the names of individual companies because “the information was given to her in confidence.” Thomas went on tell Wheeler that “It looks as though I am not able to deliver what I thought I might be able to get from Miss Porter,” but “I think she is perfectly honest in her statement, just as I will have to be when we release the results of our [industrial] survey.” Like Porter had, Thomas also “promised a good many multi-plant corporations” that he would “not mention their names in the final report, except with their permission.” Yet, Thomas gave his assurance that Wheeler would “certainly be safe in saying [to the legislature] that a good many important industries are now delaying their plans to expand further in the South because of the disturbed race relations picture.”

In another appearance before the North Carolina Legislature in July, Wheeler represented a group opposed to the Pearsall Plan called the “Negro Committee of One Hundred Counties.” The committee was a collective of black civic organizations from around the state spearheaded by Louis E. Austin. The state NAACP and other organizations also came out strongly against the Pearsall Plan and vowed to challenge it at every turn. Governor Hodges later explained that the Pearsall Plan was “designed [specifically] to discourage attempts by the NAACP and other groups to force integration.”⁵⁸² In his speech, Wheeler continued to make his case by presenting more details about what continued

⁵⁸²“Report of the North Carolina Advisory Committee on Education,” April 5, 1956, Thomas J. Pearsall Papers; Ralph Karpinos “ ‘With all Deliberate Speed’: The Brown vs. Board of Education Decision,” 13; Luther H. Hodges, *Businessman in the Statehouse: Six Years as Governor of North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 93.

segregation ultimately meant to North Carolina's economic future. While white leaders saw the Pearsall Plan as a surefire way to preserve public education, Wheeler denounced the plan because it would "actually undermine and destroy the public school system." He called the proposed amendment "unsound, [and] impractical" as it would fail to "comply with the Mandate of the U. S. Supreme Court with reference to segregation in the public schools."

This time, Wheeler gave his argument more substance by pointing to specific obstacles to North Carolina's industrial development. He argued that the "publicity given racial conflict in the school controversy was driving prospective industry away [because they were] deeply concerned over the economic condition of our state which last year ranked 48th among the states in average weekly earnings paid to manufacturing employees." Wheeler again asserted that the economic status of North Carolina's one million blacks was "key to prosperity and further industrial growth in our state." Wheeler also described the desegregation crisis to the lawmakers by pointing to the expert opinion of Julius A. Thomas. Wheeler discussed Thomas's industrial on twenty of the country's top industrial companies who "stated frankly their reluctance to construct additional plant facilities in those Southern States where local conditions prevent them from following the same non-discriminatory employment policies followed by their plants elsewhere in the United States." Wheeler used on example about a company with plans for a huge facility in North Carolina, which would employ some 4,000 people, but the company changed its mind and built the facility in Omaha, Nebraska because of North Carolina's continued racial strife. Wheeler used the example as evidence that the "pattern which we follow in respect to our schools leads also to economic suicide for the entire state. Not only are our prospects poor for obtaining new industries, but we stand to lose some of the industry that has already located in our state but

whose management is already dissatisfied with the present employment pattern and is also fearful that the children of its key personnel may not be able to obtain satisfactory schooling within our state.” Wheeler also explained that “hysteria generated by certain forces within the state has not blinded the vision of many industrial leaders and thoughtful citizens of our State who do not favor enactment of the proposed bills and who are deeply concerned lest our extreme reluctance to adhere to the democratic principles shall surely lead us to economic ruin.”⁵⁸³ Despite what looked to be a credible argument by Wheeler, his appeal fell on deaf ears again as legislators approved the measure, sending it to voters in a constitutional amendment that fall.

In a statewide election in September, voters made the Pearsall Plan official. The Pearsall Plan passed overwhelmingly across North Carolina, but the votes cast in Durham represented tighter margins. The people registered in the city’s all-black precincts voted against the amendment in line with Wheeler and the DCNA’s recommendations.⁵⁸⁴ With the Pearsall Plan just around the corner, Durham’s black leadership fell short in persuading the school board to work out an immediate plan for school desegregation. As early as June 1956, the DCNA contacted the school board warning them that if the board did not take steps to end racial segregation in its schools, black parents would take matters into their own hands by submitting reassignment applications on their children’s behalf.⁵⁸⁵ On October 12, the DCNA and affiliated organizations sent another petition to the school board with 740

⁵⁸³Luther H. Hodges, *Businessman in the Statehouse*, 99; Ralph Karpinos, “ ‘With all Deliberate Speed’: The Brown vs. Board of Education Decision,” 13.

⁵⁸⁴Ralph Karpinos, “ ‘With all Deliberate Speed’: The Brown vs. Board of Education Decision,” 13.

⁵⁸⁵“Memorandum from the DCNA’s Education Committee to the North Carolina Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights,” June 16, 1959, folder 622, box 49, in the William A. Clement Papers #4024, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2.

signatures from blacks to get them to outline a school desegregation plan. As expected, the school board rejected the appeal at its November meeting, as it stated, because its desegregation committee wanted more time to study the issue and work out a plan that would provide Durham students with the best educational opportunities.⁵⁸⁶ With the passage of the constitutional amendment, North Carolina effectively completed its resistance to *Brown*.

In the meantime, Wheeler and the DCNA laid out an overall strategy to provide parents in the black community with information about the Pupil Assignment Act and the school reassignment process. They set-up a responsible committee, independent from the direct influence of DCNA and NAACP lawyers so as to avoid breaking North Carolina's solicitation laws.⁵⁸⁷ The special committee provided powers-of-attorney forms to all parents who wanted to request reassignment of their children to white schools. Although parents had to take the lead in filing reassignment applications, in the event the board denied their reassignment applications, the attorneys would already have the authority to attend appeal hearings and initiate court proceedings on behalf of parents and their children. Between the fall of 1956 and summer of 1957, sixty-five parents granted powers-of-attorney to DCNA and NAACP lawyers John Wheeler, Conrad O. Pearson, William A. Marsh, Jr., M. Hugh Thompson, and Floyd McKissick.⁵⁸⁸

In the years following *Brown*, North Carolina made little progress toward school desegregation. While John Wheeler's fundamental ideas about desegregation, full

⁵⁸⁶*McKissick v. Durham City Board of Education* 176 F. Supp. 3 (1959) U. S. Dist. LEXIS 2749, 4; Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, November 12, 1956.

⁵⁸⁷M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 125; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 71.

⁵⁸⁸*Ibid.*

citizenship, and their link to New South prosperity remained intact, he had to consider other approaches to solving the real problem of integration. In fact, in March 1956, Wheeler attended a strategy conference in Capahosic, Virginia sponsored by the Phelps-Stokes Fund and its executive director, F. D. Patterson. As Patterson told Wheeler, the purpose of the conference would be to “examine critically the serious tensions which have arisen incident to the several decisions of the Supreme Court,” and to brainstorm about realistic solutions to bring about school desegregation and better employment and housing opportunities for blacks. Other well known black leaders at the conference included Ralph Bunche, Rufus E. Clement, Lester Granger, William Hastie, Thurgood Marshall, Benjamin E. Mays, Robert C. Weaver, and Roy Wilkins. Wheeler wanted the conference to also focus on “the desires of southern Negroes for full citizenship and for unrestricted movement,” as “little is being said by white or Negro southerners concerning the necessity of preserving the ideals of democracy and creating a favorable climate in which to implement the mandate of the Supreme Court.” After attending the conference, Wheeler felt it “provided an excellent medium for the exchange of ideas.”⁵⁸⁹

In May 1957, turning point came three years after *Brown* when Wheeler had spotlight yet again trying to convince white leaders why segregation hurt North Carolina economically. He appeared as an invited speaker at the eighth annual North Carolina Editorial Writers Conference held in Greensboro, North Carolina. The conference theme was “Three Years After the May 17 Supreme Court Decision, What Next in N.C.?” The answer

⁵⁸⁹Letter from F. D. Patterson to Wheeler, January 16, 1956, folder 10, box 83, Wheeler Papers; Letter from F. D. Patterson to Wheeler, January 31, 1956, folder 10, box 83, Wheeler Papers; Letter from Wheeler to Dr. F. D. Patterson, February 21, 1956; Letter from Wheeler to F. D. Patterson, March 6, 1956, folder 10, box 83, Wheeler Papers; Letter from Wheeler to F. D. Patterson, March 6, 1956, folder 10, box 83, Wheeler Papers; “Negro Leaders Hold Meet at Holly Knoll,” *Carolina Times*, March 10, 1956.

to that question from Wheeler's perspective changed little, if at all, since 1954. This time, however, Wheeler was frustrated that white North Carolinians seemed to be satisfied with what he described as the same backwardness; as he put it, the South's "proudest possession has been inherent in cries of rebellion against the basic principles of democracy, and that while we have been busily engaged in waving the confederate flag and giving rebel yells, the rest of the country had moved on ahead of us in every phase of social, economic, and intellectual development."

As demonstrated by his talk to the editorial writers, Wheeler still believed that desegregation was the only path to North Carolina and the South's economic prosperity. First, Wheeler argued that North Carolina's public schools would continue to suffer because the state spent far too much money on a dual educational system. Despite North Carolina's large expenditures on education, it did not produce black or white students who, on the whole, achieved at or above the national standards; as such, there was little return on this investment. Second, just as he did with the state legislature in 1955 and 1956, Wheeler again maintained that North Carolina could not succeed economically when one-fourth of its population (blacks) did not have full access to all employment opportunities because of restrictions placed on their education. Wheeler drew the audience's attention to the 1950 census figures that indicated, "North Carolina's 1,000,000 Negroes [had] an annual median family income which [was] approximately one-half of the annual median income of white families in the state." This severely limited black earning and spending power. Moreover, Wheeler explained that "Those who would brush aside this [economic] argument by pointing to the rapid growth and industrial development of the South within recent years, it should be sobering to learn that the movement of major industries into our region may have already

begun to run its course[.] [Additionally,] many [of the] large corporations are now fully aware of the tremendous burden which racial barriers impose upon the tax structure thereby making it necessary for a relatively small number of persons and corporations to support this structure.” Wheeler also criticized the editorial writers in attendance, urging them to approach the school desegregation issue more objectively. While many southern newspapers reported the racial strife accompanying school desegregation in places such as Clinton, Tennessee, complained Wheeler, those same newspapers only reported the *success* in small print, in the back of their newspapers.⁵⁹⁰ By way of an implied threat before he concluded his talk, Wheeler remarked, “In my humble opinion, North Carolina’s legislative attempts have not been subjected to a full court test of their constitutionality.”⁵⁹¹

Wheeler’s talk was effective in many ways. Both white and black newspapers across the state re-printed significant excerpts from his speech. In his talk, Wheeler tried in earnest to get whites to understand the frustrations and disappointments on the part of blacks. He presented an intellectual argument about why blacks wanted desegregation and their full citizenship rights: so they could shoulder their burden of their economic responsibilities in North Carolina and in the South. After the conference, Wheeler wrote to his fellow panelists, second Pearsall Committee co-chair William T. Joyner and attorney Irving Carlyle, adding how much he enjoyed his participation on the panel. In his letter to Joyner, Wheeler acknowledged, “Although our views are not the same on some of [the school desegregation] matters, I was impressed by the fact that whenever we have an opportunity for discussion, the atmosphere of courtesy and mutual respect invariably makes it possible for us to get closer

⁵⁹⁰Ibid., 10.

⁵⁹¹Ibid; original underlining.

together.” Joyner’s response to Wheeler was brief, but cordial, as he noted, “I think that discussion of these matters in an atmosphere of calm and mutual respect is always helpful.” Carlyle, on the other hand, promised Wheeler he would take his comments a bit further. Carlyle planned to address the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Council on Human Relations so that he could “try to help out the situation in Charlotte some by saying some of the things [Wheeler had outlined] with a little different approach.”

Wheeler’s May talk was also effective because of the way he outlined blacks’ desire for full citizenship and “freedom of movement”; he articulated blacks’ willingness to use mass, direct action protests to obtain these rights. Wheeler continued to remind members from the N. C. Editorial Writers Association that blacks were not interested in obtaining “some” of their citizenship rights, but all of them—immediately. He emphasized this point to William Snider, associate editor of the *Greensboro Daily News* and the Editorial Writers Conference chairman, when Snider wrote to Wheeler about possible school desegregation in several North Carolina cities beginning in the fall.⁵⁹²

Snider’s other immediate concern dealt with direct action protests because as he was “much disturbed” by what he described as “the NAACP’s decision to press for mixing in swimming pools as part of its Summer campaign.” He wrote, “this will certainly raise emotional issues that should not be raised at this time, and I sincerely hope there can be some understanding between the races on such matters.”⁵⁹³ Wheeler dismissed evidence that hinted at the NAACP’s involvement in such a program, although it was true that the NAACP

⁵⁹²Letter from William Snider to Wheeler, June 28, 1957, Wheeler papers, personal correspondence folder 10 of 14 (1950-1957), John Hervey Wheeler correspondence box (1952-1954; 1957-1959).

⁵⁹³*Ibid.*

endorsed actions that summer to integrate swimming pools in North Carolina. Besides providing clarification to Snider that the NAACP was not involved in the summer campaign, Wheeler had no problems with mass, direct action protests. As he stated:

these efforts are just another indication of the widespread changes in the thinking of the masses of Negro people. As indicated in my talk to the Editorial Writers Association, the southern Negro's image of himself is changing rapidly and has reached the point where he sees himself as a full blown American citizen whose movements must not be restricted in any manner. This may be shocking to many white southerners who as yet have not come to the point of understanding that it is reasonable for a Negro citizen to expect the same freedom of movement here (in the South) as he has enjoyed in the Armed Forces and in other states which are more liberal and have, within recent years, enacted legislation which guards effectively the Negro citizens' rights to education, housing, employment, travel, hotel accommodations, etc. on a non-segregated basis.⁵⁹⁴

Snider said he understood and sympathized with the position of blacks, but he was also disturbed "considerably that the best efforts of many moderate whites may go for naught in this critical time simply because some individual Negroes may try to move too rapidly."⁵⁹⁵ While trying to explain his position, Snider continued to talk in terms suggestive of white moderation, saying "I am aware of the fact that white Southerners have been negligent about trying to understand the Negro's dilemma but at the same time any effort to move far beyond what is acceptable to at least part of the white majority, it seems to me, will be futile and foolish. Even the courts realize the potential tragedy for a people which could foolishly decide to destroy their school systems and their public recreation facilities rather than submit to radical change."⁵⁹⁶ In his position, Wheeler especially challenged the South's white moderates to shed their paternalistic ideas about gradualism because blacks now recognized

⁵⁹⁴Letter from Wheeler to William Snider, July 2, 1957, Wheeler papers, personal correspondence folder 10 of 14 (1950-1957), John Hervey Wheeler correspondence box (1952-1954; 1957-1959).

⁵⁹⁵Ibid.

⁵⁹⁶Ibid.

they deserved full citizenship rights, which he saw as important to the larger goal of black economic empowerment and New South prosperity. Wheeler's point to Snider and those attending the Editorial Writers Conference took on greater meaning in other instances that summer. On June 23, for example, a group of activists in Durham staged a sit-in demonstration at a local ice cream parlor. This form of direct action proved how real Wheeler's warnings were and that blacks grew tired of waiting on whites to acknowledge their first-class citizenship rights. They were now willing to interrupt the flow of economic progress in their own way. Throughout his career Wheeler had many interactions with white moderates, and in many ways he believed that by pushing them to re-think their position and ease their willingness to support more far-reaching developments, it would help extend additional citizenship rights to black Americans. In this way, Wheeler and others not only struggled to get whites to remove segregation barriers in openly hostile settings, but it was also important to get self-proclaimed white moderates to change their ways.

Snider also wrote to Wheeler because he had confidential information about informal desegregation meeting, which took place among the Charlotte, Winston-Salem, and Greensboro school boards. He wrote to Wheeler in confidence: "I have been sitting on several meetings of the school boards of some of the larger Piedmont cities, and I believe there may be some pupil assignments across racial lines this Fall."⁵⁹⁷ In June, following the Editorial Writers Conference, the boards met and agreed to desegregate their public schools and planned to make announcements simultaneously later that July. Snider, alongside other news editors from Charlotte and Winston-Salem, participated in the informal talks and all

⁵⁹⁷Ibid.

agreed to withhold reports about the meetings until after the desegregation announcement.⁵⁹⁸ Snider and the other newspaper editors probably relayed Wheeler's warnings from the May 17 Editorial Writers Conference to the three school boards, particularly his emphasis that the Pupil Assignment Act and Pearsall Plan had not been subjected to constitutional scrutiny in federal courts. This ingenious act gave Wheeler a direct influence on North Carolina's first wave of school desegregation.⁵⁹⁹ The city school boards in Charlotte, Greensboro, and Winston-Salem, resolved to desegregate their schools on a "token" basis beginning in August.⁶⁰⁰ Wheeler had been privy to the school desegregation plans for quite some time. As legal historian Davison M. Douglas notes, "That this early desegregation would come in these three cities was not surprising. Each was a Piedmont city, removed from the large African American population of eastern North Carolina; each constituted one of the state's largest urban areas; and each had a thriving local economy. All of these conditions contributed to an environment in which modest racial change was most likely."⁶⁰¹ Taking Douglas's reasoning into consideration, it would seem that Durham, too, was ripe for school desegregation that same year as well.

BATTLING THE DURHAM CITY SCHOOL BOARD OVER DESEGREGATION

During the 1957-58 school year, Wheeler and the DCNA acted on their threat on the to the school board a year earlier. In the group of sixty-five parents who gave Wheeler and

⁵⁹⁸William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 65.; Davison M. Douglass, *Reading, Writing, Race*, 44.

⁵⁹⁹"Penalties of Segregation," 7.

⁶⁰⁰William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 65; Davison M. Douglass, *Reading, Writing, Race: School Desegregation in Charlotte, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 44.

⁶⁰¹Davison M. Douglas, *Reading, Writing, and Race*, 44-45.

others powers-of-attorney to help them get their children reassigned on a non-segregated basis, fourteen actually petitioned the school board to assign their children to white schools. The school board waited until the last-minute, a customary practice during the years following the Pupil Assignment Act (1955) and Pearsall Plan (1956), to provide school assignments on August 12. As anticipated, the school board did not assign any black students to white schools. After the school board assignments, the nine parents submitted reassignment applications to get their children be transferred to white schools. The school board promptly denied all nine reassignment applications.⁶⁰²

Between September and October, the attorneys—Wheeler, C. O. Pearson, F. B. McKissick., M. Hugh Thompson, and William A. Marsh, Jr.—appealed to the Durham school board to re-hear the requests for reassignment; in each instance, the school board refused to grant a transfer requests. By mid-October, the attorneys contacted state Superintendent of Public Instruction, Charles F. Carroll, with hopes that he could coerce the school board to do away with the segregated school system. Carroll turned down their request, stating he had no authority to intervene in the local school matter.⁶⁰³

At this point, frustrations expressed by Wheeler earlier in the year transitioned to renewed vigor toward plans to challenge the legality of North Carolina's school assignment laws. DCNA and NAACP leaders threatened the Durham school board with a school

⁶⁰²*McKissick, et. al v. Durham City Board of Education* 176 F. Supp. 3 (1959) U. S. Dist. LEXIS 2749, 4-5; Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, August 12, September 3, 1957; M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 126; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 71.

⁶⁰³Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, September 9, 17, 1957; Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, October 14, 1957; *McKissick, et. al. v. Durham City Board of Education* 176 F. Supp. 3 (1959) U. S. Dist. LEXIS 2749, 8.

integration suit.⁶⁰⁴ In order to avoid the negative publicity that would surround another school lawsuit, several black and white city leaders came together at the end of August to discuss the city's deteriorating race relations. Wheeler, alongside Asa Spaulding, Dr. DCNA executive secretary Caldwell E. Boulware, and R. N. Harris, represented the black leadership at the first meeting, which ended with little progress; the group agreed to meet again in the near future. After the second meeting, which Wheeler deliberately elected not to attend citing "business responsibilities," the group made a request to Mayor Emmanuel Evans to appoint a Human Relations Committee designed to mitigate the school desegregation issue. In November, the mayor and city council formally established the Mayor's Human Relations Committee (HRC). Watts Hill, Jr., a self-identified white moderate and an influential leader and state senator, opposed the idea because he believed that a Human Relations Committee would have no power to implement any decisions it made. Black leaders such as businessmen A. T. Spaulding, Harris, and William Jesse Kennedy, Jr., believed the HRC would help improve communications between white and black leaders on the school desegregation issue. More aggressive businessmen such as Wheeler and John Stewart showed little interest in the HRC because they saw it as a stumbling block to their ongoing desegregation efforts, which they planned to take into the courtroom in January 1958.⁶⁰⁵

After some consideration, a group from the DCNA and NAACP met with the HRC in February 1958. At the meeting, black leaders expressed their willingness to help the school board devise a satisfactory school desegregation plan. The HRC agreed to arrange a meeting

⁶⁰⁴M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 126; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 71.

⁶⁰⁵M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 126-130.; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 72.

with the school board. Following the meeting with the HRC, black leaders decided postponed their plans for litigation, something they hoped to avoid from the outset because of litigation costs, in order to give the HRC an opportunity to intervene.⁶⁰⁶

Despite the Durham school board's continued delay regarding school desegregation, on March 4, the city council finally surrendered its longstanding "white only" school board when it unanimously voted to appoint Rencher Harris as its first black school board member. Black representation on the school board had been something Wheeler and others in the DCNA had struggled for since the 1930s. Harris made history five years earlier when he became the city's first black city councilman.⁶⁰⁷ The city council's decision to appoint Harris to the board may have come as an attempt to divert attention away from Durham's lack of action along the lines of school desegregation. Their decision also came as a half-hearted attempt to appease black city leaders who grew increasingly discontent with the apathy among the white power-structure. With Harris now on the school board, Wheeler and DCNA leaders saw it as a step closer to real school desegregation in Durham. However, the council only appointed Harris through 1959. He continued to reject black reassignment applications to white schools alongside other school board members. Perhaps Harris continued to reject school reassignment applications to ensure that he received a full term on

⁶⁰⁶“Memorandum from the DCNA's education committee to the North Carolina Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights,” June 16, 1959, William A. Clement Papers, 3; M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 130-131.; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 72; Chris D. Howard, “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize,” 27; Jack M. McElreath, “The Cost of Opportunity,” 174.

⁶⁰⁷Robert Joseph Cannon, “The Organization and Growth of Black Political Participation,” 95; M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 131.; Jean Bradley Anderson, *Durham County*, 432; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 72-73.

the school board a year later.⁶⁰⁸ Wheeler and the DCNA fully supported Harris's appointment to the school board. Wheeler also viewed Harris's appointment as a way for black leaders to have a voice in decisions affecting Durham schools. In a sense, Wheeler viewed the appointment as a group appointment and reminded Harris about this when Harris made decisions without consulting him and the city's other black leaders.

The March 10 meeting between the HRC and the Durham school board failed to shift the board's stance on school desegregation. With confidence in the HRC already in doubt, the committee sent five representatives to speak with the school board. During the meeting, the school board responded in cold silence when the HRC explained that their purpose for arranging the meeting was to work out a way where black leaders could meet informally with the school board to arrange plans for school desegregation.⁶⁰⁹ Since the school board refused to respond outright, the HRC spokesman insisted on some kind of immediate reply from the board. In commenting on the school board's silence, school board chairman Frank L. Fuller clarified that they should " 'interpret it simply as silence,' " ending what turned out to be an unproductive meeting.⁶¹⁰ At that very same meeting, no less, Harris took his oath of office as the city's first black school board member. In response to the school board's blatant disregard for black concerns over school desegregation, Wheeler and other lawyers representing the DCNA and NAACP filed a lawsuit against the school board, *McKissick, et.*

⁶⁰⁸Robert Joseph Cannon, "The Organization and Growth of Black Political Participation," 95; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 72-73.

⁶⁰⁹Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, March 10, 1958; M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 131-132; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 72; Jack M. McElreath, "The Cost of Opportunity," 174.

⁶¹⁰M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 131-132; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 72; Jack M. McElreath, "The Cost of Opportunity," 174.

al. v. Durham City Board of Education (1959), in May. They wanted a court injunction to force the board to provide a plan to desegregate the city schools.⁶¹¹

In 1958, the Durham school board added to their indifference regarding school desegregation later in 1958. In an effort to address overcrowded conditions in black elementary schools during the fall of the 1958-59 school year, the Durham school board notified parents at W. G. Pearson Elementary School that they would hold double-sessions. When black parents at the school opposed the double-session arrangement, the parents designated new DCNA education committee chairman William A. Clement to negotiate a compromise. The school board decided to bus three classes of black school children miles away to attend the black Walltown Elementary School. When parents complained about the board's one school bus for transporting children, which meant the bus had to make two trips between both schools and students had to leave earlier in the morning to make it to the Walltown School on time; the education committee was able to get an additional bus. Despite these temporary remedies, the school board decided to re-open the all-white Old Morehead School at the start of the 1959-60 school year to solve the overcrowding problem.⁶¹² Earlier that summer, a school board subcommittee with responsibility to examine the Old Morehead School, advised the board to keep the building unoccupied for at

⁶¹¹ Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, March 10, 1958; M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 132-133; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 73; Ralph Karpinos, " 'With all Deliberate Speed,' " 18; Jack M. McElreath, "The Cost of Opportunity," 174-175.

⁶¹²"Memorandum from the DCNA's education committee to the North Carolina Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights," June 16, 1959, William A. Clement Papers, 3-4; Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, September 8, November 10, 1958; "DCNA Education Committee Year-End-Report," 1959, William A. Clement papers, folder 621, box 49, 1; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 70.; M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 133; Jack M. McElreath, "The Cost of Opportunity," 187-189.

least a year until significant improvements could be made.⁶¹³ The school board abandoned the Old Morehead School in 1956 because it “ ‘is the oldest school site now in use in the City School System’ ” and now located in “ ‘a manufacturing area.’ ”⁶¹⁴ The school board explained then that it was more “ ‘economical’ to build a new school than ‘to enlarge and renovate the existing building.’ ”⁶¹⁵ The Morehead School PTA added that the school’s location caused “ ‘travel inconveniences,’ ” and in order to get to their classes, children had to “ ‘pass through the furnace room and auditorium.’ ”⁶¹⁶ Instead, the school board proposed spending \$500,000 to build a new white elementary school to replace the Old Morehead School indefinitely with no intentions to “use it again as a public school.”⁶¹⁷

The Old Morehead School issue unleashed a firestorm of opposition from Durham’s black community. It also strengthened their case for school desegregation since several vacant classrooms went unused white elementary schools near the W. G. Pearson. The DCNA and other black organizations commissioned an investigative committee to perform a thorough physical inspection of the Old Morehead School. On March 12, the DCNA

⁶¹³Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, June 9, 1958.

⁶¹⁴Excerpts from “Facts for Voters in the School Bond Election to be held on April 16, 1956,” presented by the Durham City and County School Boards,” quoted in a report presented to the school board by a group of civic and professional organizations including: the Durham PTA Council, the Whitted School PTA, Pearson School investigative committee of the Morehead School, Durham NAACP, Burton School PTA, and DCNA, April 13, 1959, William A. Clement Papers, 3; DCNA Education Committee “Report on the Question of Reopening the Old Morehead School as a Negro School,” March 12, 1959, William A. Clement Papers, 2.

⁶¹⁵Excerpts from “Facts for Voters in the School Bond Election,” 3.

⁶¹⁶Excerpts from a *Durham Sun* article, March 29, 1956, quoted in a report presented to the school board by a group of civic and professional organizations including: the Durham PTA Council, the Whitted School PTA, Pearson School investigative committee of the Morehead School, Durham NAACP, Burton School PTA, and DCNA, April 13, 1959, William A. Clement Papers, 3.

⁶¹⁷“Report presented to the school board,” April 13, 1959, 4; DCNA Education Committee “Report on the Question of Reopening the Old Morehead School as a Negro School,” March 12, 1959, William A. Clement Papers, 1.

approved the committee's the findings and recommendations at one of its meetings. They criticized the school board for entertaining the idea to re-open the Old Morehead School after neglect and deterioration during in the three years after its closure. The DCNA presented its concluding report at the April 13 school board meeting. "What has happened," they asked rhetorically, "to make this site or its building become suitable for re-opening as a public school? Nothing."⁶¹⁸ Their report revealed an extensive list of major problems including "cracks in walls...leaking through bricks...no fire escapes...no sufficient outlets...inadequate ventilation...inadequate lights...unsanitary conditions...[and] wood floors."⁶¹⁹ Moreover, the group insisted that the unpaved streets combined with a heavy traffic flow would jeopardize student safety. In their most important objection to re-opening the Old Morehead School, they would not support opening another Jim Crow school it contradicted their agreement with the *Brown* decision.⁶²⁰

During the April meeting, about seventy blacks came to oppose reopening Old Morehead School, but the board gave no indication it would abandon its plans to reopen the school.⁶²¹ In fact, school board chairman Frank L. Fuller re-iterated that the board would work diligently in seeking a solution to its overcrowding problem. The school board's plans to re-open the Old Morehead School had more to do with preventing integration than it did

⁶¹⁸DCNA Education Committee "Report on the Question of Reopening the Old Morehead School as a Negro School," March 12, 1959, William A. Clement Papers, 1; "Report presented to the school board," April 13, 1959, 4; Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, April 13, 1959.

⁶¹⁹"Report presented to the school board," April 13, 1959, 2-3; DCNA Education Committee "Report on the Question of Reopening the Old Morehead School as a Negro School," March 12, 1959, William A. Clement Papers, 1.

⁶²⁰"Report presented to the school board," April 13, 1959, 4.

⁶²¹"DCNA Education Committee Report Year-End-Report," 1959, William A. Clement papers, folder 621, box 49, 1-2.

think the people of Durham would cooperate and integrate the schools. If we maintain we are not ready, then we'll never make a start.' »⁶²⁴

Still unwilling to abandon its plans to re-open the Old Morehead School, the board arranged a private meeting with select black leaders on May 6. The invitees included: William A. Clement, D. Eric Moore, Dr. Alfonso Elder, William Jesse Kennedy, Jr., Dr. Albert L. Turner, and Dr. Rose B. Browne. To Clement and the DCNA's dismay, the school board initially decided against inviting members from the education committee or any representatives in attendance at the April school board meeting. As an afterthought, and at board member Rencher Harris's suggestion, the board extended an invitation to William A. Clement and D. Eric Moore. As chairman of the original group that submitted the formal protest against re-opening the Old Morehead School, Clement wanted them to postpone the meeting because he received such late notice and could not attend because he had an out-of-town business appointment. Nevertheless, the group met as scheduled.⁶²⁵

Once word reached Wheeler about the informal meeting, he telephoned Harris on the morning of May 6, livid that such a meeting was scheduled. During their phone conversation, Wheeler accused Harris of acting too independently by "suggesting a committee without consultation" with him. Wheeler also criticized Harris for his failure to consider "the manifest desires to serve the best interest of Negro citizens."⁶²⁶ That morning's

⁶²⁴“DCNA Education Committee Report Year-End-Report,” 1959, William A. Clement papers, folder 621, box 49, 1-2.

⁶²⁵Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, May 4, 1959; “DCNA Education Committee Report Year-End-Report,” 1959, 2; M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 135-136; Letter from William A. Clement to Lew W. Hannen, May 6, 1959, William A. Clement papers, folder 622, box 49; Jack M. McElreath, “The Cost of Opportunity,” 190-191.

⁶²⁶Letter from Harris to Wheeler, May 6, 1959, miscellaneous Durham folder, miscellaneous box (N.C. Fund, Durham, Recreation Advisory Committee), Wheeler papers; an identical letter can also be found in the Rencher

intense phone conversation upset Harris so much that he felt compelled to write down his response in a letter to Wheeler. Harris reminded Wheeler that “I reserve the right to act without such consultation under circumstances which require such action.”⁶²⁷ Harris considered the accusations unfounded because “in fact, in the matter of education and my service on the Board of Education, I could use my frequent consultations with you to prove that I have not gone into matters without consultation.”⁶²⁸ Harris dismissed notions about his own self motivations and lectured Wheeler about the latter’s leadership, pointing out that “leadership and a desire for power do not go hand-in-hand. Your expressions indicate that you have a desire for power and, in my opinion, this desire hurts your leadership – which I admit and for which I have the greatest respect.”⁶²⁹

During the May 6 meeting, all invitees attended, except for Clement. Clement sent Reverend J. A. Brown in his place. Other non-invitees at the meeting included Reverend R. L. Speaks and Louis Austin.⁶³⁰ School board chairman Frank L. Fuller reminded the group that under no circumstances would they discuss school desegregation, only the possibility of reopening the Old Morehead School. However, the black delegation ignored Fuller’s ground-rules; members made it clear that they agreed with the April protest for school board officials to keep the Old Morehead School closed—they reached this decision the day before in a meeting with Wheeler and Clement. Moreover, they pointed to school desegregation as

N. Harris Papers; Robert Joseph Cannon, “The Organization and Growth of Black Political Participation,” 96-97; Marjorie Anne Elvin Foy, “Durham in Black and White: School Desegregation in Durham, North Carolina, 1954-1963,” 33.

⁶²⁷Letter from Harris to Wheeler, May 6, 1959, Wheeler papers.

⁶²⁸Ibid.

⁶²⁹Ibid.

⁶³⁰Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, May 6, 1959.

the only way to address the overcrowding. Louis Austin expressed all of their general feelings when he said, “ ‘Not one of us...would go back to our people and recommend the use of that old building. We would be repudiated and scorned if we did. Integration is the answer to crowded Negro schools, and it’s time action was taken.’ ”⁶³¹ The black community’s ability to defend its position in a united-front, despite internal conflict among its leadership, forced the board to give up its efforts to reopen the Old Morehead School. The board resolved to place the building up for sale, which it eventually did in 1960.⁶³²

The disagreements about strategy did not hinder progress toward racial equality because it was a fundamental system of checks and balances. It was to also ensure that Harris did not make decisions that affected the entire black community without at least consulting the individuals responsible for studying the issue from the beginning so that a reasonable compromise could be reached. In the above instance, the decision was not minor because it had larger implications on school desegregation, and was counterproductive because it concerned re-opening an abandoned white school to be used by black children—a customary hand-me-down during Jim Crow. The whole ordeal was another underhanded move by the school board to meet with black leaders who they deemed the spokesmen for black education in Durham.

With the school integration suit still pending in federal court, black leaders intensified their battle for school desegregation. During the April DCNA meeting attorney Conrad Pearson suggested that they take more drastic measures in order to achieve school

⁶³¹M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 136.; “DCNA Education Committee Report Year-End-Report,” 1959, 2; Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, May 6, 1959; Jack M. McElreath, “The Cost of Opportunity,” 190-191.

⁶³²M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 136; Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, August 4, 1959, January 28, 1960; Jack McElreath, “The Cost of Opportunity,” 191.

integration. Instead of filing a limited number of school integration suits, they needed to consider a strategy that entailed filing mass school reassignment application at once. Pearson reasoned that a school integration suit would prove more effective if a larger number of school reassignment applications were filed simultaneously.⁶³³ Black leaders agreed on the new strategy and its potential to succeed in gaining some level of school integration, even if they lost the pending school integration suit.⁶³⁴ The DCNA and other affiliated groups called mass meetings and attended local church services to encourage as many black parents as possible submit reassignment applications for the upcoming school year.⁶³⁵

Black leaders reached another decision that spring as well. Wheeler explained their decision in a lengthy off-the-record meeting he had with Watts Hill, Jr., which followed a meeting about a separate community project. He told Hill that black leaders had done all they could to cooperate with the white power-structure when it came to progressive developments in Durham. But now, Wheeler explained, until the black community's desegregation demands were seriously considered, from that point on, they would no longer support such projects, however good for Durham as a whole. Wheeler informed Hill that black leaders would hold-the-line until their desegregation objectives were met.⁶³⁶

In early August, the school board continued with school assignments based on its past policies. Rencher Harris, the school board's only black member, pleaded with the school board to re-consider its school assignment policy by taking into account the need for school

⁶³³M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 137.

⁶³⁴*Ibid.*, 137-138.

⁶³⁵*Ibid.*, 138.

⁶³⁶*Ibid.*, 139.

integration.⁶³⁷ Harris reminded the school board, to no-avail, that “ ‘after five years of waiting, steps must be taken in compliance with the Supreme Court’s [*Brown*] decision.’ ”⁶³⁸ Once the school board voted on school assignments for the upcoming year, Harris wanted the record to reflect his opposition to that year’s school assignment plan. He offered an amendment that failed to get a motion, which encouraged the school board to reaffirm its resolution that “requests for reassignment will be considered without respect to race or color.”⁶³⁹

The black community followed through with its plan. To the surprise of white school board members, black parents filed 225 reassignment applications and the school board promptly denied 201. As for the remaining twenty-four applications, the school board rejected sixteen and approved eight. Durham finally joined other Piedmont cities in token school desegregation.⁶⁴⁰ In contrast to the other piedmont cities, blacks in Durham had to force their local board to desegregate schools first through agitation in public forums, then through legal pressure in federal court, and finally, by organizing a mass movement. Durham’s school board proved to be a persistent barrier to school desegregation in the city as well as an affront to any claims as a progressive city interested in New South prosperity.

In September, plaintiffs in *McKissick, et. al. v. Durham City Board of Education* (1959) lost their pending desegregation suit. Judge Edwin M. Stanley concluded that the

⁶³⁷ Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, August 4, 1959.

⁶³⁸ M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 139-140.

⁶³⁹ Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, August 4, 1959; “DCNA Education Committee Report Year-End-Report,” 1959, William A. Clement papers, folder 621, box 49, 3.

⁶⁴⁰ M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 140-143.; Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, August 25, 28, 1959; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 73; *Wheeler, et al. v. Durham City Board of Education* 196 F. Supp. 71 (1961) U. S. Dist. LEXIS 2710.

plaintiffs had not exhausted all of their administrative remedies. He then gave one of the plaintiffs, Joycelyn McKissick—daughter of attorney Floyd B. McKissick—the required ten days under the Pupil Assignment Act to exhaust all of her administrative remedies. In the reassignment application filed on her behalf, McKissick’s parents provided a specific school for her to transfer to and a reason (other than wanting school integration in general) why they wanted a transfer. In their initial reassignment applications, the other plaintiffs only expressed their desires to be transferred to white schools purely to desegregate schools; therefore, Stanley did not extend the same considerations to them. At a special September 17 school board meeting, school board chairman F. L. Fuller gave Floyd B. McKissick the floor and he then introduced his wife Evelyn and daughter Joycelyn alongside attorneys John Wheeler, M. Hugh Thompson, and C. L. Berry, Jr. Wheeler then addressed the school board, explaining that the reason for the group’s appearance was to “confirm request for reassignment of Joycelyn McKissick.”⁶⁴¹ Upon re-hearing McKissick’s case—and in light of the recently approved school reassignment applications—the school board approved her request for reassignment to the all-white Durham High School, making her the ninth student to desegregate Durham’s schools.⁶⁴²

The school board continued to reject 217 reassignment applications. Despite granting the nine reassignment requests that year, the school board refused to desegregate any elementary schools. The school board defended its decision to reject the remaining assignment requests based on the fact that many parents failed to attend their appeal hearings.

⁶⁴¹Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, September 17, 1959.

⁶⁴²*McKissick, et. al. vs. Durham City Board of Education* 176 F. Supp. 3 (1959) U. S. Dist. LEXIS 2749, 11; Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, September 17, 1959.

The board argued that to be represented by counsel did not comply with the stipulations in the Pupil Assignment Act; since those parents did not attend the appeal hearings, it constituted not exhausting all of their administrative remedies. The school board explained that it refused all reassignment applications from elementary school students on the grounds that new elementary school buildings would soon relieve overcrowding in elementary schools. Moreover, the board asserted, “changes in the pattern of school population makes it unwise and perhaps impossible to transfer numbers of elementary pupils at the present time.”⁶⁴³

As tokenism became a reality in Durham, it nevertheless marked a significant milestone for Wheeler and Durham’s black community. Yet, as Louis E. Austin summed it up:

This vicious and deliberate plan of token integration must not be accepted as a victory in Durham or elsewhere in North Carolina. It must be viewed in the light of its designers and that is to forever keeps [*sic*] the Negro from achieving his rights as a full-fledged American citizen. We must not be lulled to sleep by the sweet singing of the sirens of segregation.⁶⁴⁴

The fight must go on. It must go on without bitterness, without hatred, without malice. It must go on without rashness and without gloating or boasting but with a firm determination to secure for ourselves and future generations the God-given right to walk as free men in this country which our blood, sweat and tears have helped to build and preserve for nearly three centuries.⁶⁴⁵

Indeed, it only marked another step in the onward battle for freedom and New South prosperity.

⁶⁴³Durham City School Board Meeting Minutes, September 21, 1959; *Wheeler, et. al v. Durham City Board of Education* 196 F. Supp. 71 (1961) U.S. Dist. LEXIS 2710, 5.

⁶⁴⁴“Token Integration No Victory,” *Carolina Times*, September 5, 1959.

⁶⁴⁵*Ibid.*

“APARTHEID IMPLEMENTED BY EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA” AND NEW SOUTH PROSPERITY FROM A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

In late November 1959, John Wheeler left the country and traveled to South Africa as one of seven American fellows with the United States-South Africa Leader Exchange Program (US-SALEP). The US-SALEP was a private non-profit organization established in 1958 and sponsored by the African-American Institute with funding provided by individual and corporate donors from the U.S. and South Africa. The organization's purpose was to help in “understanding between South Africa and American professional, business and civic leaders” with the added bonus of fostering “closer relations between the people of the United States and [the continent of] Africa” more broadly. While Wheeler was the only businessman in his group, other American fellows that year included Hodding Carter, the *Delta Democrat-Times* newspaper editor from Greenville, Mississippi and Dr. Guy B. Johnson, the first SRC executive director and prominent anthropology professor at UNC. Historian Rayford W. Logan served as an American member on the US-SALEP's international management committee, the group responsible for selecting fellows.⁶⁴⁶

While Wheeler received the courtesies reserved for a foreign diplomat, he was well aware of the large-scale oppression evident in South Africa. In fact, one of his conditions in agreeing to be part of the exchange program was that it not be on a “ ‘second-class citizenship’ basis.” As part of his trip, Wheeler met with South African business leaders and attended the Ecumenical Church conference in Johannesburg as a representative from the

⁶⁴⁶“Wheeler's South African Trip Part of 24 Couple U.S.-African Exchange Program Sponsored by Private Organization to Better Relations,” *Carolina Times*, December 12, 1959; “Durham Banker in South Africa on Business Trip,” *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, December 12, 1959; “John H. Wheeler Arrives in Union of South Africa,” *Atlanta Daily World*, December 9, 1959; “N.C. Banker in South Africa for Church, Race Confabs,” *Chicago Defender*, December 19, 1959; Frank S. Loescher, “History of the United States-South Africa Leader Exchange Program, Inc.,” an address in Athens, Greece, June 28, 1966, US-SALEP box, folder 7, Wheeler Papers; “Wheeler Speaks on African Trip,” *Campus Echo*, February 26, 1960.

Methodist Episcopal Church.⁶⁴⁷ What he witnessed in his one month abroad helped him make an international connection as he recognized that the educational and economic problems faced at home were not confined to the South or the United States as a whole. Indeed, he realized that the problem of full citizenship and economic power took on global proportions as blacks throughout the Diaspora were continuously confronted with the suppression of their rights. In this way, Wheeler was able to link his New South prosperity ideals and the battle for freedom in America to similar freedom movements around the world, which sought to end racial segregation. For Wheeler, nowhere was this reality more present than in South Africa's rigid, raced-based system of segregation known as "apartheid," which paralleled Jim Crow segregation in the United States. South Africa's system of apartheid kept Afrikaners (native white Africans) and white Europeans at the top of the country's social, political, and economic hierarchies, while Africans (denoting the country's native black, coloured, and Indian citizens) were relegated to inferior positions.⁶⁴⁸

As Wheeler gained privileged insight into South Africa's apartheid system, he drew a vivid picture of the country's economic future. In 1960, Wheeler lectured on several college campuses, including Northwestern University where the anthropologist Melville Herskovits pioneered African Studies programs. In an article later published in the *Journal of Negro Education* about his experiences in South Africa, Wheeler explained that the South African government enacted legislation in the 1950s designed to completely restructure its educational system with the sole purpose of bolstering its relatively new system of apartheid.

⁶⁴⁷Ibid.

⁶⁴⁸Aran S. MacKinnon, *The Making of South Africa: Culture and Politics* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004); Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (Boston and New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1994).

Wheeler wrote that the Bantu Education Act (1953), in particular, gave the South African government central control over African education, lowered teachers' pay in African schools, and reduced curriculum standards that promoted training as low-wage laborers. It also called for Africans to pay for their own educations while whites received free schooling until high school, and severely restricted African admissions to European institutions of higher education. Wheeler wrote, "To foreign observers, South Africa presents itself as a strange and contradictory member of the family of nations." "Stranger still," Wheeler continued "is the realization that the South African captains of industry hope to build a strong and profitable economy based upon the free enterprise system while seeing to it that approximately four-fifths of the population are required to contribute highly skilled services in exchange for wages which permit them to live just above the poverty level." Wheeler concluded his article by writing that:

The paradox of working for acceptance and full participation in the commercial activities of the Western powers while rejecting many of the basic ideals of Western civilization is indeed an amazing phenomenon for our period of history. In contrast, the nine and one-half million Africans are both intelligent and literate. They have also received the message of world movement toward freedom of the individual and are determined that they shall win their effort to secure for themselves the fruits of a free society. Without question, South Africa's obsession over implementation of Apartheid has, in recent years, served to limit the educational process for its non-white inhabitants, and to narrow the field of vision for the European segment of its population.⁶⁴⁹

Like he had in reaction to the South's continued segregation policies, Wheeler tied South Africa's economic survival in an increasingly global market economy to its exploitive treatment of its native Africans. His main critique made it clear that the repression of educational opportunities, in particular, for a large segment of the country's population

⁶⁴⁹ John H. Wheeler, "Apartheid Implemented by Education in South Africa," *Journal of Negro Education*, vol. 30, no. 3 (summer, 1961), 249-250.

inherently limited the economic role they could have. If such large groups of people were blocked from being able to contribute to the economy, then no country, no matter where, could ever reach its full economic potential.

CONCLUSION

The school integration battle continued in Durham and North Carolina for more than a decade throughout the 1960s and 1970s. With token school desegregation underway, John Wheeler, the DCNA, and the NAACP remained committed to complete school integration as they had immediately after the U. S. Supreme Court handed down its landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954. In rejecting the black community's appeals for school desegregation in those years, the Durham school board confirmed that in Durham—a place that for decades prided itself as a model for having good race relations—racism continued to effectively pervade the actions of its leadership in much the same way as the most ardent segregationist communities all over the New South.

Although Wheeler was correct when he predicted that North Carolina would forego some of its industrial development if it failed to desegregate its schools, historian Davison M. Douglas has also shown that in the late 1950s, North Carolina's industrial investments remained relatively steady. This happened because the state succeeded at propping up its self-proclaimed “progressive” image through a so-called “moderate” approach after *Brown*. Douglas also points to figures explaining that North Carolina's economy superseded many of its southern counterparts such as Arkansas who had openly defied *Brown*. Accordingly, North Carolina's industrial investments reached \$253 million in the year after its first wave

of desegregation, while Arkansas saw a decline from \$131 million in 1956 to below twenty percent of that figure in 1958.⁶⁵⁰

Nevertheless, John Wheeler's New South prosperity message had importance for several other reasons as well. While some local and state political leaders viewed moderation as the best way to protect North Carolina's economic advancement, Wheeler saw it as moving the state away from economic growth. He maintained that a complete end to segregation was the best approach to sure up the state's economic future. He also pointed to other significant factors that would perhaps continue to stifle North Carolina's economy as well. Most notably, Wheeler identified the improvement of employment opportunities for blacks as being crucial in determining the state's overall economic future. Not only that, but improving the economic condition of African Americans had the potential to enhance the economic plight of white North Carolinians as well. Wheeler wanted whites to understand his New South prosperity message from their own economic standpoint. He argued that segregation hurt whites because it forced them to pick up the economic void left by blacks due to their poor economic situation. Whites had to essentially support themselves and an additional one-fourth of the population in order to keep up with the state's economic demands. The problem of integration was that whites ignored the reality that segregation put them in a severely limited economic position alongside African Americans. Thus, by ensuring that blacks had the economic wherewithal to contribute their fair share to the southern economy, North Carolina and the New South could enjoy long-term prosperity.

Because of its failure to provide African Americans with equality of opportunity, North Carolina was ultimately forced to confront the racial strife that it set-out to avoid in the

⁶⁵⁰Davison M. Douglas, *Reading, Writing, and Race*, 38-39.

years following *Brown*. However, in subsequent years local and state political leaders faced more than the civil rights and economic argument that Wheeler outlined. His economic concerns were not just about racial segregation in schools, but about blacks' access to their full citizenship rights. Therefore, North Carolina pushed African Americans in militant directions, which blacks viewed as necessary to ignite an all out attack on racial segregation. Wheeler and others did not seek school integration for the sake of placing black and white children in the same classrooms; they did so because racial segregation held larger significance to the economic welfare of North Carolina and the South.

CHAPTER 5

“A DANGEROUS AGE. DANGER CANNOT BE AVOIDED”: DIRECT ACTION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A BLACK BUSINESS ACTIVIST, 1957-1960

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: ‘Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.’ And he replied: ‘Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.’ So I went forth and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.

—Minnie Louise Haskins, 1908

“You, of all people, must realize that there are some very real dangers in widening the gap which already exists between the two racial groups” explained Watts Hill, Jr. in a lengthy five-page letter to John Wheeler on March 17, 1960.⁶⁵¹ Hill, a state legislator and prominent white banking and insurance executive in Durham, wrote to Wheeler just days after a meeting that Hill called “disquieting.” On Tuesday, March 15, around thirty of Durham’s white and black community leaders gathered for the secret meeting arranged by Hill who summoned the group of white leaders; NCM president Asa Spaulding had the responsibility to gather black leaders. They met to discuss the increasing conflict arising from the February 8 student-led lunch counter sit-ins that occurred in Durham.

⁶⁵¹Letter from Watts Hill, Jr. to Wheeler, March 17, 1960, unprocessed correspondence box 1952-1953; 1959-1961, (folder name – unsorted), Wheeler Papers, 3; Jesse Boston, in an M. A. thesis completed at North Carolina Central University in 1975 titled “The Lunch Counter Sit-In Demonstrations in Durham, North Carolina,” includes excerpts from Hill’s letter to John Wheeler, 29-30. Boston more than likely obtained the letter from Wheeler, but the source requested that Hill’s name be withheld. The five-page letter read in its entirety reveals both Hill and Wheeler’s private thoughts regarding the sit-in demonstrations and the direct action strategy in general; more specifically the letter reveals the impact that each believed the sit-ins would have on Durham and North Carolina’s economic future. Hill’s reservations also speaks to the political implications the sit-in movement would have on white moderates who would potentially switch their political support from the more moderate Democratic candidates like Terry Sanford to racist I. Beverly Lake during that year’s important gubernatorial election. Hill noted that while some whites publicly supported candidates like Sanford, they would privately vote and financially support I. Beverly Lake as a result of sit-in demonstrations.

The Durham lunch counter sit-ins began precisely one week following the February 1, 1960 sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, which sparked a chain reaction from students across the South. The sit-in movement marked a turning point in civil rights leadership, and represented a major shift in strategies as direct action became another means by which blacks could agitate for change. Wheeler attended the familiar behind-the-scenes meeting between the traditional black leadership and the white power-structure that, according to Hill, ended disastrously.⁶⁵² Responding to Hill's fears of "very real dangers," Wheeler scribbled in the letter's right-hand margins "this is a dangerous age. Danger cannot be avoided."⁶⁵³ This begs the question of why Hill, a prominent member of Durham's white power structure, seemed so incensed that the usual behind-the-scenes conferences and negotiations appeared to be closed. Moreover, this calls into question Wheeler's rationale for believing that "danger" was now necessary for blacks to achieve their overall goals, and raises a concern about his goal to meet or fulfill his own civil rights and economic objectives vis-à-vis student activism.

John Wheeler's confirmation that the sit-in movement, along with its student-centered leadership could not be stopped, despite the new challenges it posed to the South, is a truth he understood in the years directly following *Brown*. For quite some time, he made the argument that mass, direct action protests would at some point become an ever-present tool for African Americans to assert their rights to "full blown citizenship." At the North Carolina Editorial Writers Conference in May 1957, Wheeler spoke at great length about his belief that blacks would no longer be willing to wait by as patiently as they had in years past

⁶⁵²Letter from Hill to Wheeler, March 17, 1960, 1; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 76, 78; William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 71.

⁶⁵³Christina Green, *Our Separate Ways*, 78; Letter from Hill to Wheeler, March 17, 1960, 3.

in order for their concerns to be addressed on a larger scale. Wheeler also spent considerable time during the previous decades arguing for complete and unrestricted “freedom of movement” for blacks, or what he defined as a truly integrated society—cautioning whites that if segregation did not come to an immediate end in North Carolina, then the state and region were doomed economically.

John Wheeler’s response to Watts Hill, Jr. also made it clear that he had come to the realization that previous civil rights gains and concessions won by blacks through various methods had their own limitations: African Americans could no longer afford to simply rely on legal strategies accompanied by speeches, conferences, negotiations, public petitions, and established networks with white power-brokers to gain more extensive measures of black equality. Wheeler’s awareness also stemmed from his own frustrations and disappointments at the slow pace of change after *Brown* when implementation proved extremely difficult for African Americans. Not only was change stagnant and slow to come in public schools across North Carolina, but it also dragged on in areas such as public facilities. In 1957, demands for immediate change surfaced in Durham and other places in a number of other ways. Wheeler had long begun to embrace, at least from an ideological standpoint, the notion of non violent direct action as a viable and realistic strategy for meeting the increasing needs of the black freedom movement and as an added tool to help blacks achieve their full citizenship rights. His overall civil rights and economic philosophy reasoned that blacks deserved their full citizenship rights in order to contribute to New South prosperity.

In many ways, John Wheeler believed that blacks need only wait for the right opportunity to move forward with direct action tactics. He believed the groundwork had been laid in the “first phase” by removing significant legal barriers in “ ‘black and white’

[and] on the printed page”—through the larger battle for educational equality—which put blacks a step closer to ending segregation. Wheeler championed direct action as the “second phase” of the black freedom movement aimed at helping African Americans obtain the necessary “physical” access in housing, travel, employment, and public accommodations.⁶⁵⁴ As Wheeler privately responded line-by-line in the margins of Hill’s letter, he defended himself against accusations made by Hill that he and other black leaders knew about the plans for sit-ins for quite some time. Hill argued, “CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] as represented by Mr. [Gordon] Carey was in Durham at North Carolina College discussing this very situation which faces us all today as long ago as June 1958.”⁶⁵⁵ Wheeler wrote that during the late 1950s, sit-ins “were not on the horizon at that time! Evidence please!”⁶⁵⁶

John Wheeler's stance in response to the 1960 sit-in movement in Durham and throughout North Carolina was vital because it helped to sustain the student-led movement. In other words, Wheeler defended and legitimized the sit-in movement in the face of state and local leaders, and as a member of the traditional black leadership he refused to dissuade student leaders to halt their demonstrations. He also pointed to the “spontaneous” and grassroots nature of the movement, which also expanded the idea of black leadership itself. Yet Wheeler did not take a sidelines position as direct action became an increasingly effective strategy during the black freedom movement. As a 1964 *Business Week* article explained about Wheeler’s response to the sit-in movement, he “received calls from whites

⁶⁵⁴John Hervey Wheeler, “Civil Rights Groups-Their Impact Upon the War on Poverty,” President’s Address, Annual Meeting of the Southern Regional Council, November 1965, box 1 (Speeches of J.H. Wheeler), folder 59, Wheeler Papers; Wheeler, “Civil Rights Groups-Their Impact Upon the War on Poverty,” *New South*, 1965; Wheeler, “Civil Rights Groups – Their Impact Upon the War on Poverty,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* Vol. 31 (Winter 1966), 152-158, <http://scholarship.law.duke.edu/lcp/vol31/iss1/11>.

⁶⁵⁵Letter from Hill to Wheeler, March 17, 1960, 2.

⁶⁵⁶*Ibid.*

and from some negroes, assuming he would help quell the demonstrators.”⁶⁵⁷ However, he “drafted a statement of support. Then he went on the picket line one morning to make his position unmistakable.”⁶⁵⁸ Wheeler welcomed student sit-ins as a good thing—something that was necessary—as he realized that city leaders had to take more concrete actions to solve serious problems confronting African Americans; the white power-structure had to agree to real, substantial changes. Wheeler became entirely committed to the student activists, supporting their efforts publicly, privately, and financially. He saw the sit-in movement and the direct action strategy as critical in his overall effort to reach his own civil rights and economic objectives.

THE ROYAL ICE-CREAM SIT-IN AND A NEW STRATEGY ON THE HORIZON

The 1960 sit-in movement reflected the changing mood of black activism, which began in the previous decade. In places such as Durham, that activism was directly influenced and motivated by events that unfolded in other parts of the country in the years after the Supreme Court’s *Brown* decisions in 1954 and 1955. In August 1955, for example, African Americans across the country were gripped by the senseless murder of fourteen year-old Chicago teen Emmett Till, who was viciously beaten and shot by several white men during a summer visit with his family in Money, Mississippi; authorities found the teen’s body in the Talahatchie River three days after his disappearance. Till unknowingly committed an act punishable by death in the Deep South when he reportedly flirted with a

⁶⁵⁷“Banker with a mission: Successful Negro bank president, firm in pushing for both Negro advancement and North Carolina development, wins an influential role throughout South and in the nation” *Business Week*, May 16, 1964.

⁶⁵⁸*Ibid.*

white female clerk at a nearby grocery store. Till's accused killers were later acquitted by an all-white jury, despite the courageous court testimony of his elderly uncle, Mose Wright, who testified that the men dragged Till out of his bed in the middle of the night. Then in December 1955, African Americans in Montgomery, Alabama initiated an economic boycott against the Montgomery City Lines bus company for its continued mistreatment of its black passengers. Although the boycott was prompted by the arrest of seamstress Rosa Parks for refusing to give up her seat to a white man, an underlying issue was the bus company's discriminatory policies against blacks; a year earlier black women in the city collectively made several appeals to the city's white leadership that included a desire for a first come, first serve seating arrangement where blacks would no longer be forced to give up their seats to whites when the bus reached capacity. For an entire year the black community, with the organized leadership of the Montgomery Improvement Association, refused to board the city buses choosing instead to walk, or carpool to work until their demands were met by city officials.⁶⁵⁹

The Montgomery bus boycott made a deep and long-lasting impression on John Wheeler. At an Emancipation Day program in Durham in January 1956, just a month after the Montgomery boycott began, Wheeler asked the audience a piercing question: "Will we

⁶⁵⁹Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: the Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University Press of California, 1995), 42; "Lynching of Boy Said Due to Mississippi Hate Campaign," *Carolina Times*, September 10, 1955; Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1992* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993), 37-52; David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*, Ch. 1; 11-82; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: American in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Simon and Schuster Inc., 1988), Ch. 5; 143-205; Rosa Parks, " 'Tired of Giving In': The Launching of the Montgomery Bus Boycott," in Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin, eds., *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2001); 61-74.

have the courage and discipline to do what Montgomery has done[?]"⁶⁶⁰ Wheeler's question referenced the need for a new strategy in actualizing complete freedom of movement, and suggests that he resigned himself to direct action long before it became a reality in Durham and throughout North Carolina. This was especially true considering the legal ground gained by blacks in the years leading to *Brown*. In the audience that day was Douglass Elane Moore, a young minister from Hickory, North Carolina who had recently moved to Durham. Shortly after hearing Wheeler speak, Moore traveled to Atlanta, Georgia to attend a leadership conference on non violence at Wheat Street Baptist Church. During the midst of his stay in Atlanta, Moore wrote what can be viewed as a rather defining letter to Wheeler given what would take place a year later. Moore felt compelled to write the letter, which he disclosed was being written "after 12 midnight now," so that he could get some things off his chest. Moore explained that while attending the conference, Wheeler's earlier "question became more haunting." Earlier that night, Moore "heard the leader of the Atlanta Movement" discuss their focus on "law liberty and love." Moore wrote that because the Durham community had "so many resources at [their] disposal" they "ought to do something[,] for in so doing [they could] give encouragement to those who fought the tough trials." Moreover, Moore pointed out that Durham's black community needed to make an "impact upon the economic and social institutions in [their] communities." "If Durham could make a witness in these areas," Moore believed, it would "aid the people in the [D]eep [S]outh" in places such as Mississippi and Alabama. Moore also noted that the letter "perhaps" also represented his own thinking "for the past 10 years and what [he] heard at this conference." Moore wanted Wheeler to know what was on his heart and concluded by

⁶⁶⁰Letter from Douglass E. Moore to Wheeler, January 9, 1956 (from Atlanta, Georgia), folder 4 (correspondence – personal 1953-1956), box 83 (correspondence box 1952-1953; 1959-1961), Wheeler Papers.

thanking Wheeler “for causing” him to “think about these matters.”⁶⁶¹ Moore’s correspondence here reveals Wheeler’s earlier inclinations toward direct action, and also demonstrates that Moore saw him as a potential ally in such activism.

On June 23, 1957, after leaving a meeting at the Asbury Temple Methodist Church, six African Americans led by the church’s twenty-eight year-old minister, Douglas E. Moore, entered the Royal Ice Cream Parlor located on the corner of Roxboro and Dowd Streets. It had been a little over a year since Reverend Moore’s emotional midnight letter to Wheeler, in which Moore credited the banker with again awakening his conscience to take more aggressive actions. Now, Moore’s convictions were clearly backed up by his bold activism that day in June. Moore had also dedicated himself to confronting segregation in this manner as a college student. He graduated from North Carolina College (NCC) a few years earlier, but prior to coming back to Durham in 1956 he attended divinity school at Boston University, alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who a year earlier successfully led the Montgomery bus boycott which underscored the power of non-violent direct action protests. While in Boston, Moore participated in student demonstrations that regularly confronted the country’s unequal social conditions.⁶⁶² Once settled in Durham and prior to the Royal Ice Cream sit-in, Moore staged several one-man protests related to municipal facilities throughout the city. He publicly pleaded with the city council at one of its meetings to remove racial barriers that gave way to segregation in the city-owned Durham Public Library and Carolina Theater. As a result of his public appearance, the city later granted Moore a

⁶⁶¹Letter from Douglass E. Moore to Wheeler, January 9, 1956.

⁶⁶²“New Pastor at Asbury Church is NCC Grad,” *Carolina Times*, June 16, 1956; Osha Gray Davidson, *The Best of Enemies*, 88.

library card to its white library. On June 13, he unsuccessfully attempted to gain admission for himself and his family at an all white swimming pool located in Long Meadow Park.⁶⁶³

In addition to Reverend Moore, the group of activists included three women and three men who were also students at NCC. They were Mary Elizabeth Clyburn (20yrs.), Vivian Jones (19yrs.), Virginia Williams (20yrs.), Claude Glenn (24yrs.), Jesse W. Gray (34yrs.), and Melvin Willis (32yrs.).⁶⁶⁴ Upon entering the ice cream parlor, the group immediately went to the white section where they sat down and occupied four booths. When the owner, Louis A. Coletta, approached them he instantly requested them to move to the adjacent section set aside for blacks. They refused to move as Moore invoked his rights as a Christian and an American; he also referenced examples of persecution throughout the world. Coletta responded by explaining that “that don’t concern this place—this place is not owned by the city or the state, this place is private property.”⁶⁶⁵ Once the group continued in its refusal to leave, Coletta proceeded to call the police. When the police arrived they arrested the seven for trespassing. The next day, they were each convicted and handed down a \$10 fine in addition to court costs.⁶⁶⁶

The Royal Ice Cream sit-in fit squarely with Wheeler’s beliefs about the necessity of complete freedom of movement for blacks as it sought to remove the *physical* barriers of segregation; it also connected black *access* to employment opportunities as well. In other

⁶⁶³ “Minister, Others Appeal Trespass Case: Negroes Fined in Dairy Bar Case,” *Durham Sun*, June 24, 1957; “Color Line Cracking Attempt Nets Fines,” *Durham Morning Herald*, June 25, 1957; M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 144; McElreath, “The Cost of Opportunity,” 207.

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁵ “Minister, Others Appeal Trespass Case: Negroes Fined in Dairy Bar Case,” *Durham Sun*, June 24, 1957; “Color Line Cracking Attempt Nets Fines,” *Durham Morning Herald*, June 25, 1957; Jesse Boston, “The Lunch Counter Sit-In Demonstrations in Durham, North Carolina,” (M.A. Thesis, North Carolina Central University, 1975), 18-20; Christina Green, *Our Separate Ways*, 65-69; Osha Gray Davidson, *the Best of Enemies*, 88.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid.

words, direct action placed the idea of complete freedom of movement at the forefront of black demands for equality, citizenship, and democracy; this figured prominently in Wheeler's vision of New South prosperity. The idea of complete freedom of movement was primarily about granting blacks equal access to the same, not separate, resources and opportunities available to whites. Having access meant that it would be possible for African Americans to reach their full potential and societal responsibilities. The battle for educational equality that was waged in the courtroom succeeded in getting the U. S. Supreme Court to strike down segregation as being fundamentally unconstitutional, but on a practical level it still only dealt with educational access, which was only one area on the larger civil rights spectrum. The Montgomery bus boycott, as well as the Royal Ice Cream sit-in, continued to shed light on the additional restrictions that Jim Crow segregation imposed on the freedom of blacks. Wheeler continued to make the point that segregation restrictions also had devastating economic consequences for African Americans, particularly when it came to their ability to obtain employment. As he explained, this partly meant that:

‘Accessibility to a job depend[ed] on [things such as] free access to housing. Negroes are restricted. They don’t have freedom of movement. Put a Negro on the road; how would he fare? Could he get a room? Could he do business? People are not just used to seeing Negro traveling businessmen, to seeing Negroes in hotel and restaurants. Put yourself in the Negro’s place. You can’t go looking for a job if you haven’t got a place to stay or a place to eat. When a person’s freedom of movement is restricted, it cuts down his access to jobs.’⁶⁶⁷

At their earlier meeting that afternoon, the Royal Ice Cream protesters discussed a number of issues that included the difficulties young blacks had trying to find employment in Durham stores. As noted by Virginia Williams years later, Moore and the group of student activists also belonged to an organization known as ACTION, “whose purpose was to integrate public

⁶⁶⁷“Desegregation Moves Slowly but Surely in North Carolina,” *Chicago Defender*, October 20-26, 1962.

places including tennis courts, swimming pools and theaters.”⁶⁶⁸ The group originated during bible study sessions at Asbury Temple, which often turned to conversations about ways to obtain social equality for blacks, and to remove the badge of second-class citizenship. ACTION, according to Williams, saw mass, direct action demonstrations as necessary and believed organizations such as the NAACP and the DCNA moved too cautiously.⁶⁶⁹ Although the group’s recent meeting dealt with black access coupled with economic inequality, they insisted that their actions were not pre-arranged or planned as “an attempt to crack the color line at the place,” but since the ice cream bar was so close to the church they decided “to get some ice cream and milk shakes.”⁶⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the stance that the group eventually took in their refusal to leave the ice cream establishment, which was located in a predominantly black neighborhood in Durham’s East End, signaled their views that blacks represented the majority of business for Coletta and the Royal Ice Cream Parlor, and many other businesses. On the other hand, blacks were denied the same privileges as whites, and could not gain employment at those same businesses; thus, they had restricted freedom of movement even in their own neighborhoods.⁶⁷¹

The Royal Ice Cream sit-in also came on the heels of a number of other incidents as well. In April, over 100 blacks showed up at the Durham Athletic Park with plans to attend the home opener for the Durham Bulls minor league baseball team; the team had recently

⁶⁶⁸Jesse Boston, “The Lunch Counter Sit-In Demonstrations in Durham, North Carolina,” (M.A. Thesis, North Carolina Central University, 1975), 24-25.

⁶⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 25.

⁶⁷⁰ “Color Line Cracking Attempt Nets Fines,” *Durham Morning Herald*, June 25, 1957; “Minister, Others Appeal Trespass Case: Negroes Fined in Dairy Bar Case,” *Durham Sun*, June 24, 1957.

⁶⁷¹ “Six Fined for Trespass Threat of Boycott for Soda Bar,” *Carolina Times*, June 29, 1957; “Color Line Cracking Attempt Nets Fines,” *Durham Morning Herald*, June 25, 1957; “Minister, Others Appeal Trespass Case: Negroes Fined in Dairy Bar Case,” *Durham Sun*, June 24, 1957; Jesse Boston, “The Lunch Counter Sit-in Demonstrations in Durham, North Carolina,” 19-20.

broke its own color-line when it hired its first black player. After being told they had to enter through a side gate and watch the game from segregated seating, the group declined to enter on that basis. Shortly thereafter, the group hired attorneys Floyd B. McKissick and M. Hugh Thompson to press city leaders on freedom of movement and equal access to city-owned recreation facilities. They also demanded clarification on official Durham Recreation Department policy. Along with attempts by some blacks toward seeking more widespread desegregation in municipal facilities, there were calls by others for a new and fresh strategy to obtain freedom of movement on a larger scale. In June 1957, *Carolina Times* editor Louis Austin criticized what he considered to be the “lethargy” of the DCNA’s efforts to improve the economic opportunities, among other things, available to blacks in the city. He particularly challenged the DCNA for its failure to seek desegregation more broadly with a “determined campaign to open up new venues of employment for Negroes in Durham...[and] the promotion of integration in the public of municipally owned theaters and the municipally owned Durham Athletic Park.” Austin pointed to the efforts by blacks in other North Carolina cities such as Raleigh, Charlotte, and Greensboro in actively seeking desegregation for blacks in public schools, municipally-owned theaters and recreational facilities such as golf courses. In Charlotte a year earlier, African Americans had succeeded in an ongoing legal battle against the city because of their “policy, practice, [and] custom” of denying black golfers the right to play on a public course supported by both white and black taxpayers. The above case initially began in December 1951 when a group of black golfers showed up at the city-owned white-only golf course demanding to play. In January 1957, James Otis Williams became the first African American to integrate Charlotte’s Bonnie Brae Golf Course. Moreover, Austin included the Durham Ministerial Alliance, another influential organization,

for also dragging its feet on important issues. Finally, Austin chided what he deemed the “old-guard” leaders in both organizations who “smothered efforts of the younger and progressive members to push the segregation question to the front.” Austin called the leaders “‘dead ducks’ on the all-important question of civil rights.” He wrote “there comes a time in the life of an organization when it needs new blood, new faces and some new ideas.” “Certainly,” he continued, “this is no hour to be at ease but an hour for positive action. The struggle for freedom and human dignity for all must go on.”⁶⁷² Thus, the Royal Ice Cream sit-in was the activists’ response to Louis Austin’s challenge toward a direct action strategy.⁶⁷³

While Austin’s recent editorial may have been an indictment against what he felt to be inactivity, the DCNA was itself in a period of transition. That May DCNA chairman John Stewart won a seat on the city council as a result of a favorable endorsement by the DCNA. Once elected, Stewart resigned as DCNA head at which point Wheeler succeeded him as the organization’s new chairman. Often deemed a black radical, Wheeler’s elevation to the DCNA’s chairmanship came as no surprise as he consistently proved himself countless times as a skilled banker, a civil rights lawyer, the organization’s education committee chairman, and a leading spokesman for blacks across North Carolina. In those capacities, he kept the public’s attention on the dangers of what economic and educational inequality for blacks meant to North Carolina’s future and New South prosperity as a whole. According to historian Walter B. Weare, the DCNA never pressed Wheeler to run for public office himself

⁶⁷²“The Lethargy of the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs,” *Carolina Times*, June 15, 1957; Osha Gray Davidson, *the Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 90; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 67.

⁶⁷³ Osha Gray Davidson, *the Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 88, 90; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 65-67.

because he “perhaps better served the Committee as dean of its brain trust, its ablest tactician and toughest negotiator.”⁶⁷⁴ Despite Austin’s criticism, Wheeler and the DCNA continued with its plans to attack school segregation by utilizing the state laws that were established in the aftermath of *Brown*. Additionally, the DCNA had already begun to ponder a legal challenge to force the Durham school board to desegregate schools. In his personal life, the early part of the year for Wheeler began with the loss of his father, John Leonidas, on March 30.⁶⁷⁵ With his father’s death, John Hervey was now the family’s official patriarch, a role that he took very seriously and had already taken responsibility for, for quite some time. That added responsibility included moving his mother and disabled sister Ruth to a nearby home in Durham. It also meant continuing to financially support Ruth’s two sons David and Richard Lowe while they attended school. In this way, Wheeler’s civil rights activism was also about ensuring freedom of movement for the next generation of Wheelers.

A month after the Royal Ice Cream sit-in, Wheeler and the DCNA deliberated on the “desirability of a [direct action] Boycott.” It was the DCNA’s economic committee chaired by Floyd B. McKissick and businessman Nathan White that met with Reverend Moore at Asbury Temple to determine whether or not a formal demonstration would be necessary. At the meeting there were several views expressed that indicated the black community’s mixed reactions. While some blacks saw the sit-in as “premature,” others were willing to give their

⁶⁷⁴“An Understandable Decision,” *Carolina Times*, January 19, 1957; M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 119-120; Jean Bradley Anderson, *A History of Durham County*, 432; “The Price of Token Representation,” *Carolina Times*, February 9, 1957; “Candidate?” *Carolina Times*, March 16, 1957, *Carolina Times*, March 23, 1957; M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 121; Walter B. Weare, *Black Business in the New South*, 247.

⁶⁷⁵“Final Tribute is Paid to Wheeler,” *Atlanta Daily World*, April 3, 1957). Obituary of John Leonidas Wheeler, April 2, 1957; Resolution made by the Directors, Officers and Employees of North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company record their sense of immeasurable loss in the death on Saturday, March 30, 1957, of John Leonidas Wheeler); “John Wheeler, 87, insuranceman, dies,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, April 13, 1957; “Taps for J. L. Wheeler,” *Atlanta Daily World*, April 2, 1957.

support for a mass boycott. Reverend Moore believed that a formal demonstration was necessary, but warned that boycotting the Royal Ice Cream Parlor in the future would not be the best decision since the owner, Louis Coletta, was also Greek and was thus considered to be a member of a minority group.⁶⁷⁶

The Reverend Moore and the student activists were ultimately unsuccessful at getting their convictions overturned, and made little headway in igniting a mass movement. After appealing their initial conviction in Superior Court, nearly a month after their sit-in, the group lost their case before an all-white jury and was ordered to pay a much higher \$25 fine along with court costs.⁶⁷⁷ The group appealed their conviction to the State Supreme Court, which a year later upheld the lower court's decision.⁶⁷⁸ The activists received legal representation from DCNA and NAACP lawyers Conrad O. Pearson, M. Hugh Thompson, William A. Marsh, Jr., and Floyd B. McKissick. However, their legal representation alone stood as the only formal support that the traditional black leadership, represented by Wheeler and the DCNA, the NAACP, and the Durham Ministerial Alliance, seemed willing to provide at that time. Additionally, the black leadership's typical approach to handling tense problems facing African Americans was to negotiate with the white power-structure in order to find

⁶⁷⁶DCNA Economic Committee Meeting Minutes, July 24, 1957, in the Floyd B. McKissick, Sr. Papers #4930, folder 7568-f, Southern Historical Collection of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the African American Resources Collection of North Carolina Central University; "Annual Report of DCNA Economic Committee," January 12, 1958, folder 7568-f, McKissick Papers; Christina Green, *Our Separate Ways*, 67-68.

⁶⁷⁷"Immediate Appeal Taken to Supreme Court: 'Ice Cream Parlor' Negroes Found Guilty of Trespassing," *Durham Morning Herald*, July 18, 1957; "Going to High Court: 7 Fined in Trespass Case Here," *Durham Sun*, July 18, 1957; "Ice Cream Bar Case: Six Get Stiff Rap on Appeal," *Carolina Times*, July 20, 1957; Jesse Boston, "The Lunch Counter Sit-n Demonstrations in Durham, North Carolina," 21-22; Christina Green, *Our Separate Ways*, 66; M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 144.

⁶⁷⁸"Ice Cream Bar Case Arguments Heard," *Carolina Times*, November 30, 1957; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 66.

some type of middle ground, and to turn to legal approaches at best if a compromise could not be reached.⁶⁷⁹

Yet, if we consider Wheeler's challenge a year earlier to a Durham audience to follow the lead of the Montgomery movement, a challenge that moved Reverend Moore to contemplate his own plan for direct action, it would seem that Wheeler was poised for the kind of tactics represented by the Royal Ice Cream sit-in. Wheeler's additional rhetoric, approval of, and warnings to white leaders that blacks would take more drastic measures to obtain the freedom of movement they rightly deserved, also leaves a question mark as to exactly why he and the DCNA decided not to continue with an immediate economic boycott or some other form of direct action protest aimed at businesses like the Royal Ice Cream Company. First, we must consider that Wheeler was not entirely convinced that direct action was the right approach at that time and at that very moment, even if he seemed to welcome such actions the year before. This meant that Wheeler was still wrestling with the idea of moving forward with direct action. It also shows that there were some very serious risks involved if they decided on that course of action. Wheeler's wavering back and forth makes clear how complicated civil rights and the battle for freedom could be as well. In other words, he probably felt that they had yet to exhaust all of their options and that freedom of movement and equal access could still be achieved through less aggressive means. In this instance, the majority consensus among the traditional black leadership was to withhold any large-scale community protests, perhaps also with the hopes that not moving forward with

⁶⁷⁹“Immediate Appeal Taken to Supreme Court: ‘Ice Cream Parlor’ Negroes Found Guilty of Trespassing,” *Durham Morning Herald*, July 18, 1957; “Going to High Court: 7 Fined in Trespass Case Here,” *Durham Sun*, July 18, 1957; “Ice Cream Bar Case: Six Get Stiff Rap on Appeal,” *Carolina Times*, July 20, 1957; Jesse Boston, “The Lunch Counter Sit-n Demonstrations in Durham, North Carolina,” 21-22, 24; Christina Green, *Our Separate Ways*, 66-69.

direct action would compel Durham's white civic leaders to finally yield to desegregation in schools as well as recreational facilities. Thus, it is important to understand Wheeler and the DCNA's non-support of the Royal Ice-Cream sit-in by also considering its timing in relation to the ongoing school desegregation battle. Wheeler was well aware of possible school desegregation in other North Carolina cities and perhaps worried that any attempts by Durham's black community to force desegregation using direct action methods would further jeopardize any chances that the city would desegregate its schools that year as well.

There were several other reasons that explain Wheeler and the black community's non-support of the Royal Ice Cream sit-in. Moore's initial failure to obtain the influence and backing of Wheeler and other leaders became a decisive barrier when it came to his sweeping quest toward complete freedom of movement and integration. To add to that, Moore's merely one year living in Durham did not "qualify" him to lead the way as his critics viewed him as an impatient outsider who was also "irresponsible, opportunistic, and dangerous."⁶⁸⁰ Attorney William A. Marsh, Jr. recalled that Moore was "'an out-of-towner who moved fast--too fast for Durham, North Carolina.'"⁶⁸¹ While evidence is lacking to state with certainty how Wheeler himself might have felt about Reverend Moore's actions, because of his longing to be informed about any events purported to be in the best interest of the entire black community, he probably took some issue with Moore as well; Moore bypassed the advice Wheeler and other black leaders might have provided, which would have most certainly outlined concerns about how a sit-in would affect their ongoing desegregation efforts. Other historians have also pointed to Moore's failure to obtain widespread

⁶⁸⁰M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 144.

⁶⁸¹Jesse Boston, "The Lunch Counter Sit-in Demonstrations in Durham, North Carolina," 24.

community support beforehand, particularly among black women whose “rich history of civic involvement could have provided the broader community backing the sit-in lacked.”⁶⁸²

JOSEPH RILEY TENNIS CASE

If the Royal Ice Cream sit-in was not enough to warrant support for a mass, direct action movement, then subsequent events later that summer proved how challenging it would be in order to get Durham to desegregate otherwise. On Thursday July 11 twenty-three year-old NCC student Joseph Gilbert Riley and fifteen year-old Joe Williams, a rising junior tennis star, decided to play tennis at the Forest Hills tennis courts, in an exclusive white neighborhood in Durham. While the two played tennis someone alerted the city recreation director, Clarence R. Wood, who called police and had Riley and Williams arrested for trespassing, and their most serious offense was disobeying the recreation department’s segregation policy. For his part in violating the recreation department’s regulations, Williams received probation from Juvenile Court. As an adult, Riley faced an upcoming trial and possibly more severe penalties if convicted.⁶⁸³ When later asked why he chose to play at Forest Hills instead of the tennis courts provided for blacks, Riley pointed to the inferior facilities at the black tennis courts, one of Jim Crow segregation’s most obvious and substantial abuses, which he said “were crowded and not kept up as well as the Forest Hills courts” and that he “just came to play tennis.”⁶⁸⁴ Riley’s background also sheds light on his decision to play tennis at Forest Hills, despite the potential consequences. A few years

⁶⁸²Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 67.

⁶⁸³ “Talks Postpone Trial: Negotiations on in Tennis Case,” *Carolina Times*, July 20, 1957.

⁶⁸⁴ “Judge Wilson Says Evidence Insufficient: Local Net Court Case Nonsuited,” *Durham Sun*, July 23, 1957.

earlier, Riley and his siblings had been plaintiffs in the *Blue* case in which Wheeler had been one of the lead attorneys, and knew first-hand about the restrictions that the city's Jim Crow policies placed on blacks. The Riley tennis case was yet another indication that blacks wanted unrestricted freedom of movement, and were willing to break the law to obtain that access. The actions by Riley and Williams also demonstrated that young blacks were the ones constantly testing their rights to freedom of movement and would continue to do so in the years to come.

The biggest problem that Wheeler and other DCNA leaders had with the arrests came, not from the youths trespassing, but more significantly from the confusion and contradictions caused by the city's segregated recreational policies. Additionally, black tax dollars supported facilities that they could not lawfully use or directly benefit from. In less than one week prior to the incident, Riley and Williams played in the predominantly black Southeastern Open Tennis Championships, hosted by the Blue Ribbon Tennis Club during the July 4 holiday weekend.⁶⁸⁵ On Saturday and Sunday the tournament was held at the Forest Hills Tennis Court with permission from the city council and the recreation department. It marked the first time that an all-black tennis tournament was played at Forest Hills, although blacks began playing in an annual city-wide tournament at Forest Hills three years before.⁶⁸⁶ Riley was also spotted playing tennis at Forest Hills on at least two other occasions leading-up to the tournament.⁶⁸⁷ Additionally, the actions on the part of Riley and Williams did not happen in isolation, but came on the heels of a similar incident just a week

⁶⁸⁵“Southeastern Tennis Play Opens Here: Forest Hills Court Setting for Tournament,” *Carolina Times*, July 6, 1957; “Joe Williams in Surprise Juniors Victory; Ferguson Conquers Women,” *Carolina Times*, July 13, 1957.

⁶⁸⁶ Southeastern Tennis Play Opens Here: Forest Hills Court Setting for Tournament,” *Carolina Times*, July 6, 1957.

⁶⁸⁷“Judge Wilson Says Evidence Insufficient: Local Net Court Case Nonsuited,” *Durham Sun*, July 23, 1957.

before when teenagers Cardoza McCullom and Vincent Moore were warned by police to stay away from the Forest Hills tennis courts after they wrapped-up a game of their own.⁶⁸⁸ Joe Williams won the tournament's junior division in a surprise upset victory over top-seed and future Wimbledon champion Arthur Ashe.⁶⁸⁹ Riley, also a member of the Blue Ribbon Tennis Club, competed in the men's doubles, but lost. Wheeler, himself a tennis enthusiast and an executive officer in the black American Tennis Association, played in the tournament's men's senior doubles and was also a strong financial supporter of young black tennis players like Williams and Ashe.⁶⁹⁰ In fact, Wheeler regularly led and directed national funding campaigns for the American Tennis Association, which sponsored the country's most talented young black tennis players.

In less than a month after the Royal Ice Cream sit-in, the Riley tennis case presented the first opportunity for Wheeler and the DCNA to obtain freedom of movement for African Americans in recreational facilities. It was also a chance to do so without employing mass, direct action, but by utilizing negotiation methods. It became clear that Wheeler and other leaders still had some level of hope that white city leaders would make some concessions along the lines of desegregation. Following the tennis court arrests, Wheeler requested a meeting with city attorney Claude V. Jones, city manager Robert W. Flack, recreation department director Clarence Wood, and Police Chief William W. Pleasants. In anticipation of their meeting, Flack was able to get Riley's case postponed by a week. At the meeting, Wheeler was joined by attorneys William A. Marsh, Jr., M. Hugh Thompson, C. O. Pearson, and Floyd B. McKissick. Wheeler's group wanted to set the record straight on "certain

⁶⁸⁸ "Talks Postpone Trial: Negotiations on in Tennis Case," *Carolina Times*, July 20, 1957.

⁶⁸⁹ "Joe Williams in Surprise Juniors Victory; Ferguson Conquers Women," *Carolina Times*, July 13, 1957.

⁶⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

unclarified” matters regarding the city’s recreational policy.⁶⁹¹ During the two-hour closed-door session, Wheeler argued his position regarding the tennis courts by stressing to city officials that blacks used the Forest Hills tennis courts during most of the tennis season that year without incident, and many were specifically invited by whites to play. When city officials suggested that blacks and whites have designated days for each group to access the Forest Hills Tennis Courts, Wheeler pointed to freedom of movement reminding them that blacks had the right to use *all* publicly-owned tennis courts at any time. On several previous occasions, city attorney Claude Jones repeatedly advised the city council and recreation department officials that they had no legal authority to prohibit blacks from accessing city-owned facilities since North Carolina had no official laws sanctioning segregation in public facilities. While Wheeler did not completely reject the idea to have designated times, he doubted that either race would only use the tennis courts on their assigned days.⁶⁹²

It appears as though both parties came to the meeting with their intentions on finding an agreeable solution. After the two-hour closed-door session, Wheeler told reporters that he arranged the meeting “to try to avoid litigation” and maintained that the tennis matter was “no test case” as Riley “had not anticipated his arrest.”⁶⁹³ Wheeler went further by noting that none of the lawyers representing Durham’s black community were there on the NAACP’s behalf; he tried to deflect the appearance of a “test case.” City manager Flack also made sure that the police refrained from arresting any blacks who used the Forest Hills

⁶⁹¹“Court Test Asked Here on Parks Use,” *Durham Sun*, July 18, 1957; “Officials, Negro Heads Confer on Tennis Case; City Council Holds Key,” *Durham Morning Herald*, July 19, 1957; “Ready for Trial in Tennis Court Invasion: City Will Push Trespass Case,” *Durham Sun*, July 19, 1957; Talks Postpone Trial: Negotiations on in Tennis Case,” *Carolina Times*, July 20, 1957.

⁶⁹²“Court Test Asked Here on Parks Use,” *Durham Sun*, July 18, 1957; “Officials, Negro Heads Confer on Tennis Case; City Council Holds Key,” *Durham Morning Herald*, July 19, 1957.

⁶⁹³*Ibid.*

Tennis Courts until the outcome of the private meeting and ensured all parties that administrators would give the tennis issue careful consideration in the days to come. Nevertheless, Flack's comments during the meeting and to the press afterwards made clear where the city stood on the issue. While Wheeler and other attorneys were present, Flack told reporters that "the law is one thing and asserting all rights guaranteed under the law is another."⁶⁹⁴ In a way, Flack made it all the more clear that it would take blacks' "asserting" their rights through direct action to ensure their freedom of movement.

Initially, the private talks yielded few changes in the city's segregation policy when it came to the tennis courts. City officials re-affirmed their position by upholding the charges against Joseph Riley and continued to operate recreational facilities on a segregated basis. Flack and Jones decided that future policies regarding recreational facilities needed to be left to the judicial system and the city council.⁶⁹⁵ The failure not to come to some type of agreement did not imply the powerlessness of black leaders, but reflects a standing policy: that they were unwilling to capitulate to the white power-structure by conceding their right to the freedom of movement they felt already belonged to the black community. On July 23, Judge A. R. Wilson dismissed the case against Riley after defense attorney William A. Marsh, Jr. requested a non-suit for lack of evidence. The arresting officer failed to show up in court and no other witnesses could confirm whether or not he actually asked Riley to leave the tennis court before making his arrest.⁶⁹⁶

⁶⁹⁴Ibid.

⁶⁹⁵Ibid; "Ready for Trial in Tennis Court Invasion: City Will Push Trespass Case," *Durham Sun*, July 19, 1957.

⁶⁹⁶"Judge Wilson Says Evidence Insufficient: Local Net Court Case Nonsuited," *Durham Sun*, July 23, 1957; "Not Told to Stay off Tennis Courts: Judge Ousts Trespass Charge Against Negro," *Durham Morning Herald*, July 24, 1957; "A New Meaning for Moderation," *Carolina Times*, July 27, 1957.

The Royal Ice Cream sit-in and the Riley Tennis case signaled the need for a mass movement and shift towards a more effective strategy. It was also the failure on the part of Durham's white leadership to desegregate Durham's schools in August that further set the stage for direct action protests. Despite Riley's dismissal, "the defense deliberately sought to settle the issue around the conference table rather than the court room."⁶⁹⁷ But it became evident to blacks that city officials got what they wanted in the end: "[their] wish to continue to circumvent the issue...which...leaves the situation as regards [to] segregation pretty much as it was before."⁶⁹⁸ The dismissal also meant that blacks could not move forward with using Riley's case as a "test." As Louis Austin mulled over the tennis case, he concluded that in the future blacks had to "carefully plan and consolidate efforts to attack Durham's extra legal jim crow if the benefits of the Supreme Court's [*Brown*] ruling against segregation are not to be entirely nullified."⁶⁹⁹ In the end, additional private talks succeeded in changing the city's segregation policy when it came to the tennis courts and other recreational facilities. The city agreed to allow blacks to use the tennis courts without penalties in the future as long as they did so in small crowds. In exchange, black leaders agreed to withhold any large-scale community actions that sought to integrate other white-only facilities, including swimming pools.⁷⁰⁰ As was often the case, Wheeler skillfully walked a delicate line when it came to the Royal Ice Cream sit-in and the Riley tennis case, pushing hard enough to put city leaders on notice, while being careful to avoid dropping the ball when it came to the school desegregation issue.

⁶⁹⁷"A New Meaning for Moderation," *Carolina Times*, July 27, 1957.

⁶⁹⁸*Ibid.*

⁶⁹⁹"The City's Dexterity Demands Careful Planning," *Carolina Times*, July 27, 1957.

⁷⁰⁰M. Elaine Burgess, *Negro Leadership in a Southern City*, 143; Osha Gray Davidson, *the Best of Enemies*, 89.

Nevertheless, black leaders perceived white leaders' overall resistance to any desegregation as an insult. In October 1957, Wheeler and the DCNA made their feelings known while continuing to seek a compromise solution to help facilitate the desegregation process in Durham. The organization sent the mayor a resolution passed by its members at one of the regular meetings stating that "The Durham Committee on Negro Affairs is not willing to take the position that all is lost. It is not willing to throw in the towel at the feet of the demagogic conqueror." "Unfortunately," the resolution continued while also pointing to failed negotiations that summer, "of late the lines of communication between these men and women of good will have been severed. Particularly is this true in Durham and Durham County. Where formerly there was trust - there is now mistrust - where formerly there was a candid discussion of problems on which there were differences of opinion - there is now silence." The document urged white and black community leaders to reaffirm their commitment in working together to end the city's racial discord. The resolution ended by requesting Mayor Emmanuel J. "Mutt" Evans and city council members to appoint a "committee of outstanding citizens of both racial groups to consider many of the problems that now confront[ed] [them]."⁷⁰¹ This group eventually became the Mayor's Human Relations Committee (HRC).

In the interim, between the late 1950s and the early 1960s, Wheeler and the DCNA did not let the underlying issues and grievances involved in the Royal Ice Cream sit-in, in particular, go ignored as the decade came to an end. The organization was very involved in finding ways to end discrimination through continuing to expose vast inequalities. This was especially true when it came to job opportunities for blacks in the city. The DCNA's

⁷⁰¹ "Resolution by the DCNA," October 17, 1957, R. N. Harris Papers.

economic committee headed by attorney Floyd McKissick and businessman Nathan White took an active lead in addressing employment concerns in several ways. In December 1956, the committee conducted an economic survey and used its findings to draft the report “Where the Durham Negro Spends his Money.” The group targeted the Belk-Leggett department store for three days, counting the number of black and white customers that entered the business during that time. The purpose of the survey and subsequent report was to show the “importance” of black “buying power,” and to provide the “total economic picture...to show the value of full employment opportunities for Negroes.”⁷⁰² In conjunction with that year’s program, the economic committee also attempted to secure employment for black high school and college students during the Christmas holiday season, and targeted local dime stores in that particular effort. After the DCNA’s decision not to push for an economic boycott following the Royal Ice Cream sit-in, during the remainder of that year the economic committee focused mainly on “collecting data, adopting procedure[s] for future [direct] action, and generally a year of organization.”

The DCNA also made inroads with several local and state research-oriented organizations. The DCNA joined with the American Friends Committee in Greensboro to get assistance in gathering “information and tactics for securing jobs.” The DCNA’s economic committee, through Wheeler’s acquaintance with Julius A. Thomas at the National Urban League, established a working relationship with that organization to obtain “pressure assistance with [the] Larger [National] Corporations from the top level.”⁷⁰³ It also worked

⁷⁰²“A Progress Report of the Economic Committee of the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs,” October 12, 1956, folder 7668f, McKissick Papers, 2; DCNA Economic Committee Meeting Minutes, November 15, 1956, folder 7668f, McKissick Papers; DCNA Economic Committee Meeting Minutes, November 19, 1956, folder 7668f, McKissick Papers; “Survey of Work done by the DCNA Economic Committee, December 6-8, 1956.

⁷⁰³DCNA Economic Committee Meeting Minutes, July 24, 1957, folder 7568f, McKissick Papers.; “Annual Report of the DCNA Economic Committee,” January 12, 1958, folder 7568f, McKissick Papers.

cooperatively with NCC's Social Sciences Department, utilizing faculty expertise and student resources to carry-out its action programs. The economic committee officers also met with several department and dime store managers in Durham with the hopes that they would consider hiring black employees, and the committee continued to discuss procedures for future economic boycotts.⁷⁰⁴ In 1958, the economic committee expanded its outreach and direct action programs significantly by seeking to "[secure] additional jobs for Negroes in areas where they have been heretofore denied employment on the basis of merit, devoid of segregational practices." The economic committee also teamed with the North Carolina Council on Human Relations (NCCHR), an organization where Wheeler also served as an executive committee member and state treasurer, using a \$5,000 grant from that organization "for the purpose of studying problems related to employment of Negro Youth in North Carolina." The organization also sponsored "Equal Opportunity Day" whereby Durham's Mayor Evans issued an official proclamation in support of fair job opportunities in Durham.⁷⁰⁵ During the summer of 1959, the DCNA's economic committee in conjunction with the American Friends Service Committee conducted a merit employment survey "to determine what training [was] needed by Negroes to be able to secure jobs which [were] presently withheld from [them], to determine what businesses [would be] willing to attempt to employ Negroes, and to be generally appraised as to what [was] being done in the Durham Community as it applie[d] to the employment of Negroes."⁷⁰⁶

⁷⁰⁴Ibid.

⁷⁰⁵"Annual Report of the DCNA Economic Committee," January 18, 1959, folder 7568f, McKissick Papers; "Report to Harry S. Jones," October 24, 1958, folder 7568f, McKissick Papers.

⁷⁰⁶"Project Proposal for Merit Employment Survey," 1959, folder 7568f, McKissick Papers; "Southeast Region Project Proposal: Merit Employment Survey," February 1959, folder 7568f, McKissick Papers.

“FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT IN SOCIETY”: THE 1960 SIT-INS IN NORTH CAROLINA

The Royal Ice Cream sit-in that occurred in Durham in 1957 did not generate the response needed to sustain the movement necessary to attack segregation at its core; it was the first of its kind in North Carolina. However, the total opposite was true on February 1, 1960, when four black students at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State College (NC A&T) in Greensboro, decided to embark on a similar attempt. That Monday, the four freshmen—Joseph McNeil, Ezell Blair, Jr., Franklin McCain, and David Richmond, walked into the local Woolworth’s store and staged a formal sit-in.⁷⁰⁷ Having arranged for someone to contact the local press at an agreed upon time, the group arrived at the downtown Woolworth’s, paid for a few school necessities and other personal items, and then proceeded to the lunch counter.⁷⁰⁸ Immediately, the four college students were refused service, but they explained that they had just been served in another area of the store and wondered why they could not be served at the lunch counter. They continued sitting, and maintained that they would not leave until they received service equaled to that of whites. After failing to obtain any service that day, the four friends returned the next day with twenty-five additional students from NC A&T; on each subsequent day, their numbers swelled significantly.⁷⁰⁹ By week’s end, students from Greensboro’s local high schools and colleges, including the all-black Bennett College for Women and the all-white Women’s College of the University of North Carolina, joined in the lunch counter sit-ins that also targeted S. H. Kress Co. store.⁷¹⁰

⁷⁰⁷William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 71, 80-82; “Students Protest Lunch Counter Segregation at Woolworth Store,” *Carolina Times*, February 6, 1960.

⁷⁰⁸*Ibid.*, 83.

⁷⁰⁹William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 83-84.

⁷¹⁰“WC Girls Aid Negro Protest,” *Durham Morning Herald*, February 5, 1960; “The Greensboro Scene,” *Carolina Times*, February 13, 1960.

Both stores were forced to close down that Saturday when someone phoned-in a bomb threat; the sit-ins prompted Greensboro Mayor George Roach to appeal to NC A&T students to end their demonstrations temporarily to avoid violence. In recognizing their short-term victory, the students agreed to halt their demonstrations for two weeks to allow for negotiations.⁷¹¹

Although the Greensboro students halted their demonstrations temporarily, their actions had already made a major impact on students throughout the rest of North Carolina. On February 8, exactly a week following the beginning of the Greensboro sit-ins, black student leaders in Durham and Winston-Salem began similar lunch counter sit-ins. The events soon spread to Charlotte and the state capital in Raleigh.⁷¹² In Durham, students from NCC and a few white Duke University students participated in that day's protests, entering the Woolworth store in downtown. When Woolworth's manager closed the store's lunch counter after a bomb threat, the students quickly proceeded to Kress; after it closed, they moved on to Walgreen's which promptly followed suit. Once the dime stores closed their lunch counters, students continued their protest by marching in picket lines throughout downtown.⁷¹³ Later that night, the student protesters received legal counsel from attorney Floyd McKissick and "learned then that they had the moral backing of the Durham Ministerial Alliance, the NAACP, and the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs." The next

⁷¹¹"Two Stores in Lunch Counter Integration Close," *Durham Morning Herald/Durham Sun*, February 6 or 7, 1960; "A&T Students Call Two Weeks Truce in Lunch Counter Protests," *Carolina Times*, February 20, 1960.

⁷¹²William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 86; "A&T Move Sets Throughout State Chain Reaction," *Carolina Times*, February 13, 1960; "Students Stage Sit-Down Protest: Results Unknown on Negotiations," *Campus Echo*, February 26, 1960.

⁷¹³"Woolworth Closed – Has Bomb Hoax after Sitdown," *Durham Sun*, February 8, 1960; "Sit-Down Strike Spreads to Six Tarheel Cities: Student-Faculty Group to Talk with Council," *Carolina Times*, February 13, 1960; Jesse Boston, "The Lunch Counter Sit-In Demonstrations in Durham, North Carolina," 25; "Woolworth's and Kress' Reopen with Counters Closed – Food Service is Limited in Firms Hit by Sitdowns," *DMH*, February 9, 1960; "Students Stage Sit-Down Protest: Results Unknown on Negotiations," *Campus Echo*, February 26, 1960; Jean Bradley Anderson, *Durham County*, 438; Christina Green, *Our Separate Ways*, 76; Osha Gray Davidson, *The Best of Enemies*, 101.

day, Durham's Mayor Emmanuel Evans sought an immediate solution to the sit-ins through negotiations. He assigned the task to the Mayor's Human Relations Committee (HRC), the biracial group set up in 1957 to help convince Durham's school board to allow black city leaders to assist with a reasonable school desegregation plan; the HRC failed in the previous instance. The HRC was headed by the Reverend Warren Carr, a white civic leader and minister at Watts Street Baptist Church.⁷¹⁴ Days after the initial sit-ins in Durham, Woolworth and Kress reopened their stores, but kept their lunch counters closed-off citing "in the interest of public safety."⁷¹⁵ Meanwhile, Walgreen's reopened as normal; Rose's removed its lunch counter stools and thereafter served white and black customers standing up.⁷¹⁶

North Carolina officials reacted to the statewide demonstrations by pointing out violations to state laws. Governor Luther H. Hodges, who oversaw the state's school desegregation crisis after *Brown*, remained doubtful that the sit-ins would achieve any significant gains.⁷¹⁷ State solicitor William H. Murdock called on dime store operators to utilize the state's trespassing laws to their advantage. He specifically referred to the State Supreme Court's verdict in the Royal Ice Cream sit-in (1957), which held that state statutes "place[d] no limitation on the right of the person in possession to object to a disturbance of his actual or constructive possession. The possessor [could] accept or reject whomsoever he

⁷¹⁴ "Wants Human Relations Body to Act – Evans Seeks Negotiations," *Durham Sun*, February 9, 1960; "Students Stage Sit-Down Protest: Results Unknown on Negotiations," *Campus Echo*, February 26, 1960; "Need to Negotiate," *Campus Echo*, February 26, 1960; Allan P. Sindler, *Negro Protest and Local Politics in Durham, N.C.* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 7-8.

⁷¹⁵ "Woolworth's and Kress' Reopen with Counters Closed – Food Service is Limited in Firms hit by Sitdowns," *Durham Morning Herald/Durham Sun*, February 9, 1960; "Students Stage Sit-Down Protest: Results Unknown on Negotiations," *Campus Echo*, February 26, 1960.

⁷¹⁶ Ibid.

⁷¹⁷ William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 86.

please[d] and for whatsoever whim suit[ed] his fancy...[and] race confer[ed] no prerogative on the intruder; nor [did] it impair his defense.’ ”⁷¹⁸ State Attorney General Malcolm Seawell agreed with the argument that business managers had the right to demand that trespassers leave, or otherwise risk being arrested for failure to do so. At the same time, Seawell clarified that potential customers had the right to seek services from retailers, but “private retail establishments ha[d] a legal right to operate their businesses without being interfered with, and to sell or not to sell to customers as they [saw] fit.’ ”⁷¹⁹ Seawell also blamed sit-in disturbances on outside agitators: “persons coming into North Carolina from other states” who he saw as “troublemakers...whose actions [could] only result in irreparable harm being done to racial relations...in North Carolina.”⁷²⁰ Noting that the state’s hands were tied, Seawell acknowledged that there were no official state laws that sanctioned segregation at lunch counters. But he also reminded the parties involved that local officials in cities and towns affected by sit-ins had the responsibility to maintain peace and order, particularly through initiating municipal ordinances to prevent further disruptions. Finally, he added that college and university administrators also had the responsibility to ensure that their students refrained from causing strife in the community.⁷²¹ In his disdain for those “outside agitators,” he told the New York-based American Civil Liberties Union, an organization that criticized his public statements regarding the sit-ins as being an affront to

⁷¹⁸“Lunch Counter Controversy Can be Averted – Murdock,” *Durham Morning Herald*, February 9?, 1960.

⁷¹⁹“Seawell Says Proprietors Can Select their Customers,” *Durham Morning Herald*, February 11, 1960.

⁷²⁰*Ibid.*

⁷²¹*Ibid.*; “Cities Can Suppress Such Activities by Passing new Ordinances Says Attorney General Seawell,” *Carolina Times*, February 20, 1960.

students' Fourteenth Amendment rights, that his statements "[were] none of [their] business."⁷²² He very bluntly told them that "[if they didn't] like it, [they] could lump it."⁷²³

In response to state leaders' appeal for college and university administrators to act responsibly, NCC president Dr. Alfonso Elder held a meeting that Wednesday between faculty members and leaders from the Student Welfare Committee and Student Government. After meeting for over two hours the group urged students and store operators to make an attempt at negotiations mediated by the HRC. The school designated the faculty-student group of campus representatives to enter into negotiations on behalf of student demonstrators; the group released a statement to the press detailing its willingness to negotiate, while also maintaining its belief in "the principles of democracy."⁷²⁴ Although the NCC negotiating committee recommended negotiations, it also sided with students because "to deny an individual because of his racial identity the privilege of enjoying services and courtesies that are extended to the general public [was] an act that [was] undemocratic, un-Christian and morally indefensible."⁷²⁵ None of the student demonstration leaders were represented on the student-faculty committee and many of those involved in the sit-ins were "disappoint[ed]" to learn about the decision to negotiate so early, and saw the move "as settling for less than the desired goal." Nevertheless, the student-faculty committee went into

⁷²² "You May Lump It,' Seawell Tells ACLU," *Durham Morning Herald/Durham Sun*, February 13, 1960; William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, 87.

⁷²³ Ibid.

⁷²⁴ "Negro Unit Here Backs Sitdowns," *Durham Sun*, February 12, 1960; "NCC Urges Negotiations in Students' Sitdown Here," *Durham Morning Herald*, February 13, 1960; "Sit-Down Strike Spreads to Six Tarheel Cities: Student-Faculty Group to Talk with Council," *Carolina Times*, February 13, 1960; "Segregation 'Undemocratic,' 'Indefensible,' NCC Asserts," *Carolina Times* February 20, 1960; "Students Stage Sit-Down Protest: Results Unknown on Negotiations," *Campus Echo*, February 26, 1960.

⁷²⁵ "Sit-Down Strike Spreads to Six Tarheel Cities: Student-Faculty Group to Talk with Council," *Carolina Times*, February 13, 1960.

negotiations while the student demonstrators temporarily halted their protests for the first time on Friday February 12.⁷²⁶

On Thursday February 11, no more than a few days after the sit-ins began in Durham, Wheeler and the DCNA outlined their strong support for the student demonstrators in a carefully crafted public statement. It is important to emphasize that this public support came during the initial week, rather than a week later when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave an uplifting speech to Durham blacks at White Rock Baptist Church.⁷²⁷ In representing the DCNA as its chairman, Wheeler praised the student activists for the “orderly and dignified manner in which these students have sought to make [the] state and nation fully aware of a pattern of discrimination which hinder[ed] the development of wholesome relations between the various racial groups which compose[d] the American citizenry.” Wheeler rejected calls from “portions of the daily press, certain public officials and other highly placed persons within the state” who wanted “the responsible Negro Leadership (including college presidents) to use its influence to halt activities of Negro students and their white counterparts.” In highlighting the requirements for New South prosperity, Wheeler remained adamant in the DCNA’s “obligation to support any peaceful movement which [sought] to remove from the customs of [their] beloved Southland; those unfair practices based upon race and color [which continued to be] a stumbling block to moral and economic progress of

⁷²⁶Ibid.; “Students Stage Sit-Down Protest: Results Unknown on Negotiations,” *Campus Echo*, February 26, 1960; “Need to Negotiate,” *Campus Echo*, February 26, 1960; “No Negotiations Without Student Leaders,” *Carolina Times*, February 20, 1960; “NCC Students to Chart Own Course of Action in Protest,” *Carolina Times*, February 27, 1960.

⁷²⁷Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 77. Green writes that “After the Reverends Martin Luther King Jr. and Ralph Abernathy appeared in Durham to cheer on the nascent protest movement, the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs also publicly endorsed the sit-ins.”; Osha Gray Davidson, *The Best of Enemies*, 95-110. Davidson also writes that “More surprising [in their response to the sit-ins] was the conversion of the black business and intellectual classes in Durham, best exemplified by the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs.

the region.” Next, Wheeler affirmed how “necessary” and crucial direct action protests had become in achieving the overall goals and objectives of the black freedom movement, noting that “Approximately two years [prior], the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs conducted a survey of the 5 and 10 cent stores located in Durham,” which “indicated that between 50 and 60 percent of the persons entering the Kress, Silvers, and Woolworth Stores, were colored people.” “Obviously,” Wheeler continued while making the connection between freedom of movement and equal employment, “the students’ protest [was] against a system which solicit[ed] and accept[ed] the trade of Negro patrons while denying them employment opportunities and the use of dining facilities which [were] usually offered for the exclusive convenience of white and foreign patrons.” In also directing his comments at white moderates, Wheeler clarified that while “many thoughtful Southerners believe[d] such practices to be morally wrong and economically unsound, the South as a whole, [had] not moved voluntarily toward eradicating such injustices as long as any vocal segment of the white population express[ed] its opposition.” He further explained why direct action protests now took precedence over past strategies as the “protest also recognize[d] the historic failures and frustrations of numerous efforts by Negro groups [such as the DCNA] to negotiate changes in the present pattern through persuasion and conference.” And that “the [most] important advances...in the field of civil rights” happened “against the backdrop of litigation and mass protest.”

In acknowledging the shared mantle of leadership, Wheeler explained that the students “now emerge[d] as a vital and strong group of stalwart citizens whose image of themselves is such that they are determined to accept no longer the inferior status which the South still [sought] to thrust upon them.” He also made it clear that this was a student-led

movement wherein students, and no one else, held the leverage to negotiate. In this way, Wheeler “hope[d] for successful negotiations between student leaders and representatives of the various stores affected.” In making a final appeal to New South prosperity, Wheeler noted that “Indeed, it is urgently necessary that we shall prove ourselves to be, in fact, what we have been saying we are when talking to those corporations which we have invited to establish new factories within [state] borders on grounds that there [was] in North Carolina a climate of racial tolerance and understanding which [would] enable personnel coming from other sections of the country to live in an atmosphere consistent with American ideals of freedom and equality for all.” Wheeler commended the students’ courage in the face of “being cursed, showered with eggs, and threatened with physical violence by irresponsible elements of...various N.C. communities.”

John Wheeler’s open support of direct action in 1960 was connected to his idea of freedom of movement, and how he envisioned that freedom for African Americans. Nothing had really changed about how Wheeler viewed direct action, and so it was no question by the 1960s that he had to publicly support it. What had changed, the major difference in 1960 was that Wheeler was now willing to put himself, his reputation, and his relationship with white leaders on the line if African Americans were to have full citizenship. It was the next logical step for African Americans because they had really exhausted all other tactics. It was an opportunity to work towards many of the same civil rights and economic objectives, but from a different angle. Direct action became the best way for blacks to physically initiate his idea of “unrestricted” freedom of movement, which ultimately centered on blacks’ ability to achieve integration. Direct action interrupted southern customs because it dramatized the very presence of blacks in previously restricted public spaces; when it came to white

businesses, it also highlighted the economic impact that direct action demonstrations could have, both because blacks would disrupt the operations of those establishments demonstrating the extent to which those businesses depended on black dollars, and because whites would avoid patronizing businesses where there were ongoing civil rights protests. As historian Charles Payne has also pointed out, this was also significant because “the sit-ins, like other forms of direct-action politics that were developed around them, also meant directly interfering with the life of a community so that it had to *respond*. If the powers-that-be would not respond to moral suasion, they *would* have to do something about disruption.”⁷²⁸

Despite the usefulness of direct action in potentially helping blacks obtain “physical” access, Wheeler’s idea of freedom of movement was not only about physical access, but it was also about what happened once blacks gained that initial access as much as anything else. African Americans also needed “maximum,” as opposed to “minimal,” access in all of those areas as well. In the area of employment opportunities, for instance, could an African American doctor expect the same staff privileges at a white hospital as a white doctor? Would that black doctor be allowed to treat white patients? Could a black banker employed by a majority-white institution expect to have an opportunity to rise through that company’s ranks—could they be president of that institution—or would their advancement within that company be capped at a certain level? Would an industrial worker have “the same open invitation to industry and to industrial employment or training or to promotion advantages that a white person would have[?]” For Wheeler, this went beyond token representation because freedom of movement and a completely integrated society were necessary elements

⁷²⁸Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 78 (italics mine).

in the larger equation of democracy, equality, and full citizenship.⁷²⁹ Wheeler's activism during the 1960s increasingly reflected his concern about the overall impact that integration would have from an institutional perspective. This new role focused on his unwavering support for student-led direct action, while at the same time continuing to press for civil rights through behind-the-scenes brokering at the local, state, and national level.

Dr. King and Reverend Ralph D. Abernathy's arrival to Durham a week after the sit-ins began in the city did serve as an inspiration and gave students an even stronger push. King and Abernathy came to Durham at the invitation of his former Boston University classmate Douglass Moore, who had tried unsuccessfully on several previous occasions to get King to speak in Durham.⁷³⁰ Upon his arrival King told reporters that continued segregation could potentially have even more severe economic consequences than lunch counter protests if states like North Carolina continued discrimination. That evening King and Abernathy spoke to between 1,200 and 1,500 audience members at a rally at Durham's White Rock Baptist Church.⁷³¹ Abernathy addressed the audience first. He had succeeded King as president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, the organization responsible for the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott. At one point in his speech, Abernathy turned directly

⁷²⁹Interview with John Hervey Wheeler by Robert Penn Warren, June 30, 1964, original interview transcript can be accessed online at "Robert Penn Warren's *Who Speaks for the Negro?*: an Archival Collection," http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/sites/default/files/RPW_reel_3.T.H.%20Wheeler.pgs_.968-1001.doc.pdf, 2; audio version also available through "Robert Penn Warren's *Who Speaks for the Negro?*: an Archival Collection," <http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/interview/john-hervey-wheeler>.

⁷³⁰Osha Gray Davidson, *the Best of Enemies*, 103.

⁷³¹"King Stresses Non-Violence in Lunch Counter Sitdowns," *Durham Morning Herald*, February 17, 1960; "Non-Violence Leader Speaks Before 1500," *Carolina Times*, February 20, 1960.

to the news cameras and reporters; taking aim at State Attorney General Seawell, he said, “write this down, and get it straight...I’m no outside agitator, America is my home.”⁷³²

In his speech, Dr. King, like Wheeler had the week prior, recognized the sit-ins as a student-led movement. He explained that the students had “taken the undying and passionate yearning for freedom and filtered it in [their] own soul and fashioned it into a creative protest that [was] destined to be one glowing epic of [their] time.”⁷³³ King linked the student sit-ins to an earlier non-violent tradition, a reference to the Montgomery bus boycott and even direct action protests initiated by CORE during the 1940s. He also reminded the audience that tokenism was not the desired outcome because it was “nothing but a new form of discrimination covered up with certain niceties of complexity.”⁷³⁴ The preacher assured the students that, morally, they were doing the right thing and urged them not to “fear going to jail.” “If the officials threaten[ed] to arrest [them] for standing up for [their] rights,” he continued “[they] must answer by saying that [they were] willing and prepared to fill up the jails of the souls.” “Maybe,” King went on to say, “it [would] take this willingness to stay in jail to arouse the dozing conscious of [the] nation.”⁷³⁵ Finally, King reassured students that they had the full support of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and urged

⁷³²“ ‘I’m no Outside Agitator,’ Montgomery’s Abernathy Says,” *Carolina Time*, February 20, 1960.

⁷³³“Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Speech at White Rock Baptist Church,” February 16, 1960, Appendix B, in Jesse Boston’s “The Lunch Counter Sit-In Demonstrations in Durham, North Carolina,” 57-60; “King Stresses Non-Violence in Lunch Counter Sitdowns,” *Durham Morning Herald*, February 17, 1960; “Non-Violence Leader Speaks Before 1500,” *Carolina Times*, February 20, 1960.

⁷³⁴Ibid.

⁷³⁵“Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Speech at White Rock Baptist Church,” February 16, 1960, Appendix B, in Jesse Boston’s “The Lunch Counter Sit-In Demonstrations in Durham, North Carolina,” 57-60; “King Stresses Non-Violence in Lunch Counter Sitdowns,” *Durham Morning Herald*, February 17, 1960; “Non-Violence Leader Speaks Before 1500,” *Carolina Times*, February 20, 1960.

both black and white “people of goodwill” to lend their support to students as well.⁷³⁶ After King’s speech, Reverend Douglas Moore asked the overflow audience to rise if they were willing to give their unwavering support to an all-out boycott of segregated stores. Everyone in the crowd stood-up, and during the church offering they eagerly flashed their dollars before dropping them in the donation buckets; their goal was “freedom, freedom, freedom.”⁷³⁷

In addition to pledging his unwavering support to the student protesters, the point of King’s visit was also to strategize about how his national civil rights organization, the SCLC, could effectively organize and help sustain these kinds of direct action protests. The “moment” that the sit-in movement provided was what Dr. King and his fellow civil rights leaders had been waiting on. During the second week of the sit-ins, Fred Shuttlesworth, a black minister and SCLC member from Birmingham, Alabama, had a speaking engagement at a Highpoint, North Carolina church and was able to witness first-hand the “well-dressed students step off in good order,” and so he alerted King. Shuttlesworth noted that they had to “ ‘get with this [sit-in movement]’ ” because it had the potential to “ ‘shake up the world.’ ”⁷³⁸

Wheeler had his own connections to King and his family, which also helps in understanding his broader commitment to linking education with economic equality. Wheeler was also among the group, along with John Stewart, C. O. Pearson, Asa T.

⁷³⁶Ibid.

⁷³⁷“King Stresses Non-Violence in Lunch Counter Sitdowns,” *Durham Morning Herald*, February 17, 1960; “Negro Lunch Counter Bid Gets Support: Church Unit Cites Moral Right for Service Equality,” *Durham Morning Herald*, February, 1960.

⁷³⁸Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1988), 273.

Spaulding, and Louis Austin that met King and Abernathy at the airport upon their arrival to Durham. Besides also being King's fellow Atlantan and Morehouse alum, Wheeler and the younger King's father, Reverend Martin Luther King Sr., attended Morehouse together in the late 1920s. At the time the younger King became a student at Morehouse, Wheeler had already served nearly nine years on the college's board where the elder King also served since the early 1950s.⁷³⁹ Already acquainted through their two families, in December 1956 Wheeler and King sat on a United Negro College Fund (UNCF) panel called "The Negro Southerner Speaks." The two continued to run into each other at annual UNCF-sponsored events.⁷⁴⁰ When Wheeler sent King get well wishes after the latter was stabbed in New York in 1958, he reminded King that "it occurred to me that one year ago this week, we were in the same city for participation in the United Negro College Fund's 'Report on the South' at Orchestra Hall."⁷⁴¹ Furthermore, when Dr. King and his wife Coretta Scott King moved from Montgomery, Alabama, back to Atlanta where the SCLC headquarters was located in 1959, the Kings lived in the home owned and formerly occupied by Wheeler's parents, John Leonidas and Margaret Wheeler, located at 563 Johnson Avenue. When her husband died in 1957 Margaret moved to Durham with her son and his family, leaving the home vacant.⁷⁴²

⁷³⁹Martin Luther King, Sr., *Daddy King: An Autobiography* (New York: Morrow, 1980),...; "John H. Wheeler Named Trustee of Morehouse," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 21, 1935.

⁷⁴⁰*Carolina Times*, December 22, 1956.

⁷⁴¹ Letter to MLK from Wheeler, October 1, 1958, Folder: Correspondence – Personal 1957-1950 (3 of 14), John Hervey Wheeler Correspondence Box, 1952-1954; 1957-1959, Wheeler Papers; Letter from MLK to Wheeler, October 10, 1958, Folder: Correspondence – Personal 1957-1950 (3 of 14), John Hervey Wheeler Correspondence Box, 1952-1954; 1957-1959, Wheeler Papers.

⁷⁴²Interview with William and Josephine Clement, by Walter and Juanita Weare, June 19, 1986 C-0031, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/C-0031/C-0031.html>, 52-53.

In the weeks following their initial sit-ins, the Durham college students agreed to halt demonstrations temporarily in order to allow for negotiations with downtown businesses. Nevertheless, by late February it was clear that negotiations were going nowhere because of what students saw as NCC officials and the HRC stepping over their bounds by pushing student leaders to the margins during talks. An editorial in the *Carolina Times* shed some light on the problem that students had with that arrangement. “Since no school official had any hand in initiating the sit-down protests, [the newspaper saw] no sensible reason why any of them should assume the role as the sole representative of students in any future program pertaining to them.” “If and when it [became] necessary to negotiate with the stores,” the newsweekly continued, “it [was their] feeling that only in the presence and with the approval of the student leaders should any attempt at settlement be made.” Lacy Streeter, a junior at NCC and the main demonstration leader, also expressed his concern that adult leaders from NCC and the HRC disregarded the goals and demands of student protesters in their efforts to reach a compromise. Streeter also maintained that students were “not hopeful that [they could] obtain satisfaction through [that particular negotiation] process.” This was especially true since “several meetings [were] held between the two groups, but there [was] no official statement as to the progress of talks.” Streeter went on to tell the local press that “none of the parties involved in the original protest were a part of the negotiations nor any of the representatives of stores hit by the protesters were on the committee.” The HRC seemed to singlehandedly takeover talks; thus, student protesters “believe[d] the main purpose of the talks would be to squash the whole thing rather than reach a genuine solution.” The HRC went as far as “authorize[ing] the Rev. Warren Carr...to issue a statement” detailing a

reached agreement.⁷⁴³ No such statement was ever issued, and a lack of an agreement prompted students to resume demonstrations through early March.⁷⁴⁴

John Wheeler's stance during such an intense period was important to the new student movement. It is difficult to determine the exact morning that Wheeler went on the picket line to finally put his own words to action as it related to the sit-in movement. But one thing was for sure: from that moment on, Wheeler became a fixture at every major direct action demonstration that occurred in Durham. That is not to suggest that Wheeler marched with student activists in every single direct action demonstration, but he always made his support for their efforts clear. Additionally, when there was a question about where he stood on a given protest, he made his position unmistakably clear with his physical presence. During the 1960s, it was Wheeler's unquestionable loyalty to those student activists that politicians like Terry Sanford remembered about him. Sanford later told an interviewer that quite often during the that time "John Wheeler was more inclined to be caught up in the activists' point of view [to the extent] that sometimes [it] would have been detrimental [for Sanford politically] if [they] had followed what [Wheeler] wanted."⁷⁴⁵ For Wheeler, the goals and objectives of the black freedom movement had not changed; the tools by which to get there had just expanded. The difference in Wheeler's activism that day in 1960 was that he used a different weapon in his battle for freedom. His actions proved how far he was now

⁷⁴³ "Student Demonstrations Continue in Durham: Picket Stores; Negotiators Get Statement Ready," *Carolina Times*, March 6, 1960.

⁷⁴⁴ "Student-Faculty Group to Talk with Council," *Carolina Times*, February 13, 1960; "No Negotiations Without Student Leaders," *Carolina Times*, February 20, 1960; "NCC Students to Chart Own Course of Action in Protest," *Carolina Times*, February 27, 1960; "Student Demonstrations Continue in Durham: Picket Stores; Negotiators Get Statement Ready," *Carolina Times*, March 6, 1960.

⁷⁴⁵ Interview with Terry Sanford, by William H. Chafe, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, circa 1975, <http://library.uncg.edu/dp/crg/oralHistItem.aspx?i=67>, 5.

willing to go in the quest for New South prosperity. As DCNA and NAACP attorney Floyd McKissick described this useful approach, "Direct action require[d] a greater risk. You are out there when you take a direct action. You are totally exposed." Wheeler was exposed when he let student demonstrators use the lobby of the Mechanics and Farmers Bank in downtown Durham to warm-up, rest, and drink hot chocolate on cold winter days during demonstrations. The same could be said when he provided financial assistance to help bail student activists out of jail for their civil disobedience. Most of all, Wheeler took an even greater risk when white leaders in Durham begged him for his help in shutting down the sit-in movement.⁷⁴⁶

"SOME VERY REAL DANGERS": A WHITE MODERATE RESPONDS TO THE SIT-INS

As the situation with the sit-in movement in Durham reached an impasse, it exacerbated racial anxieties among the city's white leadership. The HRC headed by Reverend Carr called for negotiations once more. This time Carr planned a "secret" behind-the-scenes meeting on March 15 with about thirty other influential black and white community leaders. While early attempts at negotiations included student leaders to some degree, this time Carr only invited members from the traditional black leadership along with white leaders. While there is no official list of the meeting's attendees, in addition to Wheeler (who was not a member of the HRC) there was Asa T. Spaulding, who gathered the black leaders in attendance. Other black leaders included school board member Rencher N. Harris and NCC president Dr. Alfonso Elder, both in attendance as members of the HRC. Carr made sure that white attendees were moderates on the race issue, rather than extreme

⁷⁴⁶"Report of the President, J. H. Wheeler to Stockholders for the Year Ending December 31, 1960 at its Annual Meeting," January 9, 1961."

segregationists. State senator and businessman Watts Hill, Jr. attended as a member of Durham's white power-structure.⁷⁴⁷ This particular meeting was a significant tipping point in negotiations, not as a result of any particular agreement, but because it marked another moment in which Wheeler made clear his firm support of the sit-in demonstrations along with his unwillingness to serve as a broker in the absence of the students themselves.

Wheeler's outright refusal to negotiate on behalf of the students when he felt them perfectly capable of negotiating for themselves infuriated white leaders in attendance. He defended student protesters in the face of white power-structure. Watts Hill, Jr. was especially outraged and the most vocal about Wheeler's insistence that students be represented by their own selected leadership, rather than those individuals who had not initiated the movement. Hill made his disappointment at how the meeting unfolded clear to Wheeler in a confidential letter just two days after that Tuesday's meeting. In outlining his personal feelings as a self-proclaimed "moderate," Hill felt slighted by Wheeler since the two "had numerous extremely pleasant and productive conversations" throughout the years which gave Hill "a rare opportunity to gain a very real understanding of the problems and the objectives of the Negro citizens."⁷⁴⁸ Hill confessed that he wanted to provide Wheeler with his most "honest and blunt reactions with the hope that they would give [Wheeler] pause to stop and consider whether [he was] defeating the very goal which [he] attempt[ed] to achieve."⁷⁴⁹ He believed that the recent disturbances in Durham were completely "out of hand." "Not only [were they] out of hand," Hill insisted, "but [that] there [were] elements in

⁷⁴⁷Letter from Watts Hill, Jr. to Wheeler, March 17, 1960; Allan P. Sindler, *Negro Protest and Local Politics in Durham, N.C.* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 9; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 78.

⁷⁴⁸Letter from Watts Hill, Jr. to Wheeler, March 17, 1960, 1.

⁷⁴⁹*Ibid.*

the Negro community, perhaps including [Wheeler], who believe[d] that this may [have] even be[en] desirable.”⁷⁵⁰ Hill also thought that the sit-ins happened because blacks felt that “progress by legal means...through the courts...[and] legislative bodies...[came] too slow and that adequate progress [could] only be obtained by applying economic sanctions.”⁷⁵¹

It also became obvious that Wheeler was the main source of Hill’s discontent. In calling Wheeler’s attention to Tuesday’s meeting, Hill specifically pointed out that he was “troubled greatly by what seemed to [him] to be the first evidence of a breakdown in integrity [on the part of Wheeler], a willingness to employ almost any means to achieve the end goal.” This gave Hill the “impression that the Negro race...throughout the South if not throughout the Nation – [would be] willing to suffer temporarily in order to achieve [their] long range goals.” In response to this, Wheeler wrote in the margins of Hill’s letter that “Isn’t this to be commended?” Hill pointed to one particular instance during the March 15 meeting when Wheeler “took issue with the implied comments of, [as Hill] believe[d], both Dr. Elder and Rencher Harris by stating that the current sit-down situation [was] truly a ‘grass roots, spontaneous’ movement,” a point that Hill strongly disagreed with. “Please do not misunderstand me,” Hill wrote apologetically, “I am not saying that you are not telling the truth. I am saying that I find it difficult to understand how you can be so uniformed on this matter when you are so magnificently well-informed in every other area.” In the margins Wheeler scribbled that he saw “no evidence to substantiate said information [by Hill].” In acknowledging past battles with Wheeler, Hill “realize[d] that [Wheeler had] not been treated with complete candor by the white community in recent months much less during the many past years, but...mistakes of one group [did] not justify similar mistakes on the part of the

⁷⁵⁰ Letter from Watts Hill, Jr. to Wheeler, March 17, 1960, 1.

⁷⁵¹ Ibid., 2.

other.” “Two wrongs,” Hill reminded Wheeler, “still [did] not make a right.” To Wheeler, the dangers seemed well worth the fight, and it came as no surprise that white leaders sought Wheeler out with the idea to negotiate their way out of the student protests, but this time the thing would not die-out in the face of white reaction. In some ways, Hill and other white leaders were at the mercy of Wheeler because during past squabbles, they could always depend on him to bring an objective and calming voice to the discussion. Wheeler had plenty of past experiences with whites where they resisted compromise.

There were two “very real dangers” that Hill warned Wheeler to be concerned about. The first danger, as Hill saw it, had to do with a political backlash—more directly the impact that the sit-in movement would have on the increasingly tense 1960 gubernatorial campaign. In North Carolina and the rest of the one-party South, the Democratic primary mattered most, and would surely determine who the state’s governor would that year as well. As that year’s primary heated-up, with candidates adding their names to the contest, the issue of race came to the forefront—heightened by the sit-in movement and desegregation in general. By March, John Larkins, Terry Sanford, I. Beverly Lake, and state attorney general Malcolm Seawell had all launched their bids for governor. On February 4, just days after the Greensboro sit-ins started, Sanford threw his hat in the ring making a “New Day” in North Carolina the motto of his entire campaign. As a politically savvy Fayetteville lawyer and former state senator, Sanford was considered to be a racial moderate; during the school desegregation crisis following *Brown* in the 1950s, Sanford became a vocal proponent of the Pearsall Plan, a directive that John Wheeler condemned time and again because he saw it as “economic suicide” for the state. In contrast, Lake, himself a devout racist and former assistant state attorney general, had argued for continued segregation before the U. S.

Supreme Court in *Brown's* aftermath. Watts Hill explained to Wheeler that after talking with some of his closest associates, whom he described as politically astute, there was a strong possibility that Lake could become governor.⁷⁵² According to Hill, even Lake's entrance into the race came in direct response to the student sit-ins as "the timing could not have been worse."⁷⁵³ On this point, Wheeler conceded acknowledging that: "this is true – or it would [Wheeler felt] have been wise not to push the sit-ins until after the 2nd [Democratic] primary."⁷⁵⁴ While Wheeler agreed that the sit-ins had potentially disastrous political implications for blacks, he refused to back down from his stance that the new student movement had merit. Hill reminded Wheeler that although many whites publicly supported the other more moderate Democratic candidates Sanford, Larkins, Seawell, they would nevertheless "vote for Lake when they [got] in the voting booths" and split the anti-Lake vote three-ways.⁷⁵⁵ In Wheeler's opinion, it was "Not unusual [for whites to publicly support moderate candidates, while casting their actual ballots for pro-segregationists]."⁷⁵⁶

The second danger that Hill urged Wheeler to think about was his belief that the sit-ins would further alienate white moderates like him. Hill provided an example of a conversation he had with one of the other white leaders in attendance at Tuesday's meeting. The white leader presented Hill with a laundry list of questions: "what [were they] facing? A rule or ruin proposition? By saying that there are not even temporary limitations to the aspirations

⁷⁵²John Drescher, *Triumph of Good Will: How Terry Sanford Beat a Champion of Segregation and Reshaped the South* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000).

⁷⁵³Letter from Watts Hill, Jr. to Wheeler, March 17, 1960, 3.

⁷⁵⁴*Ibid.*

⁷⁵⁵*Ibid.*

⁷⁵⁶*Ibid.*

of the Negro community, is this to be interpreted that every forward step will, in turn, immediately bring on four or five more demands on the basis that success has come once and that proves that what is needed is more of the same? Will there be no time allowed in the future for the white community to assimilate the forward steps?" Wheeler quipped in the margins, "Isn't turn about fair play?" His more serious response acknowledged that "No this [was] probably not the idea. Of the Negro." Hill also pointed to the concerns of a moderate white minister who approached him, worried about black protesters showing up at white churches demanding that they desegregate. Hill maintained that actions like these were "causing many a previous moderate to say, 'what are [blacks] trying to do, destroy their friends?' " Hill again pointed to the potential consequences, reminding Wheeler that "the knife cuts both ways...It is one thing to solidify the minority. It is quite something else to solidify the majority" because "the majority will win out." "And," Hill continued in a threatening tone "in North Carolina, don't forget that the majority also writes the laws."

Hill concluded his letter by asking "where [does] one go from here[?]"⁷⁵⁷ He offered Wheeler a solution and made a request:

the Negro community has made its point and if the demonstrations were to be called off for six months, then [he thought] it would be possible to go to top management outside of the Southeast and get them, as a matter of national policy, to feed white and Negro alike and, if that did not work, then to just close the lunch counters and stop serving food entirely.⁷⁵⁸

Hill asked a question similar to his previous one, but slightly rephrased, " 'How much, how soon?' "⁷⁵⁹ " 'Too much, too soon,' " he warned "then the Negro community [would] suffer

⁷⁵⁷Ibid., 5.

⁷⁵⁸Letter from Watts Hill, Jr. to Wheeler, March 17, 1960, 5.

⁷⁵⁹Ibid.

major reverses because they [were], after all, still the minority. The climate in this community was improving. Look how public school desegregation, token though it may be, has been accepted. But the way the Negro community is proceeding now, at least as interpreted by the white community, would indicate that you are in danger of losing what you have fought for[,] for so long. I ask whether this is what you want?”⁷⁶⁰

The existing channel between white and black leaders in Durham, as far as Wheeler was concerned, was closed-off temporarily. African Americans had wanted more than to just make a point as the sit-in movement continued the next week. And since white leaders were so used to negotiating specifically with black business leaders like Wheeler, and with Asa T. Spaulding to a lesser extent when it came to community matters, the white leadership was now at somewhat of a disadvantage because the only option left in front of them was to directly establish talks with the young, brazen, uncompromising risk takers—those sit-in participants willing to sacrifice their bodies—the threat of possible violence and going to jail in order to force immediate changes in their communities. They were willing to open themselves up to scrutiny in the name of freedom of movement, equal access, and full citizenship; once the students had taken that step, there was no turning back. In understanding the role that Wheeler played in defending the sit-ins, one might also consider whether or not the sit-in movement would have succeeded on the level it did and with the same momentum had the traditional black leadership not supported it. Wheeler could have used his economic sway over the black community, which he often did, in order to get blacks to side with him on either side. In short, Wheeler probably had more say-so when it came to the sit-ins than what he might have let on. Watts Hill’s perceptions about Wheeler’s possible

⁷⁶⁰Letter from Watts Hill, Jr. to Wheeler, March 17, 1960, 5.

involvement were probably correct, given Hill's reasoning. Wheeler held leverage with NCC students—they knew who he was, they knew about his black business activism, and they understood his views when it came to civil rights. He frequently spoke to the NCC students on campus; in January 1960, for example, Wheeler gave a lecture regarding his recent trip to Apartheid South Africa and told the students about his refusal to participate in the United States-South Africa Leader Exchange Program (US-SALEP) on a second-class basis.

The HRC along with the thirty community leaders met once more in March where they came up with a proposal which called for desegregation at the three main lunch counters on an agreed upon date. According to their proposal, desegregation would take place after a temporary halt in lunch counter demonstrations, and then proceed on a small-scale before being completely integrated. The proposal was subsequently accepted by student protestors, but rejected by the lunch counter chains; thereafter the Durham sit-ins continued through the spring and summer.⁷⁶¹ By the end of April, students from across the South met at Shaw University in Raleigh to determine for themselves how to proceed with the momentum ushered in by sit-in demonstrations. There they organized the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC pronounced Snick) to manage the new student movement. Throughout the next decade SNCC activists would become the heartbeat of the black freedom movement.⁷⁶²

In April, a month before the May 28 Democratic primary, Watts Hill, Jr. contacted John Wheeler again, this time to talk straight politics. Hill's March letter to Wheeler failed

⁷⁶¹ Allan P. Sindler, *Negro Protest and Local Politics in Durham, N.C.* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 10-11.

⁷⁶² Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1981), 19-21; Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 239-241; Jack Michael McElreath, "The Cost of Opportunity," 229.

to convince the latter to help squash the sit-ins. Now running out of time before the primary, Hill called on Wheeler for his political support. He attempted to persuade Wheeler to pledge his allegiance to a particular candidate for governor. Hill's man was Malcolm Seawell, the state attorney general who, only a few months earlier, had called the sit-in movement a ploy by "outside agitators." Hill now had the task of convincing Wheeler and the DCNA why they had to endorse Seawell in the primary. Hill worried that Wheeler and the DCNA had already made-up their minds to back Terry Sanford before Seawell's Durham campaign committee could make its pitch to the DCNA about why black Durhamites should vote for Seawell. Hill reasoned that the only two candidates really vying for black votes were Sanford and Seawell since "John Larkins [did not meet the DCNA's] standards," and because "Beverly Lake [was] so obviously not the candidate [for black North Carolinians]." Hill pointed out that a good argument could have been made for Sanford since "he [was] the 'leading' candidate historically in that his machine [had] been organized longer—some [people said] since the fifth grade." However, Hill presented Wheeler with a scenario that pitted Sanford against Lake in the second Democratic primary run-off, arguing that Wheeler wouldn't "be able to tell who [was] speaking on the question of desegregation" since "Sanford want[ed] to win too badly to oppose Lake's position." "The real danger," Hill explained was "that Lake may be elected." Hill reminded Wheeler about the contentious Frank Graham-Willis Smith senate race (1950), in which race-baiting played a key factor in helping Smith defeat Graham; Smith's camp also highlighted Graham's liberal politics as a threat to North Carolina.

While outlining Sanford's ambiguous stance on desegregation, Hill tried to explain why Seawell had yet to make a clear distinction between his position on desegregation and

that of Lake's. Hill reasoned that "If Seawell were to speak more strongly on the question of desegregation that it might well [have] elect[ed] Lake by excluding Seawell from the second primary." Seawell's "great struggle," cried Hill would be "get[ting] into the second primary and the key vote [was] going to be the vote of the negro community." Therefore, Hill advised Wheeler that "the time for drawing the [battle] lines [was] in the second primary not the first primary." "John, I am worried about the future of the South," said Hill "and the future of all citizens of the State and I do mean most specifically the negro community." However, "The timing of the sit-down demonstrations has made this a terribly different time for any statewide political candidate to speak his true feelings." By that June, after Sanford and Lake were the only two Democratic candidates left standing, Wheeler and the DCNA had endorsed Sanford for governor and collected financial contributions from the black community towards his gubernatorial campaign.⁷⁶³

In the midst of the Durham sit-ins during that summer, representatives from the national lunch counter chains finally decided on another course of action. They contacted the HRC and black leaders about reconsidering the earlier three-point proposal. Once they renewed negotiations, the parties reached a settlement that included desegregating the lunch counters even earlier than they previously discussed. On July 27, direct action demonstrations aimed at lunch counters in Durham came to an end. As part of the new agreement, lunch counters were to desegregate beginning August 1. Durham joined other

⁷⁶³Letter to Terry Sanford (Campaign Headquarters) from John Wheeler, June 22, 1960; "List of Donors to Terry Sanford's Campaign (Mostly top businessmen from Durham, especially from NCM)," June 22, 1960, Asa and Elna Spaulding Papers; Letter from Asa Spaulding to Wheeler with campaign contributions, June 21, 22, 1960, Asa and Elna Spaulding Papers.

North Carolina cities such as Winston-Salem, Charlotte, Greensboro, and High Point in desegregating its lunch counters.⁷⁶⁴

Watts Hill's prediction about the May 28 Democratic primary was not off by much in the end. Sanford came in first place with forty-four percent of the vote, and his nearest rival was in fact I. Beverly Lake with twenty-eight percent. Lake's second-place victory in many ways came as a surprise considering Larkins held strong party support, and Seawell came from the current Hodges administration. In the weeks leading to the June 25 Democratic primary run-off between Sanford and Lake, the latter continued to run on a segregationist platform before being defeated by Sanford for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination; Sanford had skillfully avoided getting into a political tug-of-war on the race issue deflecting his opponents attempts at "injecting a false issue on race," by letting North Carolina voters know he would give it "prayerful consideration." In the general election that November, Sanford won his race for governor without difficulty, defeating Republican candidate Robert Gavin.⁷⁶⁵

During Governor Terry Sanford's inaugural address on January 5, 1961, he continued with his campaign message calling for a "New Day" in North Carolina. The central part of the new governor's speech focused on his strong commitment to improving North Carolina's public education. Sanford believed that improving the state's struggling school system by providing top-notch education to all citizens, black and white, would

⁷⁶⁴Sindler, *Negro Protest and Local Politics in Durham, N.C.*, 11-12; Chris Howard "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize," 37-38; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 81; Jack Michael McElreath, "The Cost of Opportunity," 231.

⁷⁶⁵Howard E. Covington, Jr. and Marion A. Ellis, *Terry Sanford: Politics, Progress, and Outrageous Ambitions* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 231, 235-236, 239; Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs*, 41, 43.

ultimately help move the state forward economically.⁷⁶⁶ Governor Sanford's emphasis on first-class education for all North Carolinians went over well with Wheeler, given the latter's argument in the previous decade that North Carolina's failure to provide equal educational opportunities to all citizens would continue to "shackle" the state's economy. John Wheeler would have come across Terry Sanford's radar as early as 1955, when Sanford was still a state senator (1953-1955), as Wheeler crisscrossed the state that year arguing passionately about the importance of North Carolina no longer wasting time supporting school segregation because of the burden it placed on New South prosperity. That February, Wheeler spoke before the North Carolina General Assembly, and at that moment probably made a strong impression on North Carolina's future governor. Once Sanford stepped into his new role as the state's chief executive officer, Wheeler would have still been wary of the young governor given Sanford's stance on school desegregation in the previous years. Unlike Sanford, Wheeler had opposed the Pupil Assignment Act (1955) and the Pearsall Plan (1956), nevertheless the hopes of a "New Day" still had promise. Wheeler and Sanford were both skillful when it came to politics—and they both spoke the same language when it came to the need for more jobs and better access to educational opportunities for all of North Carolina's citizens. "The future entranced Sanford," as one of his political aids explained; and Wheeler along with the DCNA wasted little time in demanding that the new governor provide an even "Bright[er] Sunshine" of a "New Day" to black North Carolinians.⁷⁶⁷

⁷⁶⁶Howard E. Covington, Jr. and Marion A. Ellis, *Terry Sanford*, 238-239; Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs*, 43-45.

⁷⁶⁷"Terry Sanford and the New South"; Letter from Wheeler to Sanford, April 1961.

CONCLUSION

By February 1960, John Wheeler had already begun to see the potential significance in the burgeoning direct action phase of the civil rights movement as a tactic for meeting the goals and objectives of blacks' battle for freedom. It was a way to move beyond the stalled realities and limitations of legal strategies. As early as January 1956, a year before the Royal Ice Cream Sit-in shifted black Durham's attention to mass non-violent direct action, Wheeler had been inspired by the Montgomery bus boycott; so much so that he asked a group of blacks attending an Emancipation Day celebration if they had the "courage and discipline" to seek their freedom of movement through direct action. He encouraged his audience to stand up to racial inequality with the same bravery that their counterparts in Alabama showed.

John Wheeler's words challenged a young Reverend Douglas E. Moore to do some soul searching of his own in order to rise to the occasion by setting out to change the Durham community. The impact that Wheeler's speech had on Moore is very important in understanding Wheeler's perspective as a black business activist when it came to direct action. This was very much a part of Wheeler's desire to find additional weapons to confront the continued problems brought on by racial inequality; these were problems that could no longer be laid out in the courtroom alone, or strictly through brokering with whites. Once reality set in for Wheeler that *Brown* would be resisted at every turn, he soon explored other options to see that the gains of the "legal" or "first" phase of the black freedom movement was realized in accordance with his New South prosperity vision.

The 1960 sit-in movement marked a clear beginning to a new chapter in the battle for freedom. In a much broader context, the sit-ins underscored that this was indeed a "dangerous age" because African Americans were now willing to risk their lives in a literal

sense by disrupting community operations in order to secure the full citizenship rights that democracy entailed. At the same time, direct action also highlighted issues of employment opportunities for African Americans as well. The black community itself was ready and prepared for a more aggressive attack toward actually breaking down the physical barriers to segregation. And black and white high school and college students led the way in this new push. Wheeler and the DCNA leadership stood relentlessly and unapologetically firm behind student activists in that effort. The most important role, then, that Wheeler played during this time was speaking up on behalf of the students when their voices were unfairly marginalized during behind-the-scenes negotiations that had become so representative of how both black and white leaders in Durham attempted to handle racial discord. By outright rejecting the idea of negotiating an end to the sit-ins without the presence of students who had put their bodies on the line, John Wheeler gave voice and even more legitimacy to the new student movement. And he drew a hard-line that he refused to cross. While the sit-in movement succeeded because it also spread like wild-fire, the hard-line positions taken by individual leaders like Wheeler in favor of mass, non-violent direct action protests proved extremely effective as well.

CHAPTER 6

“THE BRIGHT SUNSHINE OF A NEW DAY”: EQUAL EMPLOYMENT, VOTING RIGHTS, AND PUBLIC POLICY AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL, 1961-1964

Now, however, we are concerned with the task of winning the battle for the minds of men that we may learn the secret of living together in brotherhood with mutual respect for one another. The American Negro wants no special trains, no special buses, no special schools, no special factories in which to work. He simply wants the same job opportunities in industry and other lines of employment with the right to be promoted and paid on the same basis as other Americans.

—John Hervey Wheeler, 1954

In the spring of 1961, John Wheeler presented Governor Terry Sanford with a rather bold fifteen-page blueprint on how Sanford could make his “New Day” proclamation more meaningful to black North Carolinians. It was a direct response to Sanford's inaugural address that January. “North Carolina cannot,” Wheeler argued “enjoy the bright sunshine of a New Day in industry, agriculture, education, and democratic living unless it frees each one of its citizens to develop to the maximum of his capabilities.” At the very top of Wheeler’s list of priorities stood equal employment opportunities for blacks. Sanford’s declaration had much to do with new beginnings in education, but for Wheeler, those new beginnings had to also start first with actual jobs; specifically, drastic policy changes were needed in state employment. If one could not get the state government to change its own employment policies right away, then how could one expect private businesses to change their policies? In other words, the state government had to serve as an effective model and prime example in opening up job opportunities to blacks. Sanford's New Day proclamation also represented a

fresh outlook on the state's economic future; it represented progress and a move forward in the state's prosperity. But from Wheeler's perspective, the state of black employment continued to determine how far and how much the state could move ahead economically.⁷⁶⁸

John Wheeler's jobs blueprint to Sanford was not an end-all be-all solution. It only represented a starting point; it marked another step in the equality of opportunity battle in employment. Wheeler suggested several ways to initiate this process. First, the local, state, and federal government needed increase representation of qualified black professionals. According to Wheeler, North Carolina made some investments in higher education to help its black citizens get training in graduate and professional schools, but the investment was lost as those individuals left the state as a result of limited job opportunities in their fields. In short, the state did not take full advantage of its black manpower. Second, changes in employment policies had to also begin across the board and on a much broader level within state and federal entities, particularly as it related to employment agencies. Wheeler specifically singled-out the North Carolina Employment Security Commission (ESC) and its local offices across the state regarding their blatant discriminatory employment practices. The question became how one could trust a government agency, whose sole function it was to assist all citizens in finding jobs and ensuring that new employment policies were implemented, when their own hiring and promoting practices contradicted the goal of fair employment? Third, qualified blacks had to be placed in positions of authority where they could be actively involved in policymaking decisions as well. Blacks were needed in high-level management and administrative positions in order to ensure that once policy changes were made, they would be implemented and continued on a permanent basis. Finally, blacks deserved a chance to maximize their full capabilities through unrestricted recruitment and

⁷⁶⁸Letter from Wheeler to Terry Sanford, April 29, 1961, Floyd B. McKissick Papers.

training. That also meant merited advancement through the ranks of a given agency; there could be no glass ceiling placed on how far blacks could move up.⁷⁶⁹

Between 1961 and 1964, Wheeler's jobs blueprint not only served as a potential guide to the Sanford administration, but it also dictated Wheeler's own activism related to equal employment opportunities for blacks as he adhered to that same plan. On the state level, Wheeler became one of the black leaders that Sanford frequently sought out for advice on issues specifically related to African Americans. Just as Wheeler's jobs blueprint to Sanford represented a considerable step in removing barriers to better job opportunities for black North Carolinians, Wheeler also recognized that black employment required involvement exceeding the state level alone. He believed that states like North Carolina would only take action in response to federal mandates and public policies established by the president himself; even then, constant pressure on local, state, and national leaders was necessary in order to actually implement those changes. To accomplish this goal, Wheeler relied on other political connections, particularly his appointment to the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity (PCEEO) in 1961. In this way, he had a direct hand in confronting the issue of unfair employment practices at the national level. Furthermore, Wheeler did not stop at seeking equal employment, but he also used his national connections to increase voting rights for blacks as well. His objective was to make certain that federal policies effectively trickled down to the state and local levels.

⁷⁶⁹Ibid.

THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION AND CIVIL RIGHTS: THE PCEEEO AND VEP, 1961-1962

The 1960 sit-in movement brought attention to civil rights as a national issue during that year's presidential election between Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice-President Richard M. Nixon. The national leadership looked to interracial organizations like the Southern Regional Council (SRC) to meet the increasing challenges posed by non-violent direct action protests. During the presidential campaign, the Kennedy camp expressed an interest in working with SRC in some capacity. As early as October 1960, SRC commissioned Daniel Pollitt, a University of North Carolina law professor, to study ways the president could deal with the country's civil rights issues without having to push civil rights legislation through Congress. As an SRC executive committee member, John Wheeler read and commented on earlier drafts of the report that ultimately influenced national public policy related to the black freedom movement.⁷⁷⁰

The SRC later published its report as *The Federal Executive and Civil Rights*, and it submitted this report to the president in January 1961. The report highlighted much needed improvements in voting, housing, employment, and education for blacks. When it came to voting, the document outlined that “a national [voter] registration drive, under the personal sponsorship of the President, should be launched.”⁷⁷¹ In other areas, the document recommended tighter restrictions be placed on federal employment practices including “effective enforcement of the bar against discriminatory employment by government contractors,” the “aim of immediate compliance [by government agencies] with the policy of non-discrimination,” and “the appointment of some Negroes to top regional or district

⁷⁷⁰Letter from Harold Fleming to Wheeler, November 7, 1960; Letter from Leslie Dunbar to Wheeler, December 2, 1960; Letter from Harold Fleming to Wheeler, December 30, 1960; Memorandum of SRC Activities, January 20, 1961, SRC box, Wheeler papers.

⁷⁷¹*The Federal Executive and Civil Rights* (Atlanta: the Southern Regional Council, 1961), iv, 28.

positions in the South.”⁷⁷² It also stressed that the federal government’s agencies had to set an example of non-discrimination for private employers to follow.⁷⁷³ The SRC wanted to remain non-partisan in order to maintain its tax-exempt status while simultaneously outlining what it believed to be the federal government’s role in civil rights. Once Kennedy was inaugurated, SRC seemed confident that his administration would play a positive role in advancing civil rights.⁷⁷⁴

During the spring of 1961, the Kennedy administration confirmed SRC’s confidence in the president’s civil rights agenda to some degree. If examined closely, the administration’s actions related to civil rights during his first year in office followed the suggested policies outlined in *The Federal Executive and Civil Rights*. That is the report provided the administration with ways they could act on various issues without having to introduce legislation to Congress. There were other civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and the National Urban League that submitted proposals to the new administration as well. The Kennedy administration particularly singled-out the SRC’s emphasis on equal employment and voter registration.⁷⁷⁵ On March 6, Kennedy issued Executive Order 10925 creating the President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity (PCEEO). He appointed John Wheeler as one of two black members (aside from Hobart Taylor, Jr. who

⁷⁷²Ibid., iv, 15.

⁷⁷³*The Federal Executive and Civil Rights*, 15.

⁷⁷⁴Letter from Harold Fleming to Wheeler, November 7, 1960, Wheeler Papers, unprocessed SRC box 1960-1964, Wheeler papers, 1; Memorandum from Harold Fleming to all Board Members and State Directors, January 12, 1961, Marion A. Wright Papers, #3830, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Memorandum of SRC Activities, January 20, 1961, unprocessed SRC box 1960-1964, Wheeler Papers, 1; *The Federal Executive and Civil Rights*, The Southern Regional Council, January 1961.

⁷⁷⁵Leslie W. Dunbar and Peggy Dunbar, interview by Jacqueline D. Hall, Bob Hall, and Helen Bresler, December 18, 1978, Interview G-00075, interview transcript, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/G-0075/G-0075>, 26-27.

served as the PCEEO's legal counsel) along with Howard B. Woods, editor of the *St. Louis Argus* newspaper, and one of fourteen public members or non-government administrators to the PCEEO. Kennedy appointed Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson as the committee's chairman. The purpose of the PCEEO was to "ensure that Americans of all colors and beliefs [would] have equal access to employment within the government, and with those who [did] business with the government."⁷⁷⁶ Wheeler's appointment, as was Woods' and Taylor's, represented a significant opportunity for him to directly influence and even *make* public policy on the national level. At the same time, he also exemplified what he partly demanded from white power brokers: black involvement in high-level decision-making.

There was strong support for Wheeler's appointment to the PCEEO from the North Carolina Democratic Party. State Democratic executive committee chairman Bert L. Bennett explained to Vice President Johnson, "Mr. Wheeler is extremely well qualified and has the full endorsement of the State Party."⁷⁷⁷ Luther H. Hodges, former North Carolina governor and now commerce secretary (and a government member of the PCEEO), also supported Wheeler's appointment. North Carolina's two U. S. senators, Samuel J. Erwin and B. Everett Jordan, wrote recommendation letters on Wheeler's behalf nominating him to the PCEEO. During the 1960 presidential campaign, Wheeler had also served on Kennedy's "National Committee of Business and Professional Men and Women for Kennedy-Johnson," headed by Hodges.⁷⁷⁸ North Carolina's new governor Terry Sanford also had great standing with Kennedy as well and would have supported Wheeler's appointment. During the 1960

⁷⁷⁶White House Press Release, Monday, March 6, 1961, for release to a. m. papers Tuesday, March 7, 1961, John Wheeler Papers, EEO folder 1961-1961 (26 of 26); Executive Order #10925 Establishing the PCEEO, March 6, 1961, Executive Order Folder, George Reedy Files, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers, Lyndon B. Johnson Library and Museum National Archives and Records Administration, Austin, Texas.

⁷⁷⁷Western Union Telegram from Bert L. Bennett to Lyndon B. Johnson, March 22, 1961, Wheeler Papers.

⁷⁷⁸Letter from Senator Sam J. Ervin, Jr. to Wheeler, April 12, 1961, Wheeler Papers.

presidential campaign, Sanford had been one of the first political figures in the South to publicly endorse Kennedy for president, risking his own gubernatorial race given that a Catholic had never been elected president. At the end of the day, it was also Wheeler's firm grasp of what economic equality for blacks meant to the wellbeing of North Carolina, the South, and Nation that led to such an important presidential appointment.

Kennedy's issuance of Executive Order 10925, which established the PCEEO, did not come as a new concept. The PCEEO had its beginnings in 1941 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) after black leaders, led by A. Philip Randolph, called for a March on Washington to push for desegregation in the armed forces and gained fair employment for blacks in defense industries during World War II. The initial executive order and the policies established by Roosevelt continued with his successors. During Harry S. Truman's administration, the agency was renamed the Committee on Government Contract Compliance (CCC); with Dwight D. Eisenhower, the group was called the United States Committee on Government Contracts (CGC).⁷⁷⁹

Throughout its existence, most civil rights organizations, mainly the NAACP and the National Urban League (NUL), viewed the Committee largely ineffective because of its unwillingness to enforce and significantly alter the discriminatory practices of government agencies and contractors.⁷⁸⁰ During these years, Wheeler embraced, at least in principle, the existence of such a committee. In 1958, he wrote to then CGC chairman Vice-President Richard M. Nixon about the "Conference on Minority Community Resources," sponsored by the CGC. Wheeler told Nixon that "the Conference was ample evidence to the nation and

⁷⁷⁹Christopher Howland Pyle, "The Politics of Civil Rights: The President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity, 1961-1962" (M. A. thesis: Columbia University, 1966), iv.

⁷⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 2-3.

world observers that the Government of the United States through its duly elected officials is firmly committed to implementation of the broad principle of equality of opportunity in employment for all citizens regardless of race.”⁷⁸¹ Wheeler appreciated these gestures by the Committee, but in reality, the CGC continued to rely heavily on a program of *voluntary* compliance rather than mandatory enforcement of the federal policies regarding racial discrimination in employment.

The direction and function of the PCEEO was determined by a committee comprised of members from Kennedy’s cabinet, who represented various government agencies, and influential leaders from across the country. The PCEEO also had a professional staff to handle the day-to-day operations. The main components of Executive Order 10925 gave the PCEEO the authority to investigate the employment practices of government agencies to ensure that discrimination no longer existed within the executive branch. The executive order specifically prohibited employment discrimination in the federal government based on “race, color, religion, or national origin.” It also included mandates for contractors doing business with the government to agree to non-discriminatory clauses concerning hiring, pay rates, layoffs, recruitment, and training. The PCEEO had the authority to investigate all government contractors or sub-contractors in order to determine whether a given contractor violated any aspects of the executive order. In instances where a government contractor failed to comply, the PCEEO had the responsibility to recommend the necessary penalties to the Justice Department. The PCEEO also had the authority to terminate or recommend

⁷⁸¹Letter from Wheeler to Vice-President Richard M. Nixon, March 7, 1958, Correspondence – Personal folder 1957-1950 (7 of 14), Wheeler Papers.

termination of a government contract if they failed to comply with the provisions outlined in the executive order.⁷⁸²

On the same day that John Wheeler attended the signing of Executive Order 10925 in Washington, he, along with Leslie Dunbar, SRC's new executive director, met with top Kennedy administration officials and civil rights advisers in an "off-the-record" lunch meeting. Wheeler had been elected as SRC's executive committee chairman that February, which came with an expanded role in the organization—added responsibilities, a closer working relationship with the executive director and with the organization's day-to-day operations. Several representatives of philanthropic foundations also joined the group during the meeting. As the only black leader in attendance, Wheeler joined Kennedy's brother, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, and Assistant Attorney general Burke Marshall. Ralph McGill, *Atlanta Constitution* newspaper editor and an SRC incorporator, also attended and had orchestrated the meeting. An additional attendee included Harold Fleming, Leslie Dunbar's predecessor at SRC and now executive vice president at the Potomac Institute, which was established by philanthropist Stephen Currier earlier that year as a private organization closely associated with the Kennedy administration. At that moment, Wheeler was at the bargaining table with the country's top power brokers, a position he was quite comfortable with.⁷⁸³

During the "off-the-record" lunch meeting, those present expressed their ideas concerning civil rights to the attorney general. Although it is impossible to determine what

⁷⁸²Executive Order 10925 Establishing the PCEEO, March 6, 1961, Executive Order Folder, George Reedy Files, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers, Lyndon B. Johnson Library and Museum National Archives and Records Administration, Austin, Texas; Christopher Howland Pyle, "The Politics of Civil Rights," 14.

⁷⁸³Leslie W. Dunbar and Peggy Dunbar, interview by Jacqueline D. Hall, Bob Hall, and Helen Bresler, December 18, 1978, Interview G-00075, interview transcript, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/G-0075/G-0075>, 26-27.

each person discussed when they went around the room, Wheeler likely directed the attorney general's attention to the need to increase the number of black assistant U.S. attorneys in the Justice Department as the attorney general was also a member of the PCEEO. In the weeks leading to and following his trip to Washington, D. C., Wheeler specifically contacted government officials about hiring more blacks in that department.⁷⁸⁴ Perhaps Wheeler also commented on other economic disparities facing blacks in the South. He wrote to the PCEEO's chairman, Vice President Johnson, a few days after the executive order announcement and expressed his gratitude to Johnson for also meeting with the SRC group to discuss the executive order. Wheeler explained to Johnson that SRC's executive committee would work with the Labor Department to ensure that the executive order was properly followed. He also noted that "this action [Executive Order 10925] by the President and Vice President indicates clearly that we have an opportunity to move forward rapidly toward the goal of making maximum use of all of the manpower resources of our nation."⁷⁸⁵

These kinds of off-the-record meetings also typified the Kennedy administration's approach to civil rights. They relied on backdoor channels and executive orders to deal with specific problems while being careful not to openly confront the southern social order. The South's politicians maintained a tight rule over Congress and were part of Kennedy's Democratic Party coalition. But Kennedy's unwillingness to risk southern political support in turn for advances in race relations made many civil rights activists and organizations

⁷⁸⁴ Letter from Wheeler to Robert F. Kennedy, March 7, 1961, Folder EEO 1961-64 (19 of 26), Wheeler Papers.

⁷⁸⁵ Letter from Wheeler to Lyndon B. Johnson, March 8 (Wed.), 1961, Folder EEO 1961-64 (19 of 26), Wheeler Papers.

wary.⁷⁸⁶ That spring, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) organized a group of activists to travel throughout the South on a Greyhound bus to test the limits of interstate travel; while at bus terminals in various cities, these Freedom Riders attempted to desegregate waiting rooms. In a bus terminal in Rock Hill, South Carolina, not far from Charlotte where Wheeler opened an M&F branch a year later, John Lewis was severely beaten. In Anniston, Alabama, their bus was set ablaze, forcing Kennedy to move beyond his behind-the-scenes-inclinations. This made civil rights activists distrustful of the new administration because of its initial hesitancy to take actions to protect the Freedom Riders.

John Wheeler's appointment to the PCEEEO also reflected his previous record and interest in seeking equitable job opportunities and better economic policies for blacks in North Carolina. In previous decades, he had articulated and connected this need with his education agenda. He came out very strongly against the state ESC. He charged the agency with discrimination, pointing out that the agency's official policy perpetuated "discriminat[ion] against Negroes in [the] listing of jobs."⁷⁸⁷ He further explained, "In general[,] when we get a new industry...there are certain jobs that are not even referred to the Negro side of the office. [T]hat is not in keeping with the purpose of the commission."⁷⁸⁸ Convinced of the PCEEEO's more overarching authority, Wheeler attended the group's inaugural meeting on April 7 in the White House Indian Treaty Room.

Initially, John Wheeler viewed the PCEEEO as having the potential to correct past job discrimination by government agencies. He also felt that the PCEEEO could be significantly

⁷⁸⁶Leslie W. Dunbar and Peggy Dunbar, interview by Jacqueline D. Hall, Bob Hall, and Helen Bresler, December 18, 1978, Interview G-00075, interview transcript, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/G-0075/G-0075.html>, 26.

⁷⁸⁷"Job Discrimination Charges Not Aimed at Local Office" *DMH*, July 13, 1959.

⁷⁸⁸*Ibid.*

more effective than had similar committees in the past because “President Kennedy’s order seems to be broader and have more teeth in it than previous [executive] orders.”⁷⁸⁹ He particularly believed that his position on the PCEEO was beneficial to and could help move North Carolina toward New South prosperity as the state needed “only to establish a reputation for nondiscrimination in hiring to ‘really expand industrially.’ ” In many ways, North Carolina was already ahead of other southern states in his opinion making this feat all the more likely.⁷⁹⁰ Moreover, Wheeler strongly believed that individual government agencies and contractors needed to take a greater responsibility as “the burden of proof regarding job equality should fall on the agency or firm rather than on the complaining individual.”⁷⁹¹ Wheeler told Livingstone College President Dr. Sam E. Duncan and several other friends who congratulated him on his appointment that this was an opportunity “to bring new hope to every citizen who has the ambition and desire to develop and make full use of his talents for the purpose of strengthening our society and the democratic way of life.”⁷⁹² While Wheeler maintained an optimistic outlook when it came to the PCEEO, he strongly felt that it would ultimately take comprehensive government legislation to deal with these past failures effectively. By April 29, Wheeler and the DCNA had sent their jobs blueprint to Governor Sanford. The April jobs blueprint was Wheeler’s desire to see the new governor take the lead in tackling state employment discrimination by adding more black

⁷⁸⁹“ ‘Equal Opportunity Would Boost Tarheel Industry,’ ” *DMH*, April 10, 1961; “Equal Job Reputation Said Needed,” *The News and Observer*, April 10, 1961.

⁷⁹⁰Ibid.

⁷⁹¹“ ‘Equal Opportunity Would Boost Tarheel Industry,’ ” *DMH*, April 10, 1961.

⁷⁹²Letter from Wheeler to Dr. Sam E. Duncan, president of Livingstone College, May 5, 1961, Wheeler Papers; Letter from Wheeler to Asa T. Spaulding, April 18, 1961, Spaulding Papers.



Figure 6.1 John Wheeler is standing in second row far left directly behind those seated. Seated left to right: former North Carolina governor and then Commerce Secretary Luther H. Hodges, Secretary of Labor Author Goldberg, President John F. Kennedy, and Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson. *(Photograph Courtesy of the John F. Kennedy Library)*

employees across state agencies. Wheeler's influence can also be seen in a similar letter sent to Sanford by the North Carolina Council on Human Relations (NCCHR), the state SRC arm, which looked to have Wheeler's New South prosperity handiwork all over it. The NCCHR's letter seemed to go further than Wheeler's jobs blueprint in pointing out to Sanford the "Economic Factors Effecting [the state's] Growth." It specifically called on the governor to institute a drastic overhaul in state-level employment by hiring and appointing qualified blacks.⁷⁹³ By the end of 1961, Sanford had begun to make strides toward the jobs blueprint and the "Bright Sunshine" of a New Day for black North Carolinians. During this same time, Wheeler became one of the black leaders that Sanford came to for advice.

⁷⁹³Letter the Executive Committee of the North Carolina Council on Human Relations to Governor Terry Sanford, also titled "A Brief Survey of the Possible Impact of Human Relations on North Carolina's plans for growth and future development, 1960, Floyd B. McKissick Papers.

In addition to his efforts to seek expansive fair employment practices from state agencies, Wheeler effectively used his position on the PCEEEO as a way to increase minority representation among the professional ranks by getting qualified blacks secure employment in federal agencies. In one of his earliest actions after Kennedy signed Executive Order 10925 that March, Wheeler sent letters to Senators Erwin and Jordan regarding an appointment to the U.S. attorney's office for the Middle District of North Carolina. Wheeler also held conversations with John Siegenthaler, an administrative assistant to attorney general Robert F. Kennedy. He was particularly interested in seeing an African American be named as an assistant U.S. attorney in connection with William H. Murdock's nomination as the U. S. attorney for the Middle District of North Carolina. Initially, Wheeler recommended three fellow civil rights lawyers and colleagues for posts with the agency. He suggested William A. Marsh, Jr., who previously joined Wheeler as a DCNA and NAACP lawyer in the Durham school desegregation cases; Major S. High, Jr. from Greensboro; and William G. Pearson II (also a DCNA member).⁷⁹⁴ Wheeler explained to Siegenthaler that it was his "understanding that Mr. Murdock has reacted favorably to the suggestion that a Negro be appointed as one of his assistants."⁷⁹⁵ Along with the recommendation of an assistant U. S. attorney, Wheeler also submitted the name of Joseph C. Biggers, a black Durham County Sherriff's Deputy, for a Deputy U. S. Marshall's position in Greensboro.⁷⁹⁶ For Wheeler, these positions had the potential to serve as a way to improve the judicial system and its

⁷⁹⁴Letter from Wheeler to Senator B. Everett Jordon, March 3, 1961, Wheeler Papers; Letter from Wheeler to John Siegenthaler, March 22, 1961, Wheeler Papers; Letter from Wheeler to Senator Samuel J. Erwin, March 23, 1961, Wheeler Papers; Letter from Wheeler to Senator B. Everett Jordon, March 23, 1961, Wheeler Papers; Letter from Wheeler to John Siegenthaler, September 13, 1961, Wheeler Papers; Letter from Wheeler to Senator Sam J. Ervin, March 3, 1961, Wheeler Papers.

⁷⁹⁵Letter from Wheeler to John Siegenthaler, March 22, 1961, Wheeler papers.

⁷⁹⁶Ibid.

treatment of blacks in general while at the same time placing blacks in high-level decision-making positions. Although none of the above-mentioned individuals were appointed, another of Wheeler's suggested appointees, Henry E. Frye, a thirty year-old African American attorney from Greensboro, received the appointment the following year.⁷⁹⁷

Once the PCEEO officially began on April 7, NAACP labor secretary Herbert Hill immediately filed a slew of complaints, some of which had went untouched during Nixon's reign over the CGC. Among Hill's complaints were approximately thirty-two against the Lockheed Aircraft Corporation, one of the U.S. government's largest contractors that operated a large manufacturing facility in Marietta, Georgia. In response to the NAACP's complaints, the PCEEO's executive director John G. Field visited the Marietta plant and found that many of the complaints against the company were justified to some degree; most jobs held by blacks were identifiably unskilled, regardless of an employee's educational background.⁷⁹⁸

Field's actions represented the federal government's move toward enforcement of Executive Order 10925, rather than having the PCEEO serve as a dumping-ground for discrimination complaints. As a result of his visit, Field requested that the company provide him with figures on non-white employees, not just at the Marietta plant, but company-wide. Going further in negotiations with company executives later, Field outlined a “ ‘plan for

⁷⁹⁷ “Named Assistant U.S. Attorney in Carolina: Henry E. Frye, 30 Gets Appointment,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, Dec. 1, 1962; In 1969 Frye became the first African American state legislature where he served until 1982. When Frye decided to establish the Greensboro National bank in the 1970s, he received counsel and advice from John Wheeler. Frye also later became the first black justice on the North Carolina Supreme Court; he would also go on to become that Court's first black chief justice as well; Howard E. Covington, *Henry Frye: North Carolina's First African American Chief Justice*, (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2013), 144; Covington notes that “Despite Wheeler's unenthusiastic reception, the two men remained in touch. Wheeler was impressed enough with Frye to put him forward as his candidate when Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy was looking for an African American to appoint to the U.S. attorney's office in the latter part of 1962.”

⁷⁹⁸ Christopher Howland Pyle, “The Politics of Civil Rights,” 26, 28.

compliance' ” that he explained would ensure that the Lockheed Aircraft Corporation would do its part in taking the initiative to remove any forms of racial discrimination addressed in the executive order, as well as increasing its number of minority workers.⁷⁹⁹ The Lockheed Aircraft Corporation's agreement to improve its employment policies along these lines helped to calm the NAACP's doubts temporarily.

Field also had to persuade one of the PCEEO's southern members, Robert Batty Troutman, of the plan's potential. Troutman was a white well-to-do southern lawyer and businessman based in Atlanta, Georgia and good friends with the Kennedys. Vice President Johnson nominated Troutman to the post because of his loyal support to Kennedy during the 1960 presidential campaign. Aside from Troutman's unwavering commitment to Kennedy, Johnson also nominated Troutman to the PCEEO because of his political connections in Georgia. Despite Troutman's favor with President Kennedy, as a southerner he harbored strong segregationist views against blacks. Yet, Kennedy also favored Troutman's appointment because he knew that southern congressmen trusted Troutman.⁸⁰⁰ Field did not have to do much to convince Troutman of the plan's strengths. Troutman gave his strong support for the plan, but somewhat ironically, he primarily saw Field's initial plan as a way to highlight a voluntary approach more than anything else. He suggested that the plan for compliance be presented to the country's largest businesses in general, not just those who held government contracts. Troutman's suggestions of voluntary compliance went over well with the president and vice president in particular.⁸⁰¹

⁷⁹⁹ Christopher Howland Pyle, "The Politics of Civil Rights," 30-31.

⁸⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 22-24, 34-35

⁸⁰¹ *Ibid.*

In May, officials from Lockheed, with the President and Vice-President in attendance, signed the first “Plans for Progress,” a voluntary program where companies agreed to operate non-segregated facilities and make provisions for training, recruiting, and hiring minority workers. Afterwards, Johnson assigned Troutman to head a subcommittee on Plans for Progress with the authority to solicit voluntary pledges from other companies even if complaints had not been levied against them. One of Troutman’s earliest moves related to Plans for Progress was to relocate the subcommittee’s operations to his Atlanta law office. From there, he proceeded to increase the number of companies that signed Plans for Progress pledges.⁸⁰²

Given Troutman’s background, Field and other PCEEO staff members quietly questioned his commitment to eradicating employment discrimination because it went against his business background and his affiliation with southern congressmen, particularly Georgia senators Herman Talmadge and Richard B. Russell. Additionally, Troutman publicly emphasized the voluntary aspects of the Plans for Progress over the PCEEO and the executive order’s emphasis on forced compliance if necessary. The major issue thereafter quickly became whether the PCEEO would rely on a “voluntary” as opposed to a “compulsory” program in order to seek an end to discriminatory employment practices against blacks with the largest government contractors. Troutman and his staff came out decidedly in favor of voluntary compliance and the Plans for Progress, while Field and his staff at the PCEEO’s offices affirmatively argued for a fair balance between the two.⁸⁰³ Field wanted to clarify to companies that agreeing to sign the Plans for Progress agreement did not

⁸⁰²Christopher Howland Pyle, “The Politics of Civil Rights,” 22-24, 34-35

⁸⁰³Ibid., 36-39, 46.

automatically mean they would escape the enforcement power of the PCEEO or its desire to see that they complied with Executive Order 10925. A major decision that widened the gap between voluntary vs. compulsory action was the PCEEO's decision to allow companies to correspond and send compliance reports directly to Troutman and the Plans for Progress office in Atlanta, systematically eliminating Field and the PCEEO's staff in Washington, D. C. from reviewing company reports as well as being directly involved in decisions related to Plans for Progress.⁸⁰⁴ As a result of this arrangement, Field made clear his opposition to his staff not having oversight of Plans for Progress.

In the meantime, John Wheeler continued to actively press for equal employment on behalf of black North Carolinians. His new position on the PCEEO came along with requests from blacks across North Carolina and other parts of the country asking for his assistance in obtaining federal employment. Carolyn Patricia Martin, a black graduate of the University of North Carolina and an employee at the Stanford L. Warren Library, wrote to Wheeler that May seeking his assistance in helping her land a job working for the Library of Congress "because [she] read of [his] interest in helping qualified Negroes to secure employment in federal agencies."⁸⁰⁵ Wheeler promptly wrote a letter to Frank Reeves, special assistant to President Kennedy. Wheeler was more than willing to help Martin, especially considering her late father Dan B. Martin's "pioneering effort to stimulate voting activity among Negroes throughout the State of North Carolina."⁸⁰⁶ Martin had been very active in energizing black voters with the Durham County Democratic Party as well as the DCNA.

⁸⁰⁴Christopher Howland Pyle, "The Politics of Civil Rights," 49-50.

⁸⁰⁵ Letter from Carolyn Patricia Martin to Wheeler, May 12, 1961, Wheeler Papers.

⁸⁰⁶ Letter of recommendation from Wheeler to Mr. Frank Reeves, Special Assistant to the President of the United States, Wheeler Papers, 1961.

At least on an individual-by-individual basis, John Wheeler's recommendations proved successful. In August, Clarestone T. Stewart, yet another person Wheeler assisted, sent him an update on her position with the Internal Revenue Service in Greensboro. That September, David Stephens thanked Wheeler for his "kind recommendation" to the U. S. Justice Department. Stephens, who was being trained to handle the serious issue of police brutality cases with the department, also explained that "Those who [were] in the Civil Rights Division particularly Mr. [Burke] Marshall and Mr. [Douglas H.] Hubbard [had] a great deal of respect for [Wheeler] as an individual and as [a] man of sound judgment." "It is this type of thing," continued Stephens, "that strikes the core of my heart and make me proud to be a Carolinian."⁸⁰⁷

Requests for John Wheeler's assistance did not stop with individuals asking for help in obtaining federal employment; requests also included individual complaints related to job discrimination from blacks already working in federal jobs. In July, Alonzo Eubanks, an employee at Durham's Veterans Affairs Hospital, outlined the discrimination he faced from the human resources department at the hospital. According to Eubanks, despite his qualifications as an electrician and military veteran, he accepted a low-grade position as a janitor at the hospital following the advice of a human resources administrator who informed him that "it would be better for [him] to try to get on in the housekeeping department or food service[,] though they were low paying jobs[,] so as to be on the campus when they got an opening in the electrical department" and then Banks "would have a better chance of being hired." The hiring agent told Banks that "they did not call in people from the street when

⁸⁰⁷Letter from Clarestone T. Stewart to Wheeler, August 7, 1961, Wheeler Papers; Letter from David L. Stephens to Wheeler, Sept. 8, 1961, Wheeler Papers.

there was a person on campus that could do the job.”⁸⁰⁸ Once a position opened in the electrical department, Eubanks interviewed for it but “never hear[d] any more about the job until Monday July 17 when [human resources] brought a man through showing him all the departments of the hospital.” To Eubanks’ disappointment, “They had hired a [white] man that was not on the campus and not in federal employment [already].” Eubanks felt discriminated against and unfairly overlooked since he was “a ten point preference veteran with a 90.5 rating for [work as an] electrician”⁸⁰⁹ Wheeler immediately forwarded Eubanks’ complaint to the PCEEO’s executive director John Field, who responded by telling Wheeler that once Eubanks confirmed that he had been discriminated against based on “ ‘race, creed, color, or national origin[,]’ ” then “we will take immediate action to have an investigation made.”⁸¹⁰

John Wheeler’s efforts and influence at the national level regarding public policy developments did not stop with the PCEEO or the issue of equal employment. While Wheeler wasted little time beginning his work with the PCEEO, he simultaneously received an additional opportunity to influence public policy by addressing voting rights with the Kennedy administration’s support. On July 28, Wheeler and Leslie Dunbar attended a monumental meeting hosted by Stephen Currier’s Taconic Foundation. Through his Taconic Foundation, Currier decided to fund a special program designed to increase voter registration, particularly among blacks in the South. The idea to focus specifically on voter registration came from the Justice Department, another example of the Kennedy administration following

⁸⁰⁸Letter from Alonzo Eubanks to Wheeler, July 20, 1961, Wheeler Papers.

⁸⁰⁹Ibid.

⁸¹⁰Letter from Wheeler to John G. Field, July 25, 1961, Wheeler Papers; Letter from John G. Field to Wheeler, August 4, 1961, Wheeler Papers.

the SRC's *Federal Executive and Civil Rights* report; voting rights may have also been the subject of the earlier "off-the-record" meeting with the administration in early March. The Taconic meeting was another circuitous way for the Kennedy administration to demonstrate its seriousness in civil rights. The Kennedy administration was also trying to avoid further Freedom Rides as well, as this looked sketchy from an international perspective; however, this might have been an effort on the part of the administration to sideline the Freedom Riders by focusing attention on voting, which was seen as less confrontational. The purpose of the Taconic meeting's was to discuss and develop a plan to proceed with such a project. Along with Dunbar and Wheeler, the Taconic Foundation invited leaders from the major national civil rights organizations to attend the meeting in New York at the Foundation's offices. The organizations included the National NAACP, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, the organization that emerged as a result of the student sit-ins the year before), the National Urban League (NUL), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the National Student Association (NSA).⁸¹¹

The July 28 Taconic meeting and Wheeler's participation in it also reflected his high standing among the national civil rights leadership. Wheeler and Dunbar sat in a room alongside key national civil rights movement figures. Marion Barry and Charles McDew represented SNCC; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr and Wyatt T. Walker represented SCLC; Roy Wilkins represented the NAACP; Lester Granger and Whitney Young, Jr. represented NUL;

⁸¹¹Letter from Stephen Currier to Wheeler, July 21, 1961, folder SRC 1961 (6 of 15), Wheeler Papers ; Agenda of the July 28, 1961 Meeting, folder SRC 1961 (6 of 15), Wheeler Papers; Letter from Wheeler to Currier, July 31, 1961, folder SRC 1961 (6 of 15), unprocessed Wheeler Papers; SRC Memorandum from Dunbar to Executive Committee, July 31, 1961, Marion A. Wright Papers, #3830, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1.

James Farmer represented CORE; and Timothy Jenkins represented the NSA. Thurgood Marshall and Robert L. Carter represented the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (LDF). Other attendees included Stephen Currier, Burke Marshall, Harold Fleming, and Kennedy's civil rights advisor, Harris Wofford.⁸¹² Dunbar was quite pleased that Wheeler attended the meeting because he was an "enormous help to [him] in that [Dunbar] was a new boy, and [he'd] never met most of these people...and it just made life bearable that John Wheeler sat beside [him]" as "John had a lot of stature with the civil rights leadership at that time in New York."⁸¹³ However, unlike many leaders representing their respective national organizations, Wheeler's closely rooted involvement in issues at the local and state level, through his DCNA chairmanship and his many other civic responsibilities, helped guide his commitment in providing a voice to local organizations during meetings like the one held at the Taconic Foundation.

During the meeting everyone had the opportunity to speak, providing ways that their organization stood ready to help. Wheeler told the group about SRC's willingness to help as "the executive committee regard[ed] [the] matter as urgent." He noted that "SRC used consultants with great success in school desegregation; wisdom and value of their use in voting drives [needed] to be considered."⁸¹⁴ Dunbar added to Wheeler's comments and offered SRC's research resources, and more importantly its administrative support.⁸¹⁵ Some

⁸¹² SRC Memorandum from Dunbar to Executive Committee, July 31, 1961, Marion A. Wright Papers, #3830, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1.

⁸¹³ Leslie W. Dunbar and Peggy Dunbar, interview by Jacqueline D. Hall, Bob Hall, and Helen Bresler, December 18, 1978, Interview G-00075, transcript, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/G-0075/G-0075.html>.

⁸¹⁴ Memorandum of typed notes on the morning session at the Taconic Conference, July 28, 1961, unprocessed SRC box 1960-1964, Wheeler Papers.

⁸¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

organizations sought an advantage over the others by detailing their experience with voter registration. Roy Wilkins, NAACP executive secretary, spoke most directly to the latter point saying that the “NAACP [was] more active in this field than any other organization. Since January, 1958 it has had established a Southwide [voter registration] Campaign.”⁸¹⁶

At the meeting, the group also discussed the most efficient way for the Taconic Foundation to distribute funds in a way that would assist all organizations with major voter registration drives throughout the South. Toward the end of the day-long meeting, Dr. King suggested “entrusting SRC with the central project role.”⁸¹⁷ All of the organizations agreed that SRC would take the administrative role in overseeing the program, and according to Dunbar, “John Wheeler and [himself] both sensed that this agreement was genuine. Indeed, [Dunbar] was deeply impressed by the amiability and harmony of the gathering.”⁸¹⁸ At a second meeting attended by Wheeler and Dunbar on August 23, the group asked SRC to draft a comprehensive plan for cooperative action. SRC promptly sent a memorandum to the organizations explaining how it would administer the voter registration project. The plan outlined that each organization would request funding through a formal application to SRC. The SRC would approve or reject applications based on predetermined criteria.⁸¹⁹

⁸¹⁶Ibid.

⁸¹⁷ SRC Memorandum from Dunbar to Executive Committee, July 31, 1961, Marion A. Wright Papers, #3830, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1.

⁸¹⁸ SRC Memorandum from Dunbar to Executive Committee, July 31, 1961, Marion A. Wright Papers, #3830, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2; Leslie W. Dunbar and Peggy Dunbar, interview by Jacqueline D. Hall, Bob Hall, and Helen Bresler, December 18, 1978, Interview G-00075, transcript, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/G-0075/G-0075.html>.

⁸¹⁹ Letter from Dunbar to SRC executive committee members, September 13, 1961, Marion A. Wright Papers, folder 143; Letter from Leslie Dunbar to James Farmer, Roy Wilkins, Whitney M. Young, Wyatt T. Walker, Charles McDew, and Timothy L. Jenkins, September 13, 1961, Marion A. Wright Papers, folder 143; Pat Watters and Reese Cleghorn, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder: The Arrival of Negroes in Southern Politics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1967).

During all subsequent meetings both John Wheeler and Leslie Dunbar pointed out most emphatically that SRC's involvement with the project depended on their understanding that SRC would not be "a mere conduit" and "reserved [their] rights to distribute money to other groups."⁸²⁰ According Dunbar, when it came to giving money to local groups, "that was not what Wilkins, King, Young, [and others] had in mind. They resisted that very strongly." "They had in mind," Dunbar remembered, "that VEP [the Voter Education Project as it came to be known] would get a chunk of money, and [SRC] would then meet and decide how [they] could divide it up among them, and that was it. [But the SRC] didn't do that."⁸²¹ In its written plan, SRC once again made this point clear to the six organizations stating that "effective registration work [might] depend not only on the work of [the national civil rights] agencies, but on that of local voters leagues, churches, Urban Leagues, local ad hoc groups, etc. Consequently, such local groups should be eligible to receive funds and services from the Project."⁸²² For Wheeler, this meant that even his local organization, the DCNA, could also apply for funding, which it eventually did. In this instance, Wheeler maneuvered to achieve his objectives making calculated decisions to ensure that these initiatives trickled down to local communities all the while helping to influence local interests at the same time.

Despite his appointment to the PCEEEO and his efforts toward increased voter registration in the South, John Wheeler did not allow his rising political clout with the Kennedy and Sanford administrations to deter his feelings about discrimination in other

⁸²⁰Written notes taken by Wheeler at the Taconic Meeting, July 28, 1961, SRC folder 1961 (2 of 15), Wheeler Papers; Leslie W. Dunbar and Peggy Dunbar, interview by Jacqueline D. Hall, Bob Hall, and Helen Bresler, December 18, 1978, Interview G-00075, transcript, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/G-0075/G-0075.html>.

⁸²¹ Leslie W. Dunbar and Peggy Dunbar, interview by Jacqueline D. Hall, Bob Hall, and Helen Bresler, December 18, 1978, Interview G-00075, transcript, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/G-0075/G-0075.html>.

⁸²²Letter from Leslie Dunbar to James Farmer, Roy Wilkins, Whitney M. Young, Wyatt T. Walker, Charles McDew, and Timothy L. Jenkins, September 13, 1961, Marion A. Wright Papers, folder 143, 3.

areas. In fact, he used it to his benefit when confronting discriminatory policies in North Carolina's segregated facilities. That October, as President Kennedy was set to deliver the University of North Carolina's founder's day address (as part of the favors he owed Sanford for his support during the presidential election), Wheeler contacted Governor Sanford with some major concerns. In a clever move and in conjunction with a group of North Carolina College students who contacted Kennedy directly and urged him not to come, Wheeler raised questions for Governor Sanford about whether or not Kennedy was aware that the airport at which the president would soon arrive still had segregated restroom facilities. Sanford quickly understood Wheeler's position and assigned one of his top aides to handle the matter before it escalated. In the meantime, Kennedy's assistant, John Sieganthaler, suggested that unless Sanford and his people found an agreeable solution, the president would have to pass on his anticipated visit. By the time the president arrived, the airport had reluctantly agreed to temporarily take down the restroom doors to avoid the "black" and "white" sign designations.⁸²³ As Wheeler sat in the audience that day as an invited guest to hear Kennedy's October 12 speech, he perhaps celebrated the minor steps taken by the Kennedy and Sanford administrations toward civil rights, those small battlefield victories that Wheeler had a hand in shaping. In some ways then, he could see the fruition of the "Bright Sunshine of a New Day," and New South Prosperity becoming a reality in North Carolina.⁸²⁴

At the close of October, a month after SRC sent out its memorandum about the voter registration project, it only received one or two responses from civil rights groups, a delay

⁸²³Howard E. Covington, Jr. and Marion A. Ellis, *Terry Sanford: Politics, Progress, and Outrageous Ambitions*, 279-280; "Transcript of President's Remarks at the University of North Carolina's Convocation," *New York Times*, October 13, 1961.

⁸²⁴ Invitation from the University of North Carolina to Wheeler to attend President John F. Kennedy's University Day address planned for Thursday morning, October 12, 1961 at 11:00a.m. in Kenan Stadium, 1961 personal correspondence folder 2, Wheeler Papers.

that caused Stephen Currier “unhappiness” as he considered abandoning the whole idea.⁸²⁵

The slow responses also received criticism from Louis Lomax, the earliest black television journalist. In 1959, Lomax gave America its first look at the Nation of Islam and its leadership, which featured its outspoken representative, Malcolm X. Lomax co-produced the five-part documentary, *The Hate that Hate Produced*, with fellow newsman Mike Wallace.⁸²⁶

Lomax was also known for being very critical of the traditional black leadership who, he explained, after the 1960 sit-ins, “[were] not too pleased to see young Negro students sit down at the conference table with Southern white city officials.”⁸²⁷ Lomax described the student sit-in movement as “the Negro Revolt,” but also argued that it was “ ‘more than a revolt against the white world. It [was] also a revolt of the Negro masses against their own leadership and goals.’ ”⁸²⁸ Recognizing the project’s urgency, Lomax attacked these organization and their leaders in a radio address for their failure to “proceed with all speed and clarity to examine and ratify an offer that [would] aid the Negro in his eternal battle against bigotry.”⁸²⁹ A full transcript found in Wheeler’s personal papers leads one to believe that Wheeler might have tipped Lomax off with the details of the voter registration project months in advance. This move might be viewed as Wheeler’s subtle attempt to pressure civil rights organizations into moving on the voter registration project before it was too late. Wheeler saw the voter registration project as an important opportunity for black Americans.

⁸²⁵ Letter from Leslie Dunbar to Joseph Haas (SRC legal counsel), October 27, 1961.

⁸²⁶ Manning Marable, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (New York: Viking, 2011), 160-161.

⁸²⁷ Louis E. Lomax, “The Negro Revolt Against ‘The Negro Leaders,’ ” *Harper’s Magazine*, 220:1321 (June 1960), 48.

⁸²⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸²⁹ Louis Lomax, “Script for Radio Broadcast on WRAI,” October 17, 1961, folder 8 SRC 1961, Wheeler Papers, 3.

Lomax pointed to organizational competition as a major barrier saying that once organizations succeeded in doing a good job in one area, “somehow they become drunk with the wine of their own being.”⁸³⁰

Lomax shed light on the biggest holdup for Roy Wilkins and the NAACP, the last organization to respond to the SRC memorandum. Wilkins explained that the NAACP’s experience in voter registration far exceeded the other organizations “some of which...have little more than good intentions to offer” and would “be taken to imply equality as regards [to] their relative importance and potential in the work to be done.”⁸³¹ Wilkins especially described the NAACP’s experience in working with local organizations and “found that funds advanced to them are not uncommonly of little value unless their projects are closely supervised.”⁸³² Wilkins explained that SRC should instead let the national civil rights organizations use funds given to them to assist local organizations. This would be better because, “in [their] opinion[,] these agencies [would] be in a better position than SRC to evaluate particular local groups.”⁸³³ Dunbar warned Joseph Haas, SRC’s legal counsel, that they “must keep an eye on the long haul, not chiefly on the preliminaries. The N.A.A.C.P. is being sticky now; over the long period [Dunbar] expect[ed] it will be the least of [their] headaches.”⁸³⁴ Although Wilkins provided a long list stipulating his organization’s terms in

⁸³⁰Louis Lomax, “Script for Radio Broadcast on WRAI,” October 17, 1961, folder 8 SRC 1961, Wheeler Papers, 3; Lomax began by saying that “I came upon a good story, a scoop. For the good of the race because some people said if I broke the story then I’d muddy the water and the thing wouldn’t come to pass. I kept quiet. I’ve been quiet about the story for the better part of three months now and I’m by no means the only reporter, Negro or White, in the United States who knows the story that I am going to share on this commentary.”

⁸³¹Letter from Roy Wilkins to Leslie Dunbar, October 17, 1961, folder 8 SRC 1961, Wheeler papers, 1.

⁸³²*Ibid.*, 2.

⁸³³*Ibid.*

⁸³⁴Letter from Leslie Dunbar to Joseph Haas, October 27, 1961, folder 8 SRC 1961, Wheeler Papers 1.

participating in the voter registration project, Dunbar believed that disagreements over local organizations could cause “real difficulty;” however, he “hope[ed] [they] could, at least, agree to disagree.”⁸³⁵ When Dunbar and the SRC sent in their official funding request to the Taconic Foundation for \$250,000.00 for the “Citizenship Education Project,” they noted the importance of having the full cooperation of the NAACP as they could not move forward without it. By the end of October, all of the organizations, with the exception of the NSA, responded to the earlier SRC memorandum and agreed to the guidelines.⁸³⁶

As the voter registration project (backed by the Kennedy administration) moved forward, by December 1961 the philosophical disagreements between John Field and Robert Troutman over the PCEEO’s Plans for Progress became even more evident at the PCEEO’s full committee meeting on Friday, December 1. At that meeting, Troutman presented a budget proposal that would meet the financial needs of Plans for Progress from his Atlanta office. The proposal included costs for staff salaries in addition to reimbursements in the amount of \$15,000 for money that Troutman spent getting the Plans for Progress program off-the-ground; everyone in attendance was taken aback because they were unaware of Troutman’s proposal ahead of time. Before the meeting concluded, Vice President Johnson appointed a second Plans for Progress subcommittee that included himself and Attorney General Robert Kennedy to examine and consider Troutman’s proposal and the PCEEO’s willingness to proceed with Plans for Progress. Sensing Johnson’s hesitancy to move in this direction, Troutman disagreed with a new Plans for Progress subcommittee; however, he

⁸³⁵Ibid.

⁸³⁶Letter from Leslie Dunbar to Stephen Currier, November 1961, folder 8 SRC 1961, Wheeler Papers, 1-2.

avored the program's continued operation as a completely separate entity without any government supervision.⁸³⁷

At this point, and in always making his stance clear and direct, John Wheeler began to question the intentions of the Plans for Progress as outlined by Robert Troutman. He regarded Troutman's plan as a way to circumvent the PCEEO's responsibility to force businesses to comply with Executive Order 10925, a point that he also raised at the December meeting. Wheeler then made his feelings about the issue known to Secretary of Labor, Arthur J. Goldberg, shortly following the December meeting. Wheeler wrote "expressing [his] concern for the possible effect[,] which some of the proposals made during last Friday's meeting may have upon the compliance program of the President's Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity."⁸³⁸ Wheeler objected first to a separate staff for Plans for Progress admitting that he "fear[ed] first, of all, that irreparable damage may result from the establishment, in Atlanta or Washington, of a separate office whose program emphasis will shift the image of the Committee from that of Administrator of an effective and mandatory compliance program in favor of a stepped-up public relations effort on the part of the Administration to obtain voluntary compliance by the major contractors doing business with the government."⁸³⁹ Wheeler agreed with the position made by Vice-President Johnson at the December meeting as Johnson reiterated the fact that the PCEEO "had originally planned to limit the Plans for Progress effort to the 50 largest contractors doing business with the government."⁸⁴⁰ Wheeler also added that the PCEEO could not have a successful

⁸³⁷Christopher Howland Pyle, "The Politics of Civil Rights," 56-58.

⁸³⁸Letter from Wheeler to Arthur Goldberg, December 6, 1961, Wheeler papers.

⁸³⁹Ibid.

⁸⁴⁰Ibid.

program without “the maximum possible use of minority group personnel and lay-leadership.”⁸⁴¹

John Wheeler continued with what he thought to be the central problem in the South as it related to the PCEEEO and the equal employment issue. “The White South,” Wheeler explained, had “shown their complete disregard for the opinions of the Negro leadership by attempting to discredit it as being irresponsible, [and] inexperienced.”⁸⁴² He felt that white leaders in the South preferred to deal with race relations with an attitude that said they “‘must be left alone to do this in [their] own way, according to [their] own time table, and without pressure from the North or from Negroes who really do not know what is best for themselves.’”⁸⁴³ As Wheeler saw it, Troutman’s program continued to encourage this attitude. The program also went completely against Wheeler’s own desires to see that blacks were part of the larger conversation and heavily involved in making the necessary changes to see that the South and states like North Carolina did not miss out on New South prosperity because of the same old strategies employed by racist southern whites. He believed that economic progress could not happen if left solely to white southerners, an argument that he had consistently made since the 1940s. In continuing to outline his skepticism, Wheeler told Arthur Goldberg that “Besides the fact that the sub-committee’s recommendations for staffing the Atlanta and Washington offices of the Plans for Progress Project called for an exclusively White staff, it [was] safe to assume that Negro personnel assigned to an Atlanta office of the Committee and attempting to work under direct supervision of the Executive

⁸⁴¹Letter from Wheeler to Arthur Goldberg, December 6, 1961, Wheeler papers.

⁸⁴²Ibid.

⁸⁴³Ibid.

Vice Chairman [Jerry Holleman] would find themselves in a rather uncomfortable and ineffective position.”⁸⁴⁴

John Wheeler also pointed to the opposition between Field and Troutman clarifying that he was “sure that after listening to the report of the chairman of the sub-committee on Plans for Progress, other members of the Committee were of the opinion that the sub-committee chairman [Troutman] was critical of [their] Executive Director [Field] and his staff.”⁸⁴⁵ Wheeler saw Troutman’s actions as “typical of the [delay] technique being used to nullify any serious effort to enforce the compliance features of [Executive] Order #10925.”⁸⁴⁶ In arguing for a fair balance between voluntary and forced compliance, Wheeler remained “convinced that every phase of the Committee’s program, including enforcement, public relations, [and] education...should remain under the direct control of the Committee through its Executive Vice Chairman and Executive Director.”⁸⁴⁷ He finally warned Goldberg that if the PCEEEO showed too much leniency, then they “may find [themselves] subject to public criticism while not being able to explain the reasons for failure.”⁸⁴⁸

Despite concerns raised about Plans for Progress in December, Troutman sought to continue the plan that he outlined at the last PCEEEO meeting. In January 1962, he went directly to President Kennedy with his proposal, hoping that his good friend would back him up in the face of strong opposition from Vice-President Johnson, Secretary Goldberg, Field and his staff, and other PCEEEO members about a Plans for Progress office separate from the

⁸⁴⁴ Letter from Wheeler to Arthur Goldberg, December 6, 1961, Wheeler papers.

⁸⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁸ Ibid.

PCEEEO's staff office.⁸⁴⁹ When the second Plans for Progress subcommittee met on January 17, they recommended keeping the Plans for Progress staff integrated with the PCEEEO structure, including oversight by PCEEEO staff administrators. Nevertheless, in a series of conferences between Troutman, Goldberg, Johnson, and Kennedy, several alternatives were reached.⁸⁵⁰ Troutman threatened to sever his ties with Plans for Progress and possibly the PCEEEO if his ideas were not adopted immediately. After Troutman expressed his concerns with Kennedy, he held several meetings with other government officials. At the end of one particular meeting with Abe Fortas, an attorney for Johnson and later a Supreme Court Justice, Troutman worked out the terms of his continued involvement with Plans for Progress. The two agreed that if Troutman decided to no longer continue his direct involvement with Plans for Progress, he would continue as a citizen-member of the PCEEEO. If Troutman and his staff continued their direct involvement with Plans for Progress, then they would have to report only to Jerry Holleman, not Field, and eventually to a Plans for Progress advisory group.⁸⁵¹

Troutman moved forward with his threat to resign from Plans for Progress. However, in a succession of private meetings, President Kennedy, Vice President Johnson, Attorney General Kennedy, and Secretary Goldberg weighed both sides of the situation, taking into account the concerns of Field and his staff as well as the demands of Troutman and his staff. Furthermore, they also had to consider how Troutman's exit from the Plans for Progress and possibly the PCEEEO would be viewed by southern lawmakers.⁸⁵² They all agreed to

⁸⁴⁹Christopher Howland Pyle, "The Politics of Civil Rights," 58.

⁸⁵⁰Ibid.

⁸⁵¹Ibid., 59-60.

⁸⁵²Ibid., 61.

Troutman's demands, deciding that there would eventually be a "Council on Plans for Progress for Employers." Given Holleman's other responsibilities this also meant that Troutman's staff went virtually unchecked by the PCEEO. Joseph Kruse, Troutman's assistant, would serve as the Plans for Progress liaison with the PCEEO staff; at the same time, Plans for Progress did not take away complete authority from the PCEEO staff when issues went directly against Executive Order 10925.⁸⁵³

While the President, Vice-President, and others did their behind-the-scenes maneuvering, Field lobbied other PCEEO members, including Wheeler, to gain their confidence in Field and his staff over Troutman's if such a situation should arise. At the next PCEEO meeting on February 15, instead of hearing a report from the second Plans for Progress subcommittee, the PCEEO members listened to the agreement reached by Kennedy and Johnson beforehand regarding the Plans for Progress and Troutman. Once hearing the new agreement, "the committee's civil rights partisans were astonished," explained one writer. Wheeler led first with his objections to the new compromise.⁸⁵⁴ Not unlike his December protest, Wheeler maintained his strong support for Field and the PCEEO staff, a pledge he also made to Field prior to the February meeting. Carrying forth his December concerns, specifically that the PCEEO was moving away from the executive order by choosing voluntary over mandatory compliance, Wheeler again questioned their timeliness especially " 'when civil rights groups [were] extremely suspicious.' "⁸⁵⁵ Others PCEEO members also questioned the need for separating the PCEEO staff and Plans for Progress

⁸⁵³Christopher Howland Pyle, "The Politics of Civil Rights," 61-62.

⁸⁵⁴Ibid., 62-63.

⁸⁵⁵Ibid.

staff altogether. Howard B. Woods, the only other black member on the PCEEEO, agreed with Wheeler.⁸⁵⁶

Speaking in the interests of civil rights groups such as the NAACP, NUL, and SRC, John Wheeler continued to rail-against the agreement. In his usual tactful manner, Wheeler added his “ ‘hope...that [they] might make a change so that whoever [was] in charge [of the Plans for Progress], instead of having his lines of authority direct to the Executive Vice-Chairman, would [also] come through the Director of the staff.’ ”⁸⁵⁷ Returning to his earlier concerns from December, Wheeler again reminded the group that unless the PCEEEO held onto the executive order’s enforcement provisions, then “ ‘certain’ ” elements from civil rights organizations would be forced to air their grievances in a more public way.⁸⁵⁸ Wheeler initiated a motion to the effect that the agreement be amended to align with Plans for Progress coming under the executive director (Field) along with the executive vice chairman (Holleman). His concerns could not be satisfied until they could “ ‘clear up some notions’ ” about the Plans for Progress.⁸⁵⁹ Wheeler continued to explain that according to some notions he “ ‘received that there [was] a possibility...that [Plans for Progress] could go off on a flier.’ ”⁸⁶⁰ After more discussion, Arthur Goldberg made an official motion in line with Wheeler’s concerns, but after more discussion that seemed to reiterate the PCEEEO’s commitment to a fair and balanced approach, the Vice President called for a vote on the previously reached

⁸⁵⁶Christopher Howland Pyle, “The Politics of Civil Rights,” 62-63.

⁸⁵⁷Ibid., 64.(Pyle’s brackets).

⁸⁵⁸Ibid.

⁸⁵⁹Ibid., 65.

⁸⁶⁰Ibid. (Pyle’s brackets).

agreement, which affirmatively passed.⁸⁶¹ Although Plans for Progress would proceed under Troutman's leadership for the time being, Wheeler's analytical skills at bringing these issues to the forefront by shifting the PCEEEO's conversation toward points of clarification nevertheless demonstrated his independent thinking and desire to see that a genuine and comprehensive approach to equal employment remained the ultimate objective.

As the Kennedy administration deliberated over the PCEEEO's internal issues, at the end of January the voter registration project was set. In January 1962, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young Jr., James Farmer, and Charles McDew announced in a combined press conference their cooperation in a major two-year national voter registration drive known as the Voter Education Project (VEP). Wiley E. Branton, a civil rights lawyer who gained recognition in 1957 as legal counsel for the Little Rock Nine was hired by SRC as the first VEP director. This represented a moment when these organizations, where competition existed, ultimately found a common ground in cooperation with President Kennedy and the Justice Department as well as philanthropic foundations under which the major goal of increased voter registration could be achieved. Wheeler had again played a prominent role in its development, which etched closer to meeting his New South prosperity objectives. During the direct action, or "second phase" of the black freedom movement, blacks would gain more political leverage and participation. The administration of VEP became the single largest and the most important role SRC played during the 1960s; it also crystallized SRC's impact on the civil rights movement.⁸⁶²

⁸⁶¹Christopher Howland Pyle, "The Politics of Civil Rights," 65-67.

⁸⁶² Voter Education Project News Release, January 1962; Pat Watters and Reese Cleghorn, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*.

After receiving a special Internal Revenue Service tax exemption for VEP, SRC received its first round of funds beginning in March 1962. Once VEP received its first round of funds, one of the first *local* civil rights organizations to submit a proposal was the DCNA, which provides another clear outcome of Wheeler's public policy influence and negotiations at the national level. As chairman of SRC's executive committee, Wheeler worked closely with Leslie Dunbar as SRC prepared itself to oversee VEP. In this position, Wheeler had the leverage to ensure that his organization was among the first local ones to receive funding from VEP in May 1962, just in time for Durham's citywide elections. The DCNA received \$2,500.00 for crass programs designed to meet registration deadlines. That same year, Durham also had a major bond issue on the ballot, which, if passed, would provide funding for the city's part of a \$12 million urban renewal project that had been in the planning stages since 1958. Wheeler was also the only black member on the Durham Redevelopment Commission, the group formed by the city to manage the urban renewal program. Without the majority of support from the city's black community, the bond referendum stood to fail. The DCNA had many of its members on volunteer committees whose main roles were to help garner support for the urban renewal bond referendum. The bond issue had larger implications related to increased black economic empowerment with the added possibility of re-opening the entire marketplace for black business as well. The bond referendum narrowly passed that October and was overwhelmingly backed at the majority black precincts. Throughout VEP's existence, Wheeler and the DCNA could always count on receiving grants for voter registration drives.⁸⁶³

⁸⁶³"Important Notice!!! Are You Registered?, No!," "Attention, Citizen, This is Your Last Call for Registration," Flyers for DCNA Voter Registration Drive, May 1962; "Gratifying Registration Returns," *Durham Morning Herald*, May 15, 1962; "Nominations Won by Candidates Backed by Negro Group," *Durham*

In the ensuing months, Wheeler's predictions at the PCEEEO's February meeting came true as the NAACP's labor secretary Herbert Hill and executive director Roy Wilkins publicly criticized the PCEEEO and its Plans for Progress. They both believed that Troutman and the Plans for Progress gave businesses a free pass by allowing them to continue their relationship with the federal government while not having to take any serious measures to deal swiftly with their discriminatory practices. In light of continued public criticism by the NAACP and other groups, Troutman became a political hindrance for Kennedy, Johnson and the PCEEEO; it further fueled the public debate over voluntary vs. compulsory compliance, rather than focusing closely on the PCEEEO's entire program as Johnson had wanted.⁸⁶⁴ A final straw came that June when a *New York Times* article was published about the PCEEEO's internal dispute and Troutman's overall support for voluntary compliance.⁸⁶⁵

While the Plans for Progress debate continued to play out, the PCEEEO began to re-evaluate the inter-workings of the staff at-large. To do this, they enlisted the expertise of past National Urban League president Theodore Kheel to study the PCEEEO's administrative structure and to make some final recommendations. Earlier that May the PCEEEO's executive vice-chairman, Jerry Holleman, resigned to avoid negative publicity over inappropriate financial gifts he received. While Kheel worked towards a final report, rumors surfaced in the *New York Times* again that the PCEEEO wanted a "moderate" black to permanently replace Holleman as the new executive vice-chairman. The PCEEEO had not planned to appoint someone to the position until it had an opportunity to examine the Kheel Report at

Morning Herald", May 27, 1962; "Here are the Results of Yesterday's Primary Election," *Durham Morning Herald*", May 27, 1962.

⁸⁶⁴Christopher Howland Pyle, "The Politics of Civil Rights," 68-74.

⁸⁶⁵*Ibid*, 83-85.

their August 22 meeting.⁸⁶⁶ But as a result of the *New York Times* article, Wheeler immediately wired a Western Union Telegram to Vice-President Johnson. Pointing out the sensitive nature of the situation along with the use of the word “moderate,” he directly explained that:

IT SEEMS INAPPROPRIATE FOR ANY ACTION TO BE TAKEN TOWARD IMPLEMENTING RECOMMENDATIONS OF KEEL REPORT BEFORE THE FULL COMMITTEE HAS HAD AN OPORTUNITY TO REVIEW IT. STOP. ALSO INDICATION THAT THE ADMINISTRATION IS SEEKING A MODERATE FOR THE ABOVE DESCRIBED POST WAS INDEED AN UNFORTUNATE USE OF TERMINOLOGY. STOP. I AM SURE THAT SEVERAL OTHER MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE WOULD JOIN ME IN URGING THAT NO FURTHER ACTION BE TAKEN UNTIL FULL COMMITTEE HAS HAD AN OPPORTUNITY TO CONSIDER THE QUESTION OF WHETHER THE KEEL REPORT AND ITS RECOMMENDATIONS ARE ACCEPTABLE.⁸⁶⁷

Wheeler did not care for the use of the word moderate in this instance for the same reasons he later rejected the black power slogan; he saw the labels as disruptive to the ultimate goal of racial and economic justice at a time when opponents of the civil rights movement looked for any excuse to thwart progress.

The immediate fall-out from the continued criticism of Plans for Progress by the NAACP and other civil rights groups forced Troutman to resign from his position as Plans for Progress chairman and then from the PCEEEO just prior to its meeting on August 22.⁸⁶⁸ At the August 22 meeting, PCEEEO members held conversations about the highly anticipated Kheel Report. The Kheel Report recommended placing the majority of the PCEEEO staff on compliance duty. The Report also recommended expanding the follow-up work on Plans for Progress and that the program be continued directly through the PCEEEO staff and not as a

⁸⁶⁶Christopher Howland Pyle, “The Politics of Civil Rights,” 84-90.

⁸⁶⁷Western Union Telegram from Wheeler to Lyndon Johnson (original capitalizations), August 1961, Wheeler Papers.

⁸⁶⁸ Christopher Howland Pyle, “The Politics of Civil Rights,” 84-90.

separate unit. It suggested involving PCEEEO members more in the decision-making process as well as government agencies more when it came to specific complaints. It recommended that there be limited speaking engagements by the staff and committee members specifically representing the PCEEEO and a more enthusiastic handling of public relations. Finally, it recommended re-organizing the staff, especially eliminating the position of executive director.⁸⁶⁹

As the PCEEEO discussed the Kheel Report, a discussion ensued about the public confusion over the PCEEEO's program—whether it favored persuasion over enforcement. Despite previous internal conversations about the direction of Plans for Progress, the PCEEEO members all agreed that there had never been a moment in their minds when the PCEEEO gave public indications that it preferred Plans for Progress or voluntary compliance over their compulsory enforcement strategy. During the discussion, labor leader Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers provided a written statement that he suggested the PCEEEO make to the press re-affirming their official stance on voluntary vs. forced compliance. Vice President Johnson and others also supported issuing the statement to the press. During the meeting, Wheeler again spoke-up very assertively about the Kheel Report and the circumstances surrounding the voluntary vs. compulsory features of the PCEEEO. He said, “I certainly, too, want to endorse this statement. In reading the Kheel Report, one of the things that struck me was that this [Kheel Report] seems to be assuming that we have taken a position which we have never taken. I think in all of the discussions that I have heard here, and certainly those that I have participated in, that we have prefaced any other remarks with the statement that we felt that the Plans for Progress and the persuasion end of our efforts were an indispensable

⁸⁶⁹“Report of Theodore W. Kheel to Vice President Johnson on the Structure and Operations of the President’s Committee on Equal Employment Opportunity,” 1962, Johnson Papers.

part of any effort to secure a compliance. This is written into the [Executive] Order.”⁸⁷⁰

Wheeler also admitted that “I have been at a loss, in reading the newspapers, to understand where the impression was obtained that we have division in the committee as to whether or not this was part of our program.”⁸⁷¹

In specific reference to the Kheel Report itself, Wheeler outlined the need for the PCEEEO to continue to analyze the document before automatically accepting and applying its recommendations. He asked Vice President Johnson if there could be a sub-committee appointed “to study it carefully and to make a report in the very near future of evaluation, after consultation with the officers of the committee, the Chairman, and with the Vice Chairman, considering the best means by which we may implement the recommendations of the Kheel Report? I believe this would dispense with the possibility of or avoid the possibility of everyone riding off in a different direction at the same time, if we could reduce our actions to something of this nature.”⁸⁷² Vice President Johnson promptly appointed Wheeler and four other committee members to a Kheel Report sub-committee.

The PCEEEO presented their public statement to the press directly following the August 22 meeting. Labor Secretary Arthur Goldberg led the press briefing and read the statement. The statement explained that “the committee reaffirms its original policy of placing primary emphasis on its compliance and enforcement activities, while recognizing that enforcement and persuasion are both essential and indivisible parts of a total program. Volunteer programs based upon persuasion can only supplement the basic work of

⁸⁷⁰“Transcript of Proceedings,” PCEEEO, August 22, 1962, Committee Meetings Folder, George M. Reedy Files, 1962, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers, 36.

⁸⁷¹Ibid.

⁸⁷²Ibid.

compliance and enforcement. To assure maximum effectiveness and progress, all activities must be under the direction and supervision of the officers and the staff. Separate activities and separate staff would not achieve the ‘proper harmonizing of enforcement and persuasion’ which the Kheel Report has called ‘the main challenge’ before the committee.”⁸⁷³ Goldberg also clarified that the Kheel Report was not a “secret” report, but would be made public after the briefing. He then explained that the Vice President appointed a sub-committee to further analyze the Kheel Report.

After Goldberg listed the names of the committee members on the sub-committee, a reporter asked “Who was Mr. Wheeler?” Without knowing it, the reporter had questioned what Wheeler’s role was on the PCEEEO.[say same thing but in a different way] However, the question itself can also be understood by recognizing the significance of Wheeler’s role on the PCEEEO. He was someone who had the cunning ability to get the PCEEEO to question and clarify its stance on important issues. During meetings, Wheeler could steer a conversation back to the larger point and force the PCEEEO to consider how its policies would ultimately affect their broader civil rights objectives.

Although the PCEEEO re-affirmed its stance that “ ‘We Mean Business,’ ” regarding enforcement of Executive Order 10925, Plans for Progress continued to receive criticism from civil rights organizations. In January 1963, the SRC, of which Wheeler was executive committee chairman, published its “Plans for Progress: Atlanta Survey,” which was a very critical special report. The SRC report asked, “Has employment of Negroes (and other minorities) increased, and have they been placed in non-traditional job categories?”⁸⁷⁴ To

⁸⁷³Ibid., 338-39.

⁸⁷⁴“Plans for Progress: Atlanta Survey,” SRC, January 1963, Civil Service Commission Folder, George Reedy Files, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers, 1.

answer that question, the SRC surveyed and researched twenty-four out of the original fifty-two companies that signed Plans for Progress pledges; the twenty-four companies represented those who also had operations in Atlanta. The Atlanta Survey concluded overall that the Plans for Progress did not translate into increased employment opportunities for blacks and non-whites in the South; only about three out of the twenty-four companies targeted “produced evidence of affirmative compliance with their pledges.”⁸⁷⁵

The SRC report went on to say that although many of these companies signed Plans for Progress pledges, most of them made very little efforts in the South towards seriously dealing with racial discrimination in employment. For those companies that made some improvements toward increasing black employment opportunities, most were relegated to manufacturing positions rather than salaried or professional positions. Many of these companies only saw Plans for Progress as a company-wide pledge that had little relevance over what happened in Atlanta or the southern region in general. Some managers of the Atlanta companies made no attempts to address their Plans for Progress pledges at all; therefore, “indications are that the interpretation of the voluntary and affirmative provisions of the program is being left to the individual signers themselves.”⁸⁷⁶

The very public SRC report alarmed the PCEEEO’s new executive vice chairman, Hobart Taylor, Jr. That February, Taylor wrote to Vice President Johnson providing a summary and assessment of the SRC’s Atlanta Survey. Taylor also outlined several actions that he and his staff intended to take following the SRC special report. Taylor planned to send PCEEEO staff member Ward McCreedy to Atlanta to obtain the materials used for the

⁸⁷⁵Ibid., 5-6.

⁸⁷⁶“Plans for Progress: Atlanta Survey,” SRC, January 1963, Civil Service Commission Folder, George Reedy Files, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers.

SRC report and to also investigate many of the issues reported in the SRC survey. Taylor noted that McCreedy attempted to make arrangements to speak with the SRC's executive director Leslie Dunbar at the SRC offices. In "having learned that John Wheeler was a member of the Board of the Southern Regional Council," Taylor explained "I called him and advised him as to the nature and purpose of McCreedy's proposed trip and asked that he convey that information to the Board."⁸⁷⁷ What is extremely telling here is that despite his positions with both the PCEEO and SRC, Wheeler did not keep the SRC from publishing its report. This indicates that, for Wheeler, equal employment for blacks was the main objective and ultimately, keeping pressure on the PCEEO from all angles was necessary.

THE BATTLEFRONT IN NORTH CAROLINA, 1963

Just as Wheeler did not believe that North Carolina would make any strides toward equal employment without being prodded by federal mandates, he also did not think that the PCEEO could achieve compliance by its efforts alone. He was prepared to continue to push Governor Sanford in remedying the state employment issue by calling out specific state agencies. In December 1962, over a year after Wheeler sent his jobs blueprint to Sanford, he wrote to the governor and adjutant general Claude Bowers of the North Carolina National Guard related to the recruitment of "Negro personnel" for the 30th Division of the North Carolina National Guard and other guard units throughout the state. Wheeler asked Sanford if he was prepared to support the recruitment of "Negro Personnel" in the North Carolina National Guard and other guard units across the state. Wheeler explained that "we feel

⁸⁷⁷Memorandum from Hobart Taylor, Jr. to Lyndon B. Johnson, February 19, 1963, Committee Meeting folder, George Reedy Files, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers, 4.

strong support for something more than mere token Negro membership in the North Carolina Guard is imperative if we are to maintain our reputation for neighborliness and fair play.”⁸⁷⁸

In his letter to Bowers, Wheeler wrote in reference to a recent public announcement about the Guard strengthening the 30th Division through an intense recruiting drive. Wheeler asked Bowers “whether the North Carolina National Guard is now prepared to accept Negro citizens for enlistment in the 30th Division and in other Guard units located throughout the state.” “If so,” Wheeler continued, “we shall appreciate your advising what procedure should be followed by those who wish to enlist.”⁸⁷⁹ Wheeler also inquired about the procedure that should be followed by those interested in joining. Finally, Wheeler also asked Bowers “the extent to which your plans for recruitment are directed toward negroes throughout North Carolina.”⁸⁸⁰

In early January 1963, John Wheeler wrote to Bowers again regarding the latter’s response to his December inquiry, “which in many respects was disappointing.”⁸⁸¹ Wheeler expressed disappointment because “It seems to us that as Chief Executive Officer of the Guard, you would have at least been able to furnish us with the names and addresses of recruiting officers who are designated to serve the Durham area, together with a reply as to whether or not their efforts are directed toward the recruiting of Negro personnel.”⁸⁸² Wheeler was also disappointed that the Guard sought to carry-out its duties in accordance

⁸⁷⁸Letter from Wheeler to Governor Terry Sanford, December 28, 1962, folder 1, DCNA box 1, Wheeler Papers.

⁸⁷⁹Letter from Wheeler to Adjutant General Claude Bowers, December 28, 1962, folder 1, DCNA box 1, Wheeler Papers.

⁸⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸⁸¹Letter from Wheeler to Adjutant General Claude T. Bowers, January 3, 1963, folder 1, DCNA box 1, Wheeler Papers, 1.

⁸⁸²Ibid.

with state laws, which from Wheeler's perspective meant "Taken literally...that Negroes are barred by your office from services in every one of the existing units of the Guard including the 30th Division."⁸⁸³ Wheeler pointed Bowers to the recent Supreme Court case, *Avent vs. the State of North Carolina* (1963), where North Carolina's attorney general told the high court that "North Carolina considers the racial barriers, set up by its Statutes to be invalid and unenforceable in view of recent decisions of the United States Supreme Court. It is also our understanding that he explained to the Court that the absence of Negroes from the North Carolina Guard units was due to the fact that none of them have sought to enlist."⁸⁸⁴

John Wheeler appealed to "our splendid reputation for fairness," as "it appears safe to say that the rest of the nation assumes that North Carolina has long since passed the point where it would want to be found discriminating against its Negro citizens by excluding them from service in its National Guard Units."⁸⁸⁵ Wheeler then suggested to Bowers that he write to the attorney general to seek his opinion on the constitutionality of continuing separate white and black militia units, the policy of only having white officers in charge of black units, and the legality of limiting the assignment of black guard units when white troops were available. Wheeler included excerpts from the North Carolina general statutes that detailed the North Carolina National Guard laws to make his point. He concluded by saying that, "Please be assured that our request is being made in good faith and with the hope that you

⁸⁸³Letter from Wheeler to Adjutant General Claude T. Bowers, January 3, 1963, folder 1, DCNA box 1, Wheeler Papers, 1.

⁸⁸⁴*Ibid.*

⁸⁸⁵*Ibid.*

will act promptly to remove one of the glaring sources of misunderstanding between the races of this State.”⁸⁸⁶

Despite John Wheeler’s position on the PCEEEO and his advocacy for increased employment opportunities for blacks, it became quite clear that Executive Order 10925 had significant limitations as well. On the whole, the executive order dealt mainly with qualified black professionals in the public sector, rather than the black masses, many of whom were unskilled and low wage earners. In addition, it did not have the far-reaching authority to challenge private businesses that did not have government contracts from discriminating against hiring black employees. Finally, any changes, if any at all, came at a much slower pace than what most blacks considered to be reasonable.

Along with his attacks on the Guard, Wheeler continued to challenge North Carolina’s other agencies that held significant power over the state’s willingness to comply with equal employment mandates, particularly Executive Order 10925. In the spring of 1963, Alonzo Reid, a black employee with ten years working for the ESC's High Point, North Carolina office, filed a complaint with the Merit System Council against his office claiming that he was discriminated against because of his race when they failed to promote him to an open management after the division was restructured on an integrated basis that March. The Merit System Council handled internal employment complaints and investigations regarding North Carolina’s ESC. Reid appealed to John Wheeler for assistance in the matter and, thereafter, he and M. Hugh Thompson represented Reid as his attorneys in the case. In his failed attempt at promotion, Reid had applied for two open management positions with the Highpoint ESC, which required him to take written

⁸⁸⁶Letter from Wheeler to Adjutant General Claude T. Bowers, January 3, 1963, folder 1, DCNA box 1, Wheeler Papers, 2.

examinations, which he later passed.⁸⁸⁷ Reid claimed that part of the reasoning why he was overlooked was due to racial discrimination by his supervisors. He maintained that part of his suspicions came from overhearing his superiors and other officials at the Highpoint office discuss their concern over “ ‘public acceptance’ and ‘employee acceptance’ ” regarding the new organizational structure of the now integrated office.⁸⁸⁸ Furthermore, Reid claimed that he also heard the local office manager say “if these ‘niggers’ would just stop and be patient, that everything would be alright.”⁸⁸⁹

On July 29, John Wheeler represented Reid at a Merit System Council hearing in Raleigh, where his client appealed the decision. Part of the official reasoning for why Reid did not receive a promotion was because he had been reprimanded in February for failure to comply with office rules, specifically by eating at his desk when no one else was in the office. He received six months probation at that time. Wheeler argued that although Reid was on probation, there were no rules stipulating that an employee could not be promoted while on probation. Wheeler appealed to the Council to re-consider Reid’s qualifications for the position based solely on his merits during the time before his reprimand. In fact, Reid’s competitive examination score was an 86, compared to scores of 84 and 77 by the employees who eventually received promotions over him. In light of the fact that Reid scored higher on his examinations than did the two whites, Wheeler raised questions as to why Reid failed to get either of the promotions. After meeting in closed-door deliberations, the Council came back with and came back with a ruling in favor of the ESC stating that the office did not

⁸⁸⁷ Merit System Council Meeting Minutes regarding the Hearing of Appeal of Mr. Alonzo Reid, July 29, 1963, EEO folder 1963, PCEEO box 39, Wheeler Papers, 3.

⁸⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁸⁹ Ibid.

discriminate against Reid on the basis of race.⁸⁹⁰ The Council chairman, Fred Stovall Royster, wrote to Reid explaining that their decision was based on the fact that the ESC's decision not to promote him had more to do with their policy of not promoting employees who were on probation at the time the employee sought a promotion. The Council also sided with the ESC's argument that the initial time of promotion would have occurred after Reid's probationary period was over, but had to be sped-up as a result of a federal mandate. In the end, the Council ruled on the ESC's behalf based on a technicality.⁸⁹¹

John Wheeler later wrote to Arthur A. Chapin, Jr., a black special assistant to secretary of labor and PCEEO member Arthur Goldberg, expressing his outright disbelief and chagrin at the Merit System Council's decision. Wheeler explained that during the hearing the Highpoint ESC office manager Ralph E. Miller stated that if Mr. Reid had scored the same on competitive examinations as the two whites who were eventually promoted, Miller would not have even considered Reid for the position because it would have meant that Reid's qualifications were somehow not as good as theirs. Additionally, Miller noted that Reid's race would also be viewed unfavorably by potential job seekers who would have questioned Reid's qualifications. Miller also noted that Reid's work performance was in good standing, which meant that there was really no significant reason for not promoting him outright. In fact, Reid's competitive examination score was an 86, compared to scores of 84 and 77 by the employees who eventually received promotions over Reid. The ESC argued that because of their recent re-organization, they decided not to use the competitive

⁸⁹⁰Merit System Council Meeting Minutes regarding the Hearing of Appeal of Mr. Alonzo Reid, July 29, 1963, EEO folder 1963, PCEEO box 39, Wheeler Papers, 5; Letter from Royster (Chairman of the Merit System Council) to Reid, August 1, 1963, EEO folder 1963, PCEEO box 39, Wheeler Papers.

⁸⁹¹Letter from Royster (Chairman of the Merit System Council) to Reid, August 1, 1963, EEO folder 1963, PCEEO box 39, Wheeler Papers.

examinations in deciding promotions, a move that effectively changed the rules of the game. The ESC claimed they would instead use non-competitive examinations to determine promotions, but they failed to give Mr. Baty or Surratt, the two men promoted over Reid, non-competitive examinations at all.⁸⁹²

To make matters worse, according to Wheeler, the Merit System Council failed to properly record the entire hearing (verbatim) to include an entire transcript of the session. Wheeler claimed the Council “misled” them entirely because the chairman “repeatedly gave instruction to the stenographer with reference to what the record should show with respect to various items.”⁸⁹³ Wheeler argued that the fact that Reid “was placed on probation on the basis of a trivial charge for violating a non-existent rule is obviously open to serious question in view of the fact that the entire force at High Point had been told during the later part of 1962 that the office would be desegregated during the following year.”⁸⁹⁴ Wheeler also explained that Reid’s treatment was not in isolation as another experienced black ESC employee in the Greensboro office was suspended because he failed to inform his supervisors that he had fallen behind in processing employment applications for the black side of the office. This happened despite that side of the office not having enough manpower to keep up with processing paperwork as new hires within the past decade had been assigned to the white side of the office. Wheeler felt strongly that “the procedure adopted at High Point and at Greensboro represent a pattern for which it appears that the commission, in desegregating several of its North Carolina offices, seeks to avoid the promotion of qualified Negro

⁸⁹²Letter from Wheeler to Arthur Chapin (Special Assistant to the U.S. Employment Service Secretary in the Department of Labor), September 3, 1963, EEO folder 1963, PCEEO box 39, Wheeler Papers.

⁸⁹³*Ibid.*, 2.

⁸⁹⁴*Ibid.*, 4.

employees to positions in which they will exercise supervision over both Negro and s[w]hite personnel.”⁸⁹⁵ In the Fayetteville office, according to Wheeler, a black ESC employee was transferred to the state ESC staff in order to keep him from receiving a management position in that office. As the rules changed or were distorted to keep blacks from obtaining better employment opportunities, Wheeler was in a strategic position and was just as interested in ensuring that agencies that held the responsibility to improve employment practices statewide also complied with Executive Order 10925 in their own hiring practices. This was also part of Wheeler’s vision to see that blacks be part of the decision-making bodies in these agencies as well.⁸⁹⁶

Although Reid lost his appeal, there were still positive outcomes from his case. Still dissatisfied after allowing due process at the state level to run its course, Wheeler reached out to government authorities in Washington, D.C., which prompted an official PCEEO investigation of the Highpoint ESC. Once the investigation was completed, Reid gave Wheeler the details of the PCEEO’s investigation of the Highpoint ESC. First, Reid was quite pleased by the investigation because it was somewhat more objective and without one-sided bias. He told Wheeler that before the investigation even began “it was most amusing yesterday morning to see them [Highpoint office management] trying to clean up some incriminating evidence and have a staff meeting to advise the staff as to what to do and say. As soon as they started to assemble, [the investigator] Mr. Murphy walked in and broke it

⁸⁹⁵Letter from Wheeler to Arthur Chapin (Special Assistant to the U.S. Employment Service Secretary in the Department of Labor), September 3, 1963, EEO folder 1963, PCEEO box 39, Wheeler Papers, 4.

⁸⁹⁶Ibid.

up.”⁸⁹⁷ Reid appealed to Wheeler again because, although an investigation took place, the Highpoint ESC “have reverted [back] to [a] ‘business as usual’ procedure regarding the routing of non-white applicants for job referrals since they [the investigators] have left the office.”⁸⁹⁸ Reid specifically wanted to know if Murphy had any disciplinary actions planned for the Highpoint ESC. He relayed to Wheeler that “the office manager here was so upset by the investigation that it made him sick and he had to go back home this morning.”⁸⁹⁹

As far as can be determined, no real disciplinary actions were taken against the Highpoint ESC officials. As Reid explained to Jack Howard, assistant to the undersecretary at the department of labor, his own job situation did improve but many trainee positions were still not advertised to the general public. The person interviewing applicants for these positions continued to refer the best openings to "certain" people, namely white applicants.⁹⁰⁰ In mid-October, Howard traveled to North Carolina for a one-on-one meeting with Governor Sanford and offered to also meet with Wheeler and Reid to discuss in more detail the ESC situation in the state so he could hopefully “render a service that will result in greater opportunity for all people in North Carolina.”⁹⁰¹ The implementation of fair employment practices was not simply isolated to state-controlled agencies. In 1964, for example, the Durham Housing Authority outright refused to appoint James J. "Babe" Henderson, "its [black] senior member and Vice President, who is unquestionably the most competent and

⁸⁹⁷ Letter from Alonzo S. Reid to Wheeler, November 21, 1963, EEO folder 1963, PCEEO box 39, Wheeler Papers.

⁸⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁰ Letter from Alonzo S. Reid to Jack Howard (Assistant to the Undersecretary, U.S. Department of Labor), 1963, EEO folder 1963, PCEEO box 39, Wheeler Papers.

⁹⁰¹ Letter from Jack Howard to Wheeler, October 15, 1963, EEO folder 1963, PCEEO box 39, Wheeler Papers; Letter from Jack Howard to Alonzo S. Reid, October 1963, EEO folder 1963, PCEEO box 39, Wheeler Papers.

most experienced member of the organization." *Carolina Times* newspaper editor Louis Austin put the issue into proper perspective. "Durham's greatest need," Austin declared was to have the "type of leadership that [would] realize that Negroes no longer appreciate[d] nor [would] they accept or follow the kind of leadership that has only a master-slave or paternalistic attitude to offer." "Unless the white leadership," Austin continued "is willing to sit down on a man to man basis and talk in a spirit of equality [then] there is little hope that Durham [would] ever move forward in the direction of a better understanding between the races."⁹⁰² To add insult to injury, the city's white power-structured also passed on hiring the city's longtime black assistant recreation director (with twenty years experience), in favor of hiring a younger, less experienced white man "fresh out of college" to head the city's entire recreation department. These were clear instances where there was no disputing the qualifications of the black candidates.

These and other examples make the limitations of Executive Order 10925 and the PCEEO obvious. They point to the slow pace of change in government employment in particular and the extent to which the equal employment mandate could be immediately realized. The cases in point also demonstrate how tedious, time consuming, and costly the process of workplace integration in government agencies was as well as how difficult it became to enforce the executive order itself. Durham and so many other cities throughout the state missed out on good leadership because they did not readily move beyond race-based discrimination in hiring. Despite the Highpoint ESC investigation the previous year, in July 1964 it seems that Reid gave up on getting fair treatment in the Highpoint office altogether. He wrote to Wheeler with interest in finding employment elsewhere, at which point Wheeler

⁹⁰²"A New Deal in Leadership Needed for Durham," *Carolina Times*, October 17, 1964; John Wheeler interview, "Robert Penn Warren's *Who Speaks for the Negro?*: an Archival Collection" at: <http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/>.

pointed to a possible opening in employment security in Washington, D.C. Reid promptly submitted an SF 57 form and forwarded it without delay. The other downside to waiting on workplace integration in government employment to unravel itself because of decades of bias was that these efforts were targeted specifically at black professionals, rather than the working class, skilled, or unskilled black masses, many of whom were unlikely to gain the prerequisite skills and education necessary for professional white-collar jobs.⁹⁰³

The economic limitations regarding the battle for equal employment was at the center of renewed direct action protests in Durham that began on May 18, 1963. Student Vivian McCoy maintained that demonstration intended “ ‘To start with employment first because we felt that employment was the essence of it all, to get blacks out of these menial jobs at department stores since we were spending all of our money there.’ ”⁹⁰⁴ That Saturday afternoon, hundreds of students from NCC and Hillside High School picketed several segregated restaurants before 130 of them were arrested by police for trespassing. In a display of support, hundreds of supporters swarmed to city hall and the county courthouse in solidarity for those arrested. The protesters vowed to continue their protests until their demands to end all forms of segregation were met.⁹⁰⁵ That day’s demonstration overlapped with city-wide elections. On Friday, the DCNA endorsed the Reverend Ruben L. Speaks, pastor at the black St. Joseph’s AME Church, in a one-shot voting tactic where they pledged support for a single candidate in the at-large city council race. In terms of the mayoral

⁹⁰³Letter from Alonzo S. Reid, July 17, 1964, EEO folder 1963, PCEEO box 39, Wheeler Papers.

⁹⁰⁴ Interview with Vivian McCoy by Chris D. Howard, April 1, 1983, Chris D. Howard Interview Notes with Vivian McCoy, April 1, 1983, Chris D. Howard Papers, 6.

⁹⁰⁵ “130 Arrested as Negroes Stage Sit-In Protest Here,” *DMH*, May 19, 1963; Jack Michael McElreath, “The Cost of Opportunity,” 308.

election, the DCNA endorsed R. Wense Grabarek, a white accountant and city councilman, running against insurance executive Watts Carr Jr.⁹⁰⁶ Grabarek won the mayoral seat with wide support from the majority-black precincts, while Speaks lost his bid for a council seat.⁹⁰⁷

On Sunday May 19, demonstrations continued as planned. This time the numbers swelled as approximately 500 demonstrators swarmed the Howard Johnson's Restaurant. The police arrested over 400 protestors and carried them off to jail. The remaining demonstrators made their way to the county courthouse where they again convened on the steps to support jailed protesters. As events unfolded in the evening, it drew in huge crowds of white teenagers who gathered directly across the street from the courthouse. At that moment, Durham faced possible violence as a few fights broke-out between blacks and whites before police ended hostilities. With some forty police officers now forming a dividing line between both groups, the next few moments were extremely tense as Mayor-elect Grabarek tried to convince both sides to remain peaceful; however it was attorney M. Hugh Thompson who later received credit for his role in easing that evening's tensions as he called on black demonstrators to disperse after he was able to obtain a few concessions such as cigarettes for those jailed.⁹⁰⁸

⁹⁰⁶“ ‘One-Shot’ Vote Set for Speaks, *DMH*, May 18, 1963; Allan P. Sindler, “Negro Protest and Local Politics in Durham, N.C.,” 14; Chris D. Howard, “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize,” 103; Jack Michale McElreath, “The Cost of Opportunity,” 308; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 91.

⁹⁰⁷“Grabarek Elected Mayor of Durham: Three Incumbents Among 6 Council Members Chosen,” *DMH*, May 19, 1963; Chris D. Howard, “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize,” 107-108.

⁹⁰⁸ “400 Negroes are Arrested as Protests Continue Here: Police Break Up Brief Scuffles,” *Durham Morning Herald*, May 20, 1963; “Opening Remarks of Mayor Grabarek, Durham's Interim Committee Press Conference,” June 4, 1963, Vice Presidential Office Files of George E. Reedy Pertaining to PCEEEO, box 28, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers, 3; Chris D. Howard, “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize,” 108-109.

The next day, on Monday May 20, NAACP and CORE Youth and College chapter representatives (the protest organizers) met with Grabarek who failed to persuade them to halt demonstrations. The NAACP-CORE group soon attended a city council meeting where Walter Riley and Quentin Baker, presidents of the Durham and NCC NAACP chapters, respectively, submitted a petition outlining their requirement ending protests. The group's demands came via its own twelve-member negotiating committee, which included attorney Floyd McKissick and NCC student leader Joyce Ware as co-persons. Again signaling the need to increase job opportunities for blacks, at the top of their list, they called for a local fair employment practices act to ensure that businesses, unions, and educational institutions no longer discriminated based on race, color, religion or national origin.⁹⁰⁹ Next, they wanted a public ordinance law to forbid "discrimination in public places, public accommodations in any Hotel, Motel, Restaurant, Theatre, [and] Hospital licensed by the City of Durham because of race, color or religion and making a violation of said ordinance a misdemeanor punishable by fine."⁹¹⁰ They requested an investigation into possible police harassment against female demonstrators and wanted those officers found guilty to be disciplined accordingly. They asked for all charges against student protesters to be dropped. Finally, the group insisted that an investigation be made into continued school segregation and specifically demanded local school officials to come up with workable school desegregation plans. At the end of said meeting, Grabarek appointed city council members Luther Barbour, Sam Riley, and John S. Stewart (the only black city council member) to a committee to

⁹⁰⁹"Grabarek, Negro Leaders Parley," *DMH*, May 21, 1963; "Mayor's Unit will Study NAACP Bid," *DS*, May 21, 1963; "Outline of Objectives from the NAACP-CORE Negotiation Committee and Negro Citizens of Durham Community to R. Wensell Grabarek," May 24, 1963, folder 197, Watts Hill, Jr. Papers, 1; Chris D. Howard, "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize," 114-115.

⁹¹⁰"Outline of Objectives from the NAACP-CORE Negotiation Committee and Negro Citizens of Durham Community," May 24, 1963, folder 197, Watts Hill, Jr. Papers, 1.

review the petition. Stewart became chair as the other committee members declined the chairmanship.⁹¹¹

That evening, students moved forward with mass demonstrations with plans to integrate Durham businesses. They poured into several retail stores, city theaters, motels, and restaurants, at which point many of them were arrested. As protests dragged on, two Durham restaurants, Honey's and Tops Drive-In, agreed to integrate their dining facilities; nevertheless, the Durham Restaurant Association decided as a body to continue the current segregation policies. As the weekend confrontations spilled over into the work-week, so too did threats of physical violence as black activists and resentful white onlookers descended on city hall once more. With center-city streets in front of the court house serving as a buffer zone between both groups, potential for violence grew closer as fireworks were thrown at black demonstrators. Police Chief William Pleasants called in the fire department to connect fire hoses to city hydrants and threatened to spray the swelling crowds, a move that served as a stark reminder of similar tactics used by police commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor in Birmingham, Alabama, in the preceding weeks. Indeed, the Durham demonstrations happened as an outgrowth of demonstrations in the Deep South. The crowds retreated as Pleasants called in the North Carolina State Highway Patrol for reserve backup for the Durham police.⁹¹²

⁹¹¹"Outline of Objectives from the NAACP-CORE Negotiation Committee and Negro Citizens of Durham Community," May 24, 1963, folder 197, Watts Hill, Jr. Papers, 1; Grabarek, Negro Leaders Parley," *DMH*, May 21, 1963; "Mayor's Unit will Study NAACP Bid," *DS*, May 21, 1963; Chris D. Howard, "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize," 115.

⁹¹²"Hundreds Arrested in New Protests by Negroes Here: Restaurant Unit Nixes New Policy," *DMH*, May 21, 1963; "A Better Way than Demonstrations," *DMH* May 21, 1963; "Protest Disrupt City Again," *DS*, May 21, 1963; "Opening Remarks of Mayor Grabarek, Durham's Interim Committee Press Conference," June 4, 1963, Vice Presidential Office Files of George E. Reedy Pertaining to PCEEEO, box 28, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers, 3; Jack Michael McElreath, "The Cost of Opportunity," 308-309.

On Tuesday May 21, students met with Grabarek in day-long conferences where they eventually reached an agreement to temporarily halt demonstrations.⁹¹³ The good faith measure happened in part because Grabarek obtained commitments from an additional five restaurants that agreed to integrate. The restaurants were the Rebel Drive-In, the Oh-Boy Drive-In, Turnage's Barebeque Place, Blue Light Café, and McDonald's Hamburger Drive-In. Grabarek then gave them his word to work diligently on the grievances outlined by demonstrators. The announced agreement came that evening as Grabarek attended a rally where he spoke to 1,000 people at St. Joseph's AME Church. He told the audience of mostly students, "The fact that you have agreed with me to forego demonstrations at this point proves to me that you deserve the rank of first-rate citizens," at which point the audience gave approval via a standing ovation.⁹¹⁴

On Wednesday May 22, Grabarek met with about fifty white and black businessmen and told them he would appoint a formal committee. It became quite clear that white leaders in attendance had no intention of sitting down with the NAACP-CORE negotiating committee, but preferred negotiating with what they viewed as the more "responsible" black leadership instead. The Reverend Warren Carr, past Human Relations Committee chairman, suggested that black leaders appoint one representative contingent so that meaningful compromise could be achieved. Watts Hill, Jr., author of the 1960 letter to Wheeler about

⁹¹³"Trespass Cases Voided: High Court Rules on Sit-In Here; Durham Cases are Overruled because S.C law 'Illegal' " *DS*, May 20, 1963; "Court Rules out Peaceful Sit-Ins Interference," *DMH* May 21, 1963; " 'Decision More Important than 1954 School Ruling,' " *DMH*, May 21, 1963; "Justices Fail to Draw Line on Business: Privacy Rights Still Undecided," *DS*, May 21, 1963.

⁹¹⁴"Protests Here to Halt Temporarily: Grabarek Secures Pledge; Five More Places Drop Bars," *DMH*, May 22, 1963; "Opening Remarks of Mayor Grabarek, Durham's Interim Committee Press Conference," June 4, 1963, Vice Presidential Office Files of George E. Reedy Pertaining to PCEEEO, box 28, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers, 3; "Grabarek Plans Truce Unit as Demonstrations Ended," *DS*, May 22, 1963; Jack McElreath, "The Cost of Opportunity," 310; Chris D. Howard, "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize," 123.

the “dangers” of the sit-in movement, voiced his own desire to see that the issues were dealt with privately and behind-the-scenes, noting that the few restaurants that desegregated earlier in the week had done so through private meetings outside of Durham. Floyd Patton, the manager at Sears, Roebuck and Company, along with others, stressed their willingness to hire more blacks. At the same time, Patton felt negotiations worthless because he believed black leaders could not negotiate effectively. In other words, the NAACP-CORE negotiating committee would never agree on conditions. Patton relayed that in early 1962, his store hired a black salesperson on a permanent basis and the company considered hiring another black employee until he received demands from a group of student activists to hire at least four more blacks in exchange for ending their pickets. He also noted that after going into negotiations, black leaders came back wanting him to hire 35 more blacks before they would stop. “I can’t have this organization [NAACP-CORE],” explained Patton, “or any other organization telling me who to hire but negotiations [could] be opened with responsible Negro leadership such as the [Asa] Spauldings, [John] Stewarts and [the John] Wheelers.”⁹¹⁵

In response to the meeting with business leaders, the NAACP-CORE group thanked Graberek in a letter for his efforts to find a reasonable solution, but they also made it clear to him that they had ultimate authority in determining the extent to which negotiations satisfied their objectives. “Unless noticeable progress is made on a daily basis,” they warned, “we cannot promise that mass demonstrations will not resume at any time.”⁹¹⁶ The NAACP-CORE group realized the “dire necessity of an excellent advisory committee and [were] certainly pleased with its formation, [but] it must advise you that since our objectives were

⁹¹⁵“Graberek Plans Truce Unit as Demonstrations Ended,” *DS*, May 22, 1963; Chris D. Howard, “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize,” 125.

⁹¹⁶“Graberek Given Thanks, Warning by Negro Groups,” *DMH*, May 23, 1963.

outlined to you (Grabarek) in our first meeting we will not be bound by any decision the committee recommends if it does not correlate with our outlined objectives which you have in your possession.”⁹¹⁷ “Please understand,” the letter went on to say, “that we are a distinct group, with distinct leaders and will not subordinate ourselves.”⁹¹⁸

By week's end, Grabarek appointed a Durham's Interim Committee (DIC). The eleven-member negotiating committee of mostly white businessmen was headed by Watts Carr, Jr., Grabarek's rival in the recent mayoral election. To no surprise, John Wheeler and Asa Spaulding were the only two black leaders on the committee because whites were unwilling to negotiate directly with the NAACP-CORE leaders. Wheeler and Asa Spaulding did voice their concerns that they were the only two blacks on the DIC. By most accounts, Spaulding had been somewhat aloof when it came to his involvement in direct action, aside from serving an intermediary selected by white power-brokers who relied on him when they wanted to end disturbances. When sit-ins took place in the city in 1960, Spaulding attended meetings as part of the group of about thirty community leaders that met behind the scenes to consider ways to end the sit-ins peacefully. Wheeler, on the other hand, as his record demonstrated, was more outwardly involved in the battle for greater freedom. Regardless, unlike the 1960 sit-ins, the student affirmed that no group or individual would speak on their behalf without first consulting its own twelve-member negotiating committee, which held an advantage given its power to resume direct action demonstrations at a moment's notice.⁹¹⁹

⁹¹⁷Ibid; original parentheses.

⁹¹⁸Ibid.; “Grabarek Plans Truce Unit as Demonstrations Ended,” *DS*, May 22, 1963; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Way*, 94.

⁹¹⁹“Grabarek Given Thanks, Warning by Negro Groups,” *DMH*, May 23, 1963; “Arbitration Offer,” *DMH*, May 21, 1963; “Mayor Names Committee of 10 on Race Problems,” *DS*, May 23, 1963; Allan P. Sindler, “Negro Protest and Local Politics in Durham, N.C.,” 17; Chris D. Howard, “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize,” 123-124; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 94.

That Thursday, NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins addressed another rally, this time held at St. Mark's AME Zion Church. During his speech, Wilkins referenced President Kennedy's move toward finally pushing civil rights legislation through Congress but reminded the audience that the problems sweeping the South could have been avoided had blacks received their citizenship rights 100 years earlier.⁹²⁰

At the DIC's first meeting, Floyd McKissick again presented the objectives of the NAACP-CORE contingent with other negotiating committee members in attendance. At that meeting, the DIC appointed four subcommittees that each had the responsibility to address a specific grievance. The four committees were "Hotels, Motels and Restaurants," "Employment," "City and County Schools," and "Miscellaneous Grievances." Wheeler was appointed to the Miscellaneous Grievances, which planned to consider the public accommodations ordinance included in the list of demands. As DIC chairman, Watts Carr, Jr. assured McKissick that the DIC would be strictly about finding an agreeable solution, rather than serving as an obstacle to compromise.⁹²¹

The Durham Agreement was touted as a voluntary agreement but it was far from that. In the next few weeks, the DIC and its subcommittees held several meetings with various Durham businesses and the NAACP-CORE negotiating committee. Along the way, the city recreation department recommended city swimming pools be desegregated immediately. During negotiations, Wheeler played an integral role during the overall negotiations by keeping student concerns in the forefront, in contrast to Spaulding, who many student leaders

⁹²⁰“Top NAACP Leader Talks at Mass Rally in Durham of Over 1,000 Negroes: Racial Group Gives Thanks to Grabarek,” *DMH*, May 24, 1963.

⁹²¹“Interim Committee at Work: Subgroups to Begin Discussions Today,” May 25, 1963; “Study Meetings Begin Today – Subcommittees on Race Issues Named,” *DS*, May 25, 1963; Chris D. Howard, “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize,” 125.

saw as an obstacle to their objectives. As DIC chair Warren Carr Jr. later explained, Spaulding “ ‘did not represent the [civil rights and political] power-structure of the black community,’ ” rather Wheeler “ ‘had a tight rein.’ ” Student activist Vivian McCoy remembered Wheeler was sure to seek guidance from Floyd McKissick, and he also attended NAACP Youth meetings in order to get a sense of what the NAACP-CORE leaders wanted discussed during DIC meetings. Grabarek supported this assessment, agreeing that Wheeler was beneficial in negotiations as an intermediary between the DIC and demonstration leaders, and as a mediator between the mayor and the black community in general. During DIC meetings, Wheeler’s astute opinions and observations most often represented student perspective and made sure that any agreements reached between the DIC and businesses were completely aligned with their goals. Watts Carr Jr. also explained that Wheeler “ ‘voiced the views of the students to the DIC.’ ” Jocelyn McKissick, Floyd McKissick’s daughter and herself a student activist, recalled that “ ‘John Wheeler was always cooperative...[and] always responsive’ ” to student angst.⁹²²

In early June, the DIC announced the “Durham Agreement,” which it touted as a “voluntary” desegregation plan. The most significant compromise centered on public accommodations as many local businesses agreed to desegregate. These businesses included

⁹²²Telegram to President John F. Kennedy from R. Wensell Grabarek and George Watts Carr Jr., June 4, 1963, Vice Presidential Office Files of George E. Reedy Pertaining to PCEEO, box 28, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers; “Wait-See Attitude Prevailing in Durham on Race Problems: Integration of City Swimming Pools is Urged,” *Carolina Times*, June 1, 1963; “The Mayor’s Efforts Worthy of Commendation,” *Carolina Times*, June 1, 1963; “Governor Sanford’s Speech at the Boys State Meet,” *Carolina Times*, June 22, 1963; Interview with Vivian McCoy by Chris D. Howard, April 1, 1983/Chris D. Howard Interview Notes with Vivian McCoy, April 1, 1983, Chris D. Howard Papers, 6; Interview with R. Wense Grabarek, interview #24, by Chris D. Howard, April 1, 1983/Chris D. Howard Interview with R. Wense Grabarek, April 1, 1983; Interview with Joycelyn McKissick by Chris D. Howard, Interview #27, Chris D. Howard Interview Notes with Joycelyn McKissick, Interview #24, Interview with Watts Carr, Jr., March 25, 1983;/Chris D. Howard Interview Notes with Watts Carr, Jr.; Chris D. Howard Papers, 4; Chris D. Howard, “Eyes on the Prize,” 124; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 94.

the Jack Tar Hotel, along with the city's eleven motels. At least 55 of Durham's 103 restaurants desegregated, while another eight restaurants agreed to consider desegregation; another six restaurants refused outright to desegregate their facilities. In reality, however, all of them still had full discretion over whether or not to serve individuals for various reasons of their own.⁹²³ Watts Carr, Jr. characterized the agreement as plain " 'Economics. That's the first thing you threw at 'em. If you don't do this thing...we['re] just going to be ruined. The town can't [survive] it [otherwise].' " In regards to education, very little was accomplished by the way progressive school desegregation plans. Additionally, the Durham City Schools pointed to a pending school desegregation ruling in federal court before determining the actions it could take.⁹²⁴

In the area of equal employment, the Durham Agreement reflected little in the way of increased jobs for blacks right away. For instance, no major retail businesses targeted during the May demonstrations agreed to immediately hire a specified number of blacks. Instead, the employment section included in the Durham Agreement revealed the employers' contentions that there were just not enough qualified black applicants to fill needed positions with their companies. The DIC reported some thirty retailers agreed to eliminate race-based hiring practices as outlined by Executive Order 10925. On that same note, they planned to work with Durham's relatively new Industrial Education Center to institute job training programs to increase the number of qualified black applicants. The DIC also noted that other

⁹²³ "Durham's Interim Committee Report of the Subcommittee on Hotels, Motels, and Restaurants," Vice Presidential Office Files of George E. Reedy Pertaining to PCEEO, June 4, 1963, box 28, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers, 16-18; "Final Report: Hotels, Motels and Restaurants Subcommittee," June 27, 1963, folder 197, Watts Hill, Jr. Papers; "More Eating Establishments Drop Barriers," *Carolina Times*, June 22, 1963; "Durham Motels Desegregating: Hotels and Half of Eating Places Drop Race Bars," *New York Times*, June 5, 1963.

⁹²⁴ "Durham's Interim Committee Report of the Subcommittee on Fair Employment Practices," Vice Presidential Office Files of George E. Reedy Pertaining to PCEEO, box 28, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers, 10-15; "Final Report: Fair Employment Practices Subcommittee," June 1963, folder 197, Watts Hill, Jr. Papers.

private companies had pledged to hire skilled applicants without regard to race; however, there were few qualified applicants according to those companies. As a result, they could not immediately increase the number of black employees. Durham's six commercial banks planned to adhere to non-discriminatory policies. The three insurance companies headquartered in Durham agreed to hire on the basis of merit rather than race. There was a general voluntary agreement to the principle of fair employment practices. However, there was no agreement to pass any fair employment ordinance as student demonstrators had initially wanted.⁹²⁵ " 'We eliminated some of the job discrimination,' Vivian McCoy recalled, and " 'We opened the door for accommodations in motels. But we didn't get all the jobs that we should have gotten for blacks. [But] It was effective in that time.' "⁹²⁶ The DIC examined the employment practices of Durham's city government, which had previously placed blacks in restricted (or menial) positions, something that Wheeler had strongly objected for quite some time. The DIC concluded that blacks deserved better and more frequent job opportunities within the local government agencies, including opportunities for promotion. In many ways, the DIC praised Durham for having already begun employing blacks in government jobs, and the city agreed to continue their efforts in this area; as evidence, city administrators pointed to their actual job applications where they removed the requirement for job applicants to provide their race.

The Durham Agreement received national attention and press coverage for its sweeping desegregation measures. In the days immediately following the Durham

⁹²⁵“Durham's Interim Committee Report of the Subcommittee on Fair Employment Practices,” Vice Presidential Office Files of George E. Reedy Pertaining to PCEEEO, box 28, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers, 10-15; “Final Report: Fair Employment Practices Subcommittee,” June 1963, folder 197, Watts Hill, Jr. Papers.

⁹²⁶Interview with Vivian McCoy by Chris D. Howard, April 1, 1983/Chris D. Howard Interview Notes with Vivian McCoy, April 1, 1983, Chris D. Howard Papers, 7.

Agreement, Mayor Grabarek and other DIC members asked John Wheeler to contact Vice President Johnson to have him send a positive public response. In a brief note to Johnson's assistant George E. Reedy, Wheeler mentioned that "some Comment by the Vice President will be extremely useful in supporting the proprietors of the private businesses who have integrated."⁹²⁷ On June 7, Reedy prepared a Western Union telegram from Johnson that read: "My warm congratulations for the action that has been taken to solve the problems of Durham by community action. I have heard an excellent report from my good friend John Wheeler on the efficient and effective steps that have been taken, and my best wishes are with you."⁹²⁸ However, Vice President Johnson had reservations about sending the wire; Reedy explained to Johnson that "it would be well to call Wheeler directly and tell him why [a public response might not be such a good idea]. His regard for you is very high."⁹²⁹ On June 11, Wheeler phoned Reedy and the two probably discussed the Vice President's hesitancy about sending the wire. In the end, Durham city leaders were given one better, as President Kennedy publicly acknowledged the Durham plan in a congratulatory message to Grabarek. That evening, Kennedy delivered a powerful televised speech to the nation that where he announced his plans to send a major civil rights bill to Congress. Then just hours after the president's hopeful promise, NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers was gun-downed outside his home in Mississippi. Evers' murder continued to highlight the country's inclination toward violence and the serious risks involved in the battle for freedom; perhaps it

⁹²⁷Letter from John Wheeler to George E. Reedy, June 7, 1973, Vice Presidential Files of George E. Reedy Pertaining to PCEEO, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers.

⁹²⁸Unsent Western Union Telegram from Lyndon B. Johnson to R. Wensell Grabarek, June 7, 1963, Vice Presidential Files of George E. Reedy Pertaining to PCEEO, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers.

⁹²⁹Memo from George E. Reedy to Lyndon B. Johnson, June 10, 1963, Vice Presidential Files of George E. Reedy Pertaining to PCEEO, Lyndon B. Johnson Papers.

also served as a reminder to those living in Durham of how close the city had come to violence just a month earlier.⁹³⁰

THE SOUTHERN REGIONAL COUNCIL (SRC) PRESIDENCY

As direct action protests in Durham subsided and reached a significant turning point, Wheeler's position with the SRC became a topic of debate for its leadership. At a November 1962 executive committee meeting SRC president James McBride Dabbs, who headed the organization since the mid-1950s, informed the executive committee that he would resign as president after 1963 and that they should begin making preparations for electing a new president. As the SRC's executive committee chairman, Wheeler appointed three executive committee members to an ad-hoc or advisory committee to recommend a new president to the at-large nominating committee. The ad-hoc committee included former SRC president Marion A. Wright, Fisk University president Dr. Stephen J. Wright (no relation), and businesswoman and philanthropist Josephine Wilkins. In a series of meetings and correspondence during the spring and summer of 1963, the ad-hoc committee eventually decided on recommending Wheeler to the nominating committee.⁹³¹

Although all three agreed early on that Wheeler was the best qualified person to lead the organization during such an intense period for civil rights, they did not all agree on when his tenure should officially begin or the process that should be followed. Josephine Wilkins

⁹³⁰“Wait-See Attitude Prevailing in Durham on Race Problems: Integration of City Swimming Pools is Urged,” *Carolina Times*, June 1, 1963; “The Mayor’s Efforts Worthy of Commendation,” *Carolina Times*, June 1, 1963; “More Eating Establishments Drop Barriers,” *Carolina Times*, June 8, 1963; “Governor Sanford’s Speech at the Boys State Meet,” *Carolina Times*, June 22, 1963; Chris D. Howard, “Keep Your Eyes on the Prize,” 128-129.

⁹³¹ SRC Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, November 19, 1962, SRC Folder 3 of 17...1962, SRC Box 1960-1964, Wheeler Papers, 2; Letter from Marion A. Wright to Harold Fleming, May 8, 1963, folder 149, in the Marion A. Wright Papers #3830, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Letter from Marion A. Wright to Leslie Dunbar, June 18, 1963, Wright Papers.

especially voiced her uneasiness to the other committee members and to executive director Leslie W. Dunbar about how such a change in the leadership could potentially prove to be damaging to the “smoothly running machinery” that was the SRC’s organizational structure at such a crucial moment in time.⁹³² Dunbar agreed to some degree with Wilkins but also realized that, at some point, organizations needed a change in leadership. Dunbar expressed some of the same concerns as Wilkins when he told Marion A. Wright, “since 1961, when the Voter Education Project [VEP] was first broached to us in principle, I have worked closely with and leaned heavily on John Wheeler. The Project will go on now for another 16 months or so, and I need John. Some very crucial questions will have to be decided in the next few weeks and there is every reason that they will not be the last.”⁹³³ “My own practice,” Dunbar continued “has been to turn to the Chairman of the Executive Committee, not to the President, for guidance on policy matters when I feel that I need it. This is my practice not only for the Voter [Education] Project, but for all matters.”⁹³⁴ He further advised Marion A. Wright that although the SRC by-laws did not provide for a president-elect position, they also did not rule-out the possibility.

Marion A. Wright continued to disagree with Wilkins and Dunbar, and despite their concerns over VEP and the SRC’s organizational structure, he assured Dunbar that as president, Wheeler could continue to work closely with him and provide the same counsel because “your reliance upon Mr. Wheeler has been prompted, not so much by his official position, as by personal qualities.”⁹³⁵ Furthermore, he noted, the ad-hoc committee had the

⁹³²Letter from Josephine Wilkins to Marion A. Wright, July 25, 1963, folder 150, Marion A. Wright Papers, 2.

⁹³³Letter from Leslie W. Dunbar to Marion A. Wright, June 25, 1963, folder 149, Wright Papers, 2.

⁹³⁴Ibid.

⁹³⁵Letter from Marion A. Wright to Leslie W. Dunbar, June 26, 1963, folder 149, Wright Papers, 1.

responsibility to recommend a president to succeed Dabbs immediately but “it was not the duty of designating a president-elect to be promoted a year from the coming annual meeting.”⁹³⁶ In July, Marion A. Wright wrote to Wilkins with another piercing point saying, “I think that the election of John Wheeler would be immensely reassuring, not merely to our Negro members but to Negro people everywhere.”⁹³⁷ He continued with even sharper criticism, “I am sure that if Wheeler were white there would be no question that he should be chosen. I think the SRC, of all organizations, should be quick to recognize merit without regard to color.”⁹³⁸ Believing “now is the time to act,” Wright called for boldness and risk-taking.⁹³⁹

Wilkins fired back, clarifying to Marion A. Wright that she was, without a doubt, fully behind Wheeler’s election to the SRC presidency as “his election would undoubtedly be welcomed by all, not because he is a Negro, but because of his stature and his eminent qualifications for the post.”⁹⁴⁰ Wilkins also expressed her concern, as did Dunbar, about how the change in leadership at that time would interrupt the close working relationship between Wheeler and Dunbar as it related to VEP (now in its second year of operation). She explained that although Wheeler’s “counsel would still be available [regarding VEP],” he would “be in a new role, and a new person would be introduced into the situation and could not be by-passed.”⁹⁴¹ She maintained, “as you know it is the chairman of the executive

⁹³⁶Ibid.

⁹³⁷Letter from Marion A. Wright to Josephine Wilkins, July 11, 1963, folder 150, Wright Papers.

⁹³⁸Ibid.

⁹³⁹Ibid.

⁹⁴⁰Letter from Josephine Wilkins to Marion A. Wright, July 25, 1963, folder 150, Wright Papers, 1.

⁹⁴¹Ibid., 2.

committee in any organization to whom the executive of the organization turns in his day to day operations, and that the time and energy factor of having a new person in this post would remain.”⁹⁴² To this end, Wilkins suggested that instead of Wheeler taking over the SRC presidency immediately beginning in 1964, that he should assume a president-elect position for a one-year interim period. Wilkins felt that having Wheeler succeed McDabbs after one year as president-elect would “in no wise minimize the significance of the election.”⁹⁴³ Marion A. Wright once again reiterated his point to Wilkins, stating “I am afraid that to proceed by the steps you suggest in choosing our first Negro president would be misconstrued and considered by some to fall within the category of ‘eventually, but now now’. Some of the bloom would be rubbed off the occasion by using the gradualist approach.”⁹⁴⁴

Essentially in a stalemate, Marion A. Wright urged their third ad-hoc committee member, Dr. Stephen J. Wright, who had been relatively quiet on the president-elect question, for his input and to essentially settle the matter with a tie-breaking vote.⁹⁴⁵ When Dr. Wright (who had decades earlier aided Wheeler as an expert witness in the *Blue* case) finally provided his input, he sided with Marion A. Wright citing many of the same reasons, particularly his belief that Dunbar could continue to consult Wheeler on important matters.⁹⁴⁶ At the end of August, the ad-hoc committee submitted its recommendation to the at-large

⁹⁴²Ibid.

⁹⁴³Ibid.

⁹⁴⁴Letter from Marion A. Wright to Josephine Wilkins, August 20, 1963, folder 150, Wright Papers, 1.

⁹⁴⁵Letter from Marion A. Wright to Dr. Stephen J. Wright, August 8, 1963, folder 150, Wright Papers; Letter from Marion A. Wright to Dr. Stephen J. Wright, August 13, 1963, folder 150, Wright Papers.

⁹⁴⁶Letter from Dr. Stephen J. Wright to Josephine Wilkins, August 24, 1963, folder 150, Wright Papers.

nominating committee. Despite being given Wilkins' reservations, the at-large nominating committee voted to move forward with its plan to offer Wheeler's name for election to the SRC presidency at the organization's annual meeting to take effect immediately in 1964.⁹⁴⁷

That year, the SRC planned its annual meeting for November 25 and 26, just before the Thanksgiving holiday. However, on November 22, the Friday before the SRC's annual meeting, tragedy struck the entire nation as an unknown assassin gunned-down President John F. Kennedy and Texas Governor John Connally while the president's motorcade traveled through downtown Dallas. The president was ultimately killed. As can be expected, Kennedy's tragic death forced the SRC to cancel its annual meeting in order to take part in the national mourning, rightfully overshadowing what would have otherwise been a monumental occasion for Wheeler and the SRC.⁹⁴⁸

The SRC rescheduled its annual meeting for January 29 and 30, 1964. In a brief acceptance speech, John Wheeler admitted that, while honored to accept the position, he did have his own doubts about becoming the SRC's new president. He recounted the organization's accomplishments saying, "We have come a long way in our concept of what the South ought to be like, and we have done it not by chance, but by hard work, and...we have been able to bring the South with us."⁹⁴⁹ Wheeler also recognized that "We are at a [new] phase in our [civil rights] effort which requires a great deal more sophistication than we have been using in these areas, and we are getting past the front line of barriers that are

⁹⁴⁷Letter from Josephine Wilkins to Marion A. Wright, August 27, 1963, folder 150, Wright Papers; Letter from ad-hoc committee to at-large nominating committee, August 1963, folder 152, Wright Papers; Letter from Josephine Wilkins to the at-large nominating committee, August 26, 1963; Letter from Josephine Wilkins to Marion A. Wright, August 31, 1963, folder 150, Wright Papers; Letter from Leslie W. Dunbar to Marion A. Wright, September 4, 1963, folder 150, Wright Papers.

⁹⁴⁸SRC Executive Committee Meeting Minutes, September 24, 1963, folder 150, Wright Papers, 1.

⁹⁴⁹SRC Annual Meeting Minutes, January 29-30, 1964, folder SRC 1964, Wheeler Papers.

more detailed, intricate, well grounded, and with more roots than ever before.”⁹⁵⁰ Before closing, Wheeler pointed to what he saw as the new in battlefront in the struggle for freedom saying “It is possible that next year we may be able to define the dimensions of poverty which Lyndon B. Johnson has been talking about. I am not so sure that we know where the areas of poverty lie, but these are the challenges that we now face.”⁹⁵¹ Wheeler’s new title as SRC president put him in a position to further influence public policy on a larger scale. He believed that African Americans needed to be part of the group that made decisions and recommendations about public policy. His election to the SRC presidency was also in line with his belief that African Americans need be part of the group that made decisions and recommendations about public policy; this was what his appointment as SRC president meant in the larger scheme of things.

CONCLUSION

In John Wheeler's efforts to seek better employment opportunities for black Americans in accordance with non-discriminatory laws, he offered a clear plan toward achieving a better economic future for North Carolina. In the equality of opportunity battle in employment in the state, Wheeler provided Governor Terry Sanford with a jobs blueprint to help him achieve a "New Day" in North Carolina. Wheeler relied on the authority of the federal government and his own influence in national public policy debates to realize his own civil rights and economic objectives as well. Wheeler was adamant that in order for North Carolina and the South, more broadly, to enjoy long-term prosperity, they had to utilize their

⁹⁵⁰Ibid.

⁹⁵¹Ibid.

black manpower resources more effectively. They also had to make drastic policy changes within state-run agencies such as the North Carolina ESC and other agencies with control over large-scale employment in the Tar Heel State. Moreover, Wheeler believed that this could not become a reality without blacks being involved in policymaking decisions. On an individual level, Wheeler lobbied for fair employment practices from virtually every angle in order to remove significant barriers to equal employment opportunities. At the same time, he was equally concerned about blacks receiving expanded voting rights and used his position with national civil rights organizations to see that federal mandates trickled down to the local level.

John Wheeler was also willing to advance civil rights within the parameters set forth by the new Kennedy administration in order to achieve substantial gains in the battle for freedom. He saw this kind of political power as being beneficial in helping North Carolina move forward economically. As a black power-broker, Wheeler was also representative of what he demanded from white leaders: black inclusion in decision-making. Additionally, Wheeler was successful in helping qualified black professionals, in particular, gain employment in state and federal government agencies. As the equality of opportunity battle in employment became fierce in North Carolina, Wheeler focused his attacks on other large government entities including the North Carolina National Guard. Nevertheless, his influence on the PCEEO and his efforts on the equal employment front came with its own limitations. To a large extent, his efforts in this area dealt less with obtaining improved employment opportunities for the black masses, for which equal employment came at a much slower pace. In understanding Wheeler's role with regard to employment, it becomes clear how difficult, time-consuming, costly, and frustrating the process of integrating government

agencies could be. Therefore, ongoing direct action demonstrations were still necessary in order to obtain comprehensive government legislation, which became a reality with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As Wheeler's role as a black business activist and civil rights leader expanded by 1964, his perspective on how best to obtain equality turned a critical corner more forcefully toward the "implementation" phase in the battle for freedom.

CHAPTER 7

“OF CONFLICT, GROWTH AND PROGRESS”: URBAN RENEWAL AND THE PARADOX OF A BLACK BUSINESS ACTIVIST

Southern cities which have not already begun, through adequate planning, to provide the means for developing a completely open housing market may find within a relatively short period that their efforts to eliminate bias and discrimination in the housing field will be too little and too late to prevent the eruption of massive protests by Negroes whose opportunities for better schooling and upgraded employment are stymied by customs and practices which prevent their escape from slums and ghettos.

—John Hervey Wheeler, 1964

On March 25, 2008, the University of North Carolina's Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity co-sponsored the premiere screening of *Change Comes Knocking: The Story of the North Carolina Fund*. During the Q&A session, panelist Rubye Gattis commented on John Wheeler's role in Durham's urban renewal program. During the mid-1960s, Gattis became the president of the black United Organizations for Community Improvement (UOCI), a coalition between various public housing councils in Durham that came into existence in the middle of the decade to confront housing discrimination, among other issues. She minced no words regarding her feelings toward Wheeler. She reminded the audience that once the dust settled and the smoke cleared from the bulldozers that demolished the once thriving Hayti neighborhood, the two remaining visual relics happened to be the St. Joseph's AME Church and the local M&F branch, both located on Fayetteville Street. The church and bank were the two institutions most dear to Wheeler. At the church he served as treasurer, a member of its board of trustees, and even sung in the choir; Wheeler had also

been a lay member on the AME Church's national body.⁹⁵²

The rather candid remarks from Gattis clearly placed some blame for Hayti's demise at John Wheeler's feet. In her mind there was no coincidence in the fact that while most blacks could not escape being displaced if they resided in urban renewal areas, black power-brokers like Wheeler could pick and choose the landmarks that were worthy of being preserved. In other words, not everyone paid a price for urban renewal, and the older Gattis is not alone in her assessment. Today—a half-century later—any mention of urban renewal to most of Durham's black residents old enough to remember "How Hayti Lived and Played," would be like rubbing salt into still unhealed wounds—ultimately the tragic loss of community. If hard-pressed to comment on urban renewal in the former "capital of the black middle class," others might also point to Wheeler for "selling out the black community." They might even identify other influential black business leaders in the city for also selling them a " 'bill of goods.' " From this perspective, those leaders misled black Durham on the hopes and promises of what urban renewal would offer Hayti and were themselves perhaps motivated by greed and financial gain. The city's urban renewal program was promoted as " 'a chance to bloom,' " as one long-time resident described it.⁹⁵³ In practice, however, urban renewal became both a farce and an unfortunate reality, which came to be defined as "Negro Removal."⁹⁵⁴

⁹⁵² "Premiere Screening of 'Change Comes Knocking: The Story of the NC Fund,' " March 25, 2008, UNC-Chapel Hill, <http://www.law.unc.edu/centers/poverty/events/archive20072008/>; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 117; Robert R. Korstad and James L. Leloudis, *To Right These Wrongs*, 189, 195.

⁹⁵³ Andre D. Vann and Beverly Washington Jones, *Durham's Hayti*, (Charleston, SC and Chicago: Arcadia Publishing, 1999), Ch. 5 titled "How Hayti Lived and Played"; Rebecca Kathleen Blackmon, "When the Bulldozers Came: A historical analysis of urban renewal and community action in a New South City," Honor's thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Jean Bradley Anderson, *Durham County*, 407.

⁹⁵⁴ "A Farce or Reality," *Carolina Time*, September 25, 1965.

While Gattis and others remained firm in their criticism of Durham's urban renewal program, Judge Robinson Oscar Everett saw things a bit different. "To me," explained Robinson in a February 2008 interview, "it's like whenever I drive along 147, I think 'my gosh, think of all the problems that would be if we didn't have it.'"⁹⁵⁵ For about fifteen years, beginning with the urban renewal program's inception in 1958, Everett served as chairman of the Durham Redevelopment Commission, the agency established to administer its urban renewal program. Everett, by that time a distinguished law professor at Duke University, admitted to being "defensive subconsciously." He believed hindsight lent itself to unfair observations. "You know now in the papers you read criticisms and how it destroyed the community, [primarily] the black community and things of that sort. To me that really is exaggerated or unwarranted because a lot of stuff was replaced that was in very, very bad shape. I know in Hayti they tore down some of the business structures as well." "The creation of the Durham freeway," continued Everett, "Highway 147, leading from I-40 through [downtown] Durham [and then back] to I-40" was a major accomplishment.⁹⁵⁶ In addition to the expressway construction, Everett contended that other major accomplishments were "getting rid of a lot of dilapidated housing and providing motive, incentive and funding for some new housing." He did, however, have some regrets: "with the emphasis on historic preservation—you know preserving history and historic buildings...we tore down the old train station, [which was a] pretty historic place."⁹⁵⁷

⁹⁵⁵Interview with R. O. Everett by the author, February 29, 2008 (U-0285), in the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007), Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; interview transcript, 14.

⁹⁵⁶Ibid, 13, 15.

⁹⁵⁷Ibid., 16.

In considering John Wheeler's role as it relates to urban renewal, it is true that he sat on the Durham Redevelopment Commission as the lone black member. Therefore, much of the blame placed on him for those failures—both during the 1960s and even now—seems understandable given the level of his involvement. He attended countless behind-the-scenes planning sessions and meetings about the future prospects of urban renewal in Hayti. In the black community, Wheeler was urban renewal's number one champion and at the time was also chairman of the DCNA. By the time urban renewal began in Durham and throughout North Carolina, the DCNA yielded significant political power when it came to the black vote and was very active on the civil rights front as well. By 1960, the DCNA's political bloc included over 13,000 votes or roughly twenty-two percent of the city's total registration.⁹⁵⁸ In other words, 68 percent of eligible blacks were registered to vote and the DCNA's endorsees received 85 percent of black voter support at the all-black precincts in all but two contested two man-elections between 1949 and 1967. The black electorate proved instrumental when city leaders needed a bond referendum passed in 1962 to pay for the federally backed urban renewal program. In addition to the black electorate, by the late 1950s the direct action phase of the civil rights movement was in full swing and black political leaders such as Wheeler seemingly found themselves in a position to demand more from the white power-structure, or so they felt.

By 1969, as Durham's urban renewal program moved forward and its lopsided outcome became evident, John Wheeler became somewhat disillusioned. Vivian Rogers Patterson, Wheeler's longtime bank secretary, remembered "a lot of people were upset with

⁹⁵⁸Walter Weare, *Black Business in the New South*, 243-244; William Keech, *The Impact of Negro Voting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 30.

Mr. Wheeler about [how] urban renewal [turned out]."⁹⁵⁹ During the early 1970s, for example, Wheeler did express some misgivings about urban renewal when Chapel Hill mayor Howard N. Lee contemplated that city's own version of an urban renewal program; Lee consulted Wheeler about it. In 1969, Lee became Chapel Hill's first black mayor elected in a predominantly white southern town and came to know Wheeler through state Democratic Party channels. Lee explained that "I did go to Wheeler...and I tried to learn from the Durham experience." "I think in fairness," Lee continued, "as [Wheeler] looked back, he recognized that the urban renewal project was not serving the future of Durham's black community well." Furthermore:

When [Wheeler] was making those decisions [he] thought that the black businesses both on Parrish Street and on the other streets in and around Durham...would benefit. And I think he really believed that there would be a new crop of housing, affordable housing that would be developed. And when it turned out, the city just didn't move it in that direction. I think he felt [that] some people had actually hung him out to dry and then he became the target of black criticism, of destroying the black community in part. So when I was thinking about urban renewal versus redevelopment [for Chapel Hill], he suggested that I not follow the Durham model, and I didn't.⁹⁶⁰

This begs the question of why, then, did John Wheeler support such a massive urban renewal program from the very beginning? The story of urban renewal in Durham, like so many other cities throughout the country, is a complicated and multilayered narrative, which more often than not leaves us with more questions than it does answers.⁹⁶¹ All too often that history is relegated to pointing the finger at the alleged culprits: the black business elite who

⁹⁵⁹Interview with Vivian Rogers Patterson, 2010.

⁹⁶⁰Interview with Howard N. Lee by author, February 29, 2008 (U-0298), in the Southern Oral History Program Collection (#4007), Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; interview transcript, 8-9.

⁹⁶¹W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *A Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 219, Chapter 6.

profited at the expense of so many. Regardless of whether there is some truth to the latter assessment, the entire narrative warrants a broadened perspective. In Wheeler's case, this means the same community that previously benefited from his battle for freedom up to that point was now in his line of target. That assessment stands in stark contrast to the details presented in previous chapters. It is problematic to ignore that record of achievement and commitment in seeking racial equality and economic justice for blacks, without mentioning other factors that might explain the end result more fully. It also helps to move beyond the notion of naiveté on the part of Durham's black leadership for failing to see through the veil of deceit, when their previous actions on so many issues reflected thoroughness, careful analysis, and strategic planning. In the past, blacks scrutinized every bond proposal that stood to have potential adverse affects on black Durham and they did the same when it came to urban renewal. In the end, the limitations and paradoxes of black leadership during that period can be understood better by also considering the potential benefits that urban renewal would bring to places like Durham.

If examined more closely, the ultimate reasoning behind why John Wheeler supported urban renewal is very consistent and in line with his vision of New South prosperity. First, he remained very adamant about the decade of the 1960s being the time for blacks to re-enter the larger marketplace.⁹⁶² In 1964, he "described the next order of business" for African Americans "in these terms: 'the current wave of militancy can succeed only in removing the artificial barriers to our return to the marketplace.' " Going further, "Negro businessmen," noted Wheeler, "must help the Negro 'reenter the marketplace through pressure for maintenance of a free and open society by every means at our disposal, including some of the

⁹⁶²“Banker with a mission: Successful Negro bank president, firm in pushing for both Negro advancement and North Carolina development, wins an influential role throughout South and in the nation,” *Business Week*, May 16, 1964.

extraordinary ones in which all too few of us have participated in recent months."⁹⁶³ Second, Wheeler believed in equal housing and saw urban renewal as the best path—and possibly a remedy—to potentially opening up the wider housing market to blacks in accordance with "freedom of movement." This had the added benefit of improving educational and employment opportunities available to blacks. In other words, urban renewal seemed to be in the best interest of black economic power, civil rights, and New South prosperity. In the end, Wheeler and others mistakenly placed too much stock in these possibilities but it must be understood that he had also witnessed change through years of continued agitation.⁹⁶⁴ As Wheeler explained in a *Business Week* article, "some Negro businessmen have never known the thrill of seeing relationships change from a patronizing popularity to mutual understanding and respect."⁹⁶⁵ Last, Wheeler believed that the direct action or "second phase" of blacks' battle for freedom had reached its twilight hour. They had entered a new day—the third or "implementation" phase of their efforts. This third, and perhaps final, phase in the black freedom movement was especially uncharted territory. In Wheeler's mind, this would be the most difficult area to penetrate because it meant blacks would truly become part of the larger American society. In many ways, then, urban renewal's failures represented the major challenges blacks faced, which they well understood. The paradox of a black business activist was at one in the same the paradox of black Americans: they stood at the threshold of freedom and American democracy, and they were not alone as civil rights

⁹⁶³"Banker with a mission," *Business Week*, May 16, 1964.

⁹⁶⁴John Wheeler interview, "Robert Penn Warren's *Who Speaks for the Negro?*: an Archival Collection" at: <http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/>

⁹⁶⁵"Banker with a mission," *Business Week*, May 16, 1964.

and poverty merged in their tactical assault on American society. Yet they were still unwelcomed strangers in their own land.

URBAN RENEWAL

The early stages of Durham's urban renewal program began with federal legislation enacted a few years after World War II. The passage of the Housing Act of 1949 by the U.S. Congress was a pivotal moment. It “marked another milestone,” explained John Wheeler “in our effort to meet the present and future needs of our cities, many of which found themselves still unable to cope successfully with rapidly spreading blight, congestion, and fiscal problems occasioned by stagnation of the center-city.”⁹⁶⁶ The new housing legislation specifically addressed problems spawned by overcrowded living conditions and unleashed government resources to assist local authorities in redeveloping decayed slums in urban areas; it also financed low-cost housing developments. Thus, cities around the nation submitted applications to receive federal dollars for those purposes. That same year Dan K. Edwards won Durham's mayoral election after an endorsement by the Voters for Better Government—the labor coalition that included the DCNA—and he soon submitted a request to take part in the new government subsidies. After that, the city established the Durham Housing Authority to oversee low-income public housing developments approved by the city council. The city council appointed the DCNA's James J. “Babe” Henderson, the NCM

⁹⁶⁶John Hervey Wheeler, “Keynote Address at the First Annual Housing and Urban Renewal Clinic at N.C. A&T,” November 2-3, 1961.

treasurer and founder of the black Durham Business and Professional Chain, as the only black member on the agency's board.⁹⁶⁷

During the early 1950s, Durham completed its first crop of public housing projects. In 1953, the city finished construction on a low-income housing complex it called Few Gardens. A year later, the Housing Authority opened the McDougald Terrace Public Housing Development for blacks, which it named in honor of the late M&F cashier Richard L. McDougald.⁹⁶⁸ As noted in chapter two, during the Great Depression decade, McDougald pushed for affordable housing for blacks in Durham and became the motivating force behind the bank's home loan program for returning World War II veterans eventually set-up by Wheeler when he became the bank's new cashier. In 1935, M&F became the first bank in North Carolina approved to administer low-cost home loans under FDR's newly created Federal Housing Administration (FHA). Moreover, the postwar housing act reorganized the FHA and other New Deal lending institutions under the Housing and Home Finance Agency, the predecessor to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Wheeler and M&F took pride in the institution's role in financing affordable housing for blacks with assistance from the U.S. government. He carried this ideal with him when he took the helm of the institution in 1952 because it was something that he viewed as having the potential to bring blacks closer to having equitable housing. By the 1960s, Congress continued to pass legislative measures to bolster equitable housing policies and the idea of community

⁹⁶⁷John Hervey Wheeler, "Keynote Address at the First Annual Housing and Urban Renewal Clinic at N.C. A&T," November 2-3, 1961; John F. Bauman, "Housing Act of 1949," in David R. Goldfield, ed., *Encyclopedia of American Urban History* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2007), 357-359, *Durham County*, 499, 411.

⁹⁶⁸Jean Bradley Anderson, *Durham County*, 499-411.

restoration gained significant traction as well. The major problem, as with other laws passed by the federal government entities, was with enforcement.⁹⁶⁹

As an extension of his growing expertise in the housing field as M&F president, John Wheeler consistently linked issues of housing for blacks to employment and educational rights. In late 1956, he accepted an appointment to the national Commission on Race and Housing, where he replaced the deceased Dr. Charles S. Johnson, Fisk University president and SRC executive committee member since 1944. Robert C. Weaver, the future HUD secretary served on the Commission alongside Wheeler. The Commission on Race and Housing was an independent citizens' group created in 1955, and financially supported by the Fund for the Republic, to examine racial discrimination in housing affecting minorities in the U. S. In 1958, having completed a three year study, the Commission made extensive recommendations to housing agencies at the federal, state, and local levels. The Commission particularly advised government entities to enact legislation and policies designed to make housing more accessible to middle-and low-income minorities that included "a free housing market" on a non-segregated basis, which fit well with Wheeler's vision of New South prosperity.⁹⁷⁰

In making the connection between what freedom of movement, in this case residential mobility, meant to New South prosperity John Wheeler told SRC president James McBride Dabbs that fair housing practices were "especially desirable because [open] housing is more

⁹⁶⁹John Hervey Wheeler, "Keynote Address at the First Annual Housing and Urban Renewal Clinic at N.C. A&T," November 2-3, 1961.

⁹⁷⁰*Where Shall We Go From Here?: Report of the Commission on Race and Housing* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958), 64-65.

often than not, the key to equal job opportunities.”⁹⁷¹ In 1959, Wheeler spoke to a group of real estate brokers in Cleveland, Ohio about his work with the Commission on Race and Housing. In his speech, Wheeler made the point that “we have developed a new consciousness and concept that the right to a job is a legal right.” Wheeler especially pointed out that “it appears that we are now on the threshold of adopting a new concept that free and unrestricted access to the total housing market is also a legal right.”⁹⁷² For Wheeler, housing and employment went hand-in-hand and his service on the Commission on Race and Housing further exposed him to the broader problems related to fair housing throughout the country. By this time, Wheeler was convinced more than ever of the role open housing could have on an open society.

As the decade progressed, Durham made further plans to improve the city’s infrastructure and to make itself a more desirable place to live, in the face of suburbanization and white flight. In 1954, while the attention of most black Americans centered on the *Brown* decision, Congress passed the Housing Act of 1954 as a supplementary measure to the one passed in 1949. The new housing act stated in part that:

major emphasis [would be on] urban renewal—embracing the eradication and prevention of slums and urban blight—and coordinated application of Federal aids. To further this new emphasis, local communities, as a condition for receiving Federal assistance for slum clearance and urban renewal, low-rent public housing, and certain new FHA-insured mortgage programs, are required to develop and put into operation a workable program, approved by the Housing Administrator, utilizing all means available to eliminate and prevent slums and urban blight.⁹⁷³

⁹⁷¹Letter from Spencer M. Overton to Wheeler, December 6, 1958; Letter from Wheeler to James M. Dabbs of the SRC, January 20, 1959, Personal Correspondence Box, Wheeler Papers; Letter from J.M. Dabbs to Wheeler, January 6, 1959.

⁹⁷²John Hervey Wheeler Speech to the Cleveland Association of Real Estate Brokers, May 19, 1969, John Hervey Wheeler Speeches Folder, Wheeler Papers.

⁹⁷³“The Housing Act of 1954 and Implications for Minorities,” Lecture presented before the Seventh Annual Human Relations Institute, sponsored by the Dayton Urban League, February 21, 1955, Citizens Advisory Committee folder, box AO-22, Spaulding Papers, 1.

The additional housing legislation not only dealt with “renewal” and “development,” but also promoted “conservation” and “rehabilitation” in blighted areas. The measure allowed for commercial zoning alongside residential development; it included provisions to do away with discrimination in public housing.⁹⁷⁴ In 1957, the North Carolina General Assembly passed a bill to allow cities to pursue federal funding for urban renewal programs. In response, Durham's city planner Paul Brooks wasted little time seizing the opportunity and solicited the expertise of the City and Regional Planning Department at the University of North Carolina in order to do so. Brooks commissioned the department to investigate a possible urban renewal program in Durham. The group released a written report that spring, which highlighted several major areas believed to be the most suitable sites for urban renewal in the city.⁹⁷⁵ The report, *Outlook for Durham*, targeted the city's central areas. It identified the Hayti neighborhood in particular because of dilapidated housing, poor infrastructure, and other problems that strained city resources, while contributing little to its tax-base. The *Outlook* authors subsequently participated in several public presentations regarding their study. In mid-February, the black Durham Business and Professional Chain sponsored a meeting with the group so the “[black] business men and citizens of Hayti may become acquainted with the aims and purpose of Urban Renewal.”⁹⁷⁶

By year's end, Durham's leaders formed the Durham Redevelopment Commission (DRC) to manage the city's urban renewal process. John Wheeler received an appointment to the five-member committee, which included Duke University law professor Robinson Oscar

⁹⁷⁴John F. Bauman, “Housing Act of 1954,” in David R. Goldfield, ed., *Encyclopedia of American Urban History* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2007), 359-360.

⁹⁷⁵*Outlook for Durham*, (Durham: City Planning Department, Spring 1957).

⁹⁷⁶“Urban Renewal for Hayti to be Discussed,” *Carolina Time*, February 15, 1958; “Urban Renewal Use Studied,” *Carolina Times*, April 5, 1958.

Everett (chairman), J. E. Irvine (vice-chairman), R. G. Hurst, and J. G. Glass. Without question, Wheeler's appointment to the Commission provided a semblance of racial inclusion among the decision-makers, as it was necessary to have black representation. His appointment was also necessary because the DCNA's support was needed, as one of the targeted urban renewal areas was Durham's Hayti section. Nevertheless, Wheeler's appointment also went beyond simply tokenism because his housing credentials made him the resident expert as he was well versed on housing issues by that time.⁹⁷⁷ In other cities throughout the state—Raleigh, Greensboro, Winston-Salem, and Charlotte—leaders had already received upwards of \$4 million in federal funds to help with their urban renewal plans.⁹⁷⁸

As the DRC took steps toward obtaining federal funds, urban renewal gained traction in black Durham. In a January 1959 poll taken by the *Carolina Times*, urban renewal came in second only to the pending school desegregation suit *McKissick v. Durham* (1959) as the most discussed topic.⁹⁷⁹ In the meantime, the DRC submitted its official urban renewal application to the Federal Urban Redevelopment Commission based in Atlanta, Georgia. In addition to an initial \$1 million for its first project, the Durham group asked for \$42,000 for initial start-up costs to devise a detailed and comprehensive renewal proposal to fulfill the promises of urban renewal. With the *Outlook* study as the blueprint, and city planner Paul Brooks as the DRC's acting executive director, Durham seemed confident about its plans for the future. Ben T. Perry, III, a professional housing administrator with the Housing and

⁹⁷⁷“With Slum Clearance Urban Renewal Could Revitalize Durham,” *Durham Morning Herald*, July 6, 1958; Jean Bradley Anderson, *Durham County*, 406-407.

⁹⁷⁸*Ibid.*

⁹⁷⁹“Many 'Firsts' Come in '58,” *Carolina Times*, January 3, 1959.

Home Finance Agency, accepted the executive director's post on a permanent basis in 1961. As the DRC awaited their application's approval during most of 1959, in October Paul Brooks asked for Wheeler's help getting "an early approval," under the Republican-led Eisenhower administration. Wheeler immediately contacted NCM president Asa T. Spaulding, adding that "whatever you do toward having Mr. [Val J.] Washington push this matter for us will be appreciated." In turn, Spaulding sent word to Val Washington, the black director of minorities for the Republican National Committee, for his help as the urban renewal funds would go toward "improving a black neighborhood." Spaulding, himself a Republican, held significant influence nationally and so whatever assistance he provided helped the cause. By month's end, Durham's urban renewal application was approved. The application approval came at an opportune time as the federal government made new changes to its overall urban renewal policies in September.⁹⁸⁰

The DRC outlined its plans for the city's urban renewal project, which it made public in the spring of 1961. At the same time, direct action protests by way of the sit-movement were well underway. In that context, the timing of urban renewal could not have been better given the level of demands that blacks made to receive a greater share of public resources; urban renewal came as a possible solution to conditions already made worse by racial discrimination. The proposed "Hayti-Elizabeth Street Project" outlined an ambitious ten-year urban renewal plan to be completed in six separate phases comprising 500 acres in Hayti. It included provisions for the construction of a major \$6.5 million thoroughfare, the "East-West Expressway," directly through the center of the designated Hayti clearance area.

⁹⁸⁰Letter from John Wheeler to Asa Spaulding, October 8, 1959; Letter from Asa Spaulding to Val J. Washington, October 8, 1959; Letter from Robinson O. Everett to Asa Spaulding, January 5, 1960; "Decision to Drop Race Clause In Urban Renewals is Applauded," *Carolina Times*, September 5, 1959.

Durham had the responsibility to pay \$1 million of that figure. The projected expenditures for the entire urban renewal program came to approximately \$18 million, two-thirds to be covered by the federal government and the other third (\$4.5 million) of which Durham would have to cover. The city leaders decided to send voters an \$8.6 million bond issue to take care of its share of urban renewal costs, which included improvements to the city's overall infrastructure. From an economic standpoint, the city's black financial institutions stood to conduct a good portion of business related to virtually every aspect of the urban renewal process.⁹⁸¹ During the initial stages, the DRC used several approaches to win additional backing for their impending urban renewal program; they particularly relied on a strong publicity campaign. On the whole, the publicity campaign played a positive role in helping the urban renewal program receive favorable backing from Durham's black community in the beginning. There was very little pushback, if any, in the all-black neighborhoods throughout the city.

It was not until a controversial commercial zoning order surfaced in the spring of 1961 between wealthy white real estate developer Abe Greenberg and the black Durham Business and Professional Chain (DBPC) that any major concerns about urban renewal were met with organized opposition. In June, the DBPC raised serious objections about an order passed by the City Planning and Zoning Commission in April for a proposed four-acre shopping center in a section of Hayti that was scheduled for clearance. Greenberg proposed the shopping center and planned to ask the Zoning Commission to expand the initial four acre request to twenty-two acres. The DBPC viewed the new zoning request as being in direct conflict with a similar proposal in the same area by the DRC itself. In their proposed

⁹⁸¹W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *A Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory*, 232.

shopping center, the DRC planned to sell about twenty-five acres in the renewal area to private developers with the contractual obligation to use the land for a shopping center. Moreover, back businesses already in Hayti, which would be uprooted temporarily as a result of urban renewal, would have first dibs on retail options under the DRC's deal. It was probable, too, that the DRC would sell to an investment group formed through the DBPC, which organized the Chain Investment Corporation in anticipation of the Commission's shopping center.⁹⁸²

The DBPC not only questioned Greenberg's shopping center but the group balked at his new acreage request. In a letter sent to the local newspapers, DBPC president Floyd B. McKissick explained that "survival of our membership businesses that will be forced to relocate under the urban renewal program is at stake."⁹⁸³ The DBPC now worried that in the event a larger shopping center (as proposed by Greenberg) was built, the Hayti community would not be able to support two shopping centers. Therefore, the proposed Greenberg shopping center had the potential to deter future commercial development given the limited collective buying power in Hayti. The DBPC petitioned the city council to "delay or deny rezoning requests" so that a market analysis study could be completed to predict with more accuracy whether two proposed shopping centers serving the same area could enjoy profitability given the competing interests. The Greenberg deal raised the issue of "fair play"

⁹⁸²Shopping Facility to be Erected on Southern Edge of Durham," *Carolina Times*, January 7, 1961; "Durham Negro Merchants Hit Greenberg Plan," June 17, 1961; "Durham Shopping Center Issue Unsolved," *Carolina Times*, June 24, 1961; "Urban Renewal Body Seeks Time to Study Effects of Proposed Center on One Planned in Mid-Hayti," *Carolina Times*, July 22, 1961; "Urban Renewal Financing Body Elects officers," *Carolina Times*, July 29, 1961; "Chain Okays Action: Zoning Board Approves 7.3 Acres for Greenberg Shopping Project," *Carolina Times*, August 19, 1961; "A Peaceful Solution to the Shopping Center Problem," *Carolina Times*, August 19, 1961; "Walker Picked for Durham Zoning Body," *Carolina Times*, September 9, 1961; "Fayetteville St. Shopping Center Formally Okayed," *Carolina Times*, September 9, 1961; "Shopping Center Construction Near," *Carolina Times*, December 2, 1961; "New Bowling Facility set to Open in Durham," *Carolina Times*, August 25, 1962; "Bowling Strikes Durham Like a Tornado," *Carolina Times*, September 15, 1962.

⁹⁸³"Controversy Storm Looms Over Greenberg Zoning Bid," *Durham Morning Herald*, June 15, 1961.

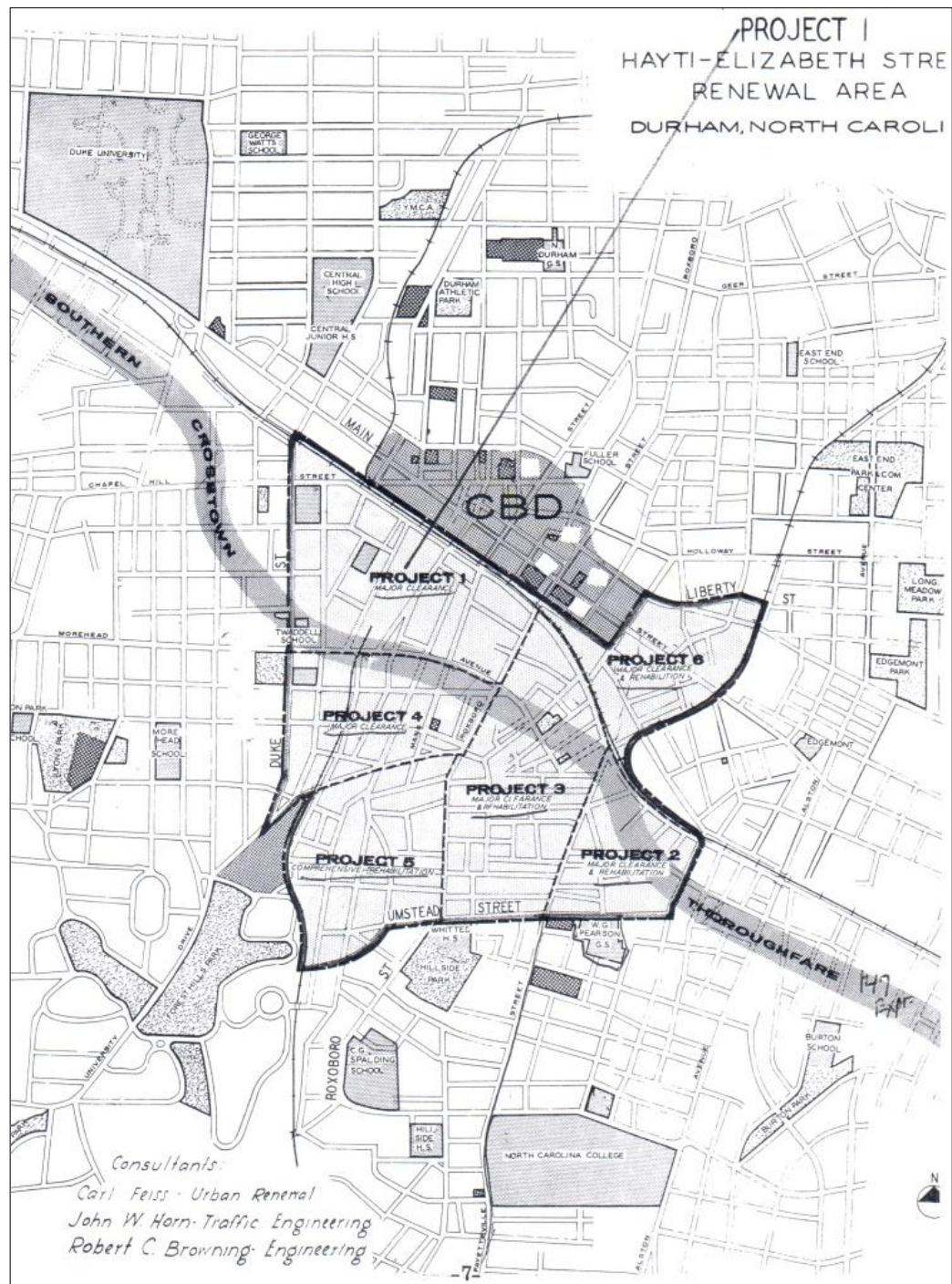
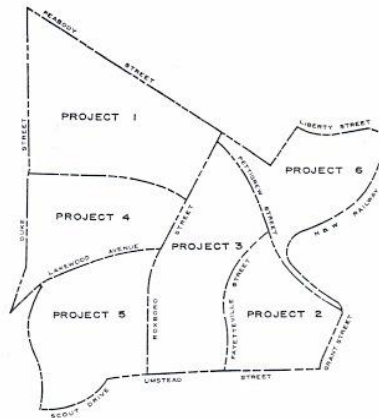


Figure 7.1 Proposed Hayti-Elizabeth Street Urban Renewal Area with Southern Crosstown Thoroughfare (Highway 147—Durham Freeway).

and the extent to which those black merchants who had for years nurtured their businesses in Hayti, could succeed in re-establishing those same businesses once urban renewal clearance ended. The DBPC had no problems with free enterprise but wanted some assurance that their members—some 135 merchants—would have an opportunity to benefit economically once urban renewal was complete. Wheeler and the DRC agreed with the DBPC and advised the city council to hold-off voting on the recommended rezoning until a market analysis could be completed. Once the DRC received its market analysis report, it validated the DBPC's claim that the buying power in the Hayti area could only support either two smaller shopping centers or one large shopping center, but not a large and small shopping center at the same time.⁹⁸⁴

In light of the market analysis, Greenberg and his lawyers met with the DBPC in a two-hour conference and reached a compromise where Greenberg would ask the Zoning Commission for just over seven acres for a shopping center, and not the twenty acres he had wanted earlier. At no point did the DBPC question whether urban renewal should move forward; rather there was a major concern about the beneficiaries of the potential economic revitalization that was to take place. The dispute had little to do with wanting to block urban

⁹⁸⁴Shopping Facility to be Erected on Southern Edge of Durham," *Carolina Times*, January 7, 1961; "Durham Negro Merchants Hit Greenberg Plan," June 17, 1961; "Durham Shopping Center Issue Unsolved," *Carolina Times*, June 24, 1961; "Urban Renewal Body Seeks Time to Study Effects of Proposed Center on One Planned in Mid-Hayti," *Carolina Times*, July 22, 1961; "Urban Renewal Financing Body Elects officers," *Carolina Times*, July 29, 1961; "Chain Okays Action: Zoning Board Approves 7.3 Acres for Greenberg Shopping Project," *Carolina Times*, August 19, 1961; "A Peaceful Solution to the Shopping Center Problem," *Carolina Times*, August 19, 1961; "Walker Picked for Durham Zoning Body," *Carolina Times*, September 9, 1961; "Fayetteville St. Shopping Center Formally Okayed," *Carolina Times*, September 9, 1961; "Shopping Center Construction Near," *Carolina Times*, December 2, 1961; "New Bowling Facility set to Open in Durham," *Carolina Times*, August 25, 1962; "Bowling Strikes Durham Like a Tornado," *Carolina Times*, September 15, 1962.



THE HAYTI-ELIZABETH STREET URBAN RENEWAL AREA

Over the next ten years, the Redevelopment Commission of the City of Durham will buy much of the property in this area. Many of the existing buildings will be torn down. New streets and utilities will be built and the purchased land will then be sold for private use. This land can be sold to anyone who will develop it in accordance with the Urban Renewal Plan.

If you live in this area, or if you own property here, you will be interested in the facts about the Urban Renewal Program and how it will affect you. This booklet attempts to answer some of the questions which may be in your mind, and to describe your rights and privileges under the law.

Figure 7.2 Proposed Hayti-Elizabeth Street Urban Renewal Area.
(Source: "Durham's Urban Renewal Program Pamphlet")

renewal from happening.⁹⁸⁵ In August 1962, Greenberg completed the College Plaza and its first tenant was a bowling center that opened for business to "to thousands" who "converged on the College Plaza lanes." The DRC shopping center never came to fruition.⁹⁸⁶

The DRC and other city leaders made great strides in forming citywide advisory committees to inform Durham's general public about the advantages and disadvantages of the urban renewal program and to also field questions from concerned citizens. As the DRC moved forward with its agenda, Durham Mayor Elie J. Evans established a 48-member advisory council along with smaller sub-advisory councils across the city and particularly in urban renewal areas. An educational pamphlet, which detailed the entire urban renewal program, aided the advisory councils in explaining the program.⁹⁸⁷ In early 1962, the major focus for city leaders was on getting the proposed bond issue passed by the voting public in order to pay for the city's share of urban renewal costs.⁹⁸⁸

⁹⁸⁵ "Shopping Facility to be Erected on Southern Edge of Durham," *Carolina Times*, January 7, 1961; "Durham Negro Merchants Hit Greenberg Plan," June 17, 1961; "Durham Shopping Center Issue Unsolved," *Carolina Times*, June 24, 1961; "Urban Renewal Body Seeks Time to Study Effects of Proposed Center on One Planned in Mid-Hayti," *Carolina Times*, July 22, 1961; "Urban Renewal Financing Body Elects officers," *Carolina Times*, July 29, 1961; "Chain Okays Action: Zoning Board Approves 7.3 Acres for Greenberg Shopping Project," *Carolina Times*, August 19, 1961; "A Peaceful Solution to the Shopping Center Problem," *Carolina Times*, August 19, 1961; "Walker Picked for Durham Zoning Body," *Carolina Times*, September 9, 1961; "Fayetteville St. Shopping Center Formally Okayed," *Carolina Times*, September 9, 1961; "Shopping Center Construction Near," *Carolina Times*, December 2, 1961; "New Bowling Facility set to Open in Durham," *Carolina Times*, August 25, 1962; "Bowling Strikes Durham Like a Tornado," *Carolina Times*, September 15, 1962.

⁹⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁸⁷ "Renewal Committee Has Serious Job," unidentified newspaper article, Spaulding Papers, box A0-22; "City Commission Finishes Urban Renewal Application; Brooks Named Acting Director," *Durham Morning Herald*, December 18, 1958; "City Now Eligible for Slum Clearance Funds," *Durham Morning Herald*, January 15, 1959; "Highway Body to Get Expressway Plan on Nov. 5," *Durham Morning Herald*, October, 1959, Spaulding Papers, box A5-15; "City Picks Expressway Route," *Durham Sun*, October 15, 1959, Spaulding Papers, box A5-15; "Redevelopment Commission Seeks Planning Firm for Project Here," *Durham Morning Herald*, October 31, 1959; "Federal Funds Accepted for Project Here," *Durham Morning Herald*, Nov. 14, 1959; "Redevelopment Plan with Mall Outlined," *Durham Morning Herald*, October 22, 1959; Consultant Report: "Land Utilization and Marketability Study, Hayti –Elizabeth Area Project 1," June 7, 1961.

⁹⁸⁸ *Carolina Times*, April 9, 1962; "Bond Referendum," *Carolina Times* Feb. 10, 1962; Citizens Advisory Committee, Program for Community Improvement Constitution," Spaulding Papers, Citizens Advisory

To show how Durham's black leaders made every effort to carefully scrutinize all large-scale undertakings, Durham voters had several other bond issues presented to them during this same time. In 1958, for example, the black community led by the DCNA threatened not to support an upcoming bond issue related to a proposed industrial education center because there was a possibility that the center would operate on a segregated basis. Nevertheless, once all parties agreed on integration, the DCNA endorsed the industrial education center bond referendum, and it passed. When a school bond issue went before voters in 1960, the DCNA voiced its opposition again because school desegregation by that time still only represented tokenism. The DCNA and NAACP also had an impending school desegregation suit *Wheeler, et. al. v. Durham* (1961) in the federal courts. The black community's stipulations centered on the Durham school board having a workable desegregation plan in place before the DCNA pledged its support for the bond issue.

In the months leading to the bond vote, John Wheeler and the DCNA worked to increase black voter registration. The organization used funds it received from the newly created Voter Education Project (VEP) for crass programs in this effort, which had the added benefit of placing the community's future in the hands of black voters. Wheeler's chairmanship of SRC's executive committee and his behind-the-scenes influence helped to ensure that the urban renewal bond issue had a chance to succeed. Nevertheless, as the city moved closer to the vote, the black community feared failure since most tax-payer funds would go toward redevelopment in Hayti. Louis E. Austin articulated the underlying tensions a month before the vote, saying "the mass of white voters of this city will not respond favorably to any movement that means the betterment of the Negro's lot."

Committee folder, box AO-22.; "Advisory Body Names Project Committees," *Durham Morning Herald*, December 14, 1961.

Furthermore, "the mere fact that the urban renewal bond issue has been isolated in an election where it is the only question before the voters is further evidence that there is no honest support for its passage in corners occupied by the political quarterbacks of Durham."⁹⁸⁹ Despite apprehension on the part of blacks, the bond issue narrowly passed and the DCNA's bloc vote provided the margin of victory with 92 percent of black voter support.⁹⁹⁰ It was also in 1962 that John Wheeler and M&F opened its third bank branch, located in Charlotte near Johnson C. Smith University (JCSU) and the city's largest black section. At JCSU's spring commencement a year later, in recognizing the economic impact the bank had in that community, the institution awarded Wheeler with an honorary doctorate degree.⁹⁹¹

THE GREAT SOCIETY

By 1963, North Carolina, like the rest of the New South, remained steeped in racial conflict. At the same time, urban renewal in Durham and other cities offered a renewed sense of promise to black Americans. Moreover, that year also marked the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, which went into effect on January 1, 1863. Therefore, January 1, 1963 was an especially fitting day for John Wheeler as he also celebrated his fifty-fifth birthday. The significance of what the Emancipation Proclamation's centennial meant

⁹⁸⁹ "Urban Renewal Bond Issue Headed for Defeat," *Carolina Times*, September 15, 1962; "The Bond Issue and Durham's Progress," *Carolina Times*, September 22, 1962.

⁹⁹⁰ "Bond Proponents Breath Sigh of Relief," *Durham Morning Herald*, October 7, 1962.

⁹⁹¹ Western Union Telegram from Asa T. Spaulding to Wheeler, March 1, 1962, Asa and Elna Spaulding Papers; An invitation to attend the dedication ceremony for the M&F Charlotte Branch to be held on March 4, 1962, Asa and Elna Spaulding Papers; Letter from Asa T. Spaulding to A. E. Spears (Vice President, M&F Charlotte Branch), March 9, 1963, Asa and Elna Spaulding Papers; Dedication Ceremony Program (held at Johnson C. Smith University Church), March 4, 1962, Asa and Elna Spaulding Papers.

did not go unnoticed in the state. Governor Terry Sanford took a bold step toward fulfilling the earlier promises of freedom as he entered his third year in office—in a state where the chief executive was only allowed one term. On January 18, Sanford took to the podium in the packed ballroom at the Carolina Inn on the campus of his alma mater, the University of North Carolina. During the North Carolina Press Association's annual luncheon Sanford reflected on his own vision of New South prosperity, which came as a striking resemblance to Wheeler's. At a time when the civil rights movement daringly confronted the deeply-rooted problems stemming from decades of racial and economic oppression, Sanford told the audience "Now is the time in this hundredth year [since the Emancipation Proclamation] not merely to look back to freedom, but forward to the fulfillment of its meaning." "Despite this great progress," Sanford continued, "the Negro's opportunity to obtain a good job has not been achieved in most places across the nation. Reluctance to accept the Negro in employment is the greatest single block to his continued progress and to the full use of the human potential of the nation and its states." The speech pointed to the failures of states like North Carolina in living up to the principles outlined in the Emancipation Proclamation. Sanford spoke along economic lines, declaring "the time has come for American citizens...to give the Negro a full chance to earn a decent living for his family and to contribute to higher standards for himself and all men." He seemed determined more than ever to meet those principles and the ideals of a new generation because it "would be adding new economic growth for everybody." Sanford ended his daring speech by saying, "We can do this. We should do this. We will do this because we are concerned with the problems and the welfare of our neighbors."⁹⁹²

⁹⁹²Terry Sanford, "Emancipation Day Speech," January 1, 1963,

In the months after Sanford's emancipation day speech, he moved with swiftness toward achieving the very ideals he preached that day in January. In fact, as early as November 1962, Sanford and his aides met with several philanthropic foundations to pitch them their ideas about seriously addressing the problem of poverty. The Sanford administration hoped to obtain private financial support for a broad and radical reform program and the Ford Foundation seemed the most eager to help. By meeting with private foundations, Sanford sidestepped a resistant state legislature that would never approve of spending tax dollars on the kind of action-oriented program that Sanford put forward. The problem of poverty had weighed on Sanford's heart since his term began, as he pushed an agenda that looked to improve the state's educational system. Along the way, Sanford could not help but connect the state's most pressing problems, and those of the most underrepresented citizens, to the problem of poverty in the New South and American society at-large. By July, Sanford's intentions were clear as he set-up what became the North Carolina Fund.⁹⁹³

By this time, John Wheeler was the most visible black leader in North Carolina and someone whom Sanford frequently called on for advice during his administration. In preparing his earlier emancipation day speech, for example, Sanford solicited feedback through circulating drafts to friends and political supporters throughout the state; Wheeler was among them. The two held similar outlooks on the requirements to bring North Carolina

<http://blogs.lib.unc.edu/shc/index.php/2010/05/02/video-of-governor-terry-sanfords-emancipation-speech-to-the-north-carolina-press-association/>; Robert K. Korstad and James L. Leloudis, *To Write these Wrongs*, 81.

⁹⁹³Robert K. Korstad and James L. Leloudis, *To Write these Wrongs*, 59-65; George Esser with Rah Bickley, *My Years at the North Carolina Fund, 1963-1970: an Oral History* (Research Triangle Park: George Esser, 2007), 15-19.

out of the shadows of its economically exploitive past. A particularly telling and instructive moment came when Sanford asked the previously mentioned group of supporters over to the governor's residence for breakfast. Once there, they gathered around a conference table to make suggestions about how the governor could best convey his ideas. During the behind-the-scenes meeting, Wheeler first insisted that the governor needed to unveil his plan in conjunction with the Emancipation Proclamation's anniversary because it had the potential to make freedom a reality for black North Carolinians. Wheeler did not stop there but he made another long-lasting contribution. As historians Robert Korstad and James Leloudis explained, as the group discussed the speech "Wheeler immediately objected that [the emancipation day speech] was too moderate."⁹⁹⁴ Wheeler made it clear to those in the room that the governor had to speak from a position of authority strictly grounded " 'more heavily on the law' " and not " 'goodwill and persuasion.' " Wheeler's interjection at that moment demonstrated his political acumen, and as Sanford aide John Ehle concluded " 'by attacking the statement,' " Wheeler " 'had got the group past the point of debating whether a statement [of any sort] ought to be released.' "⁹⁹⁵

John Wheeler proved extremely helpful in eventually getting the Ford Foundation to commit to the proposed poverty program. In January and again that summer, the Ford Foundation sent representatives to tour the state at the invitation of Governor Sanford so they could determine whether to approve a major grant to assist him in bringing his ideas to life. Before Ford officials okayed funding, however, they went directly to Wheeler to see if the banker had any serious concerns related to the governor's proposal to battle poverty in the

⁹⁹⁴Korstad and Leloudis, *To Write these Wrongs* 81-82.

⁹⁹⁵As quoted in Korstad and Leloudis, *To Write these Wrongs*, 82; original brackets come from the authors also.

state. In February, Sanford and his advisors brokered an initial meeting with Wheeler, the NCM's William Jesse Kennedy, Jr., John Stewart, and others to discuss the plans for a statewide organization, which had to include black involvement. Although Wheeler and others were "cautious," they saw it as a good opportunity nonetheless. Wheeler did raise specific concerns later in the summer when the Ford Foundation and the Sanford administration began detailing specifics. Included in Sanford's proposal was the Comprehensive School Improvement Project, where some funds would go toward enhancing the quality of poor public schools in the state. Given Wheeler's hard-fought battles in the previous two decades, which centered on educational equality, it was important to him that schools primarily serving black children received their fair share of funding, something not regularly practiced in North Carolina. The Ford Foundation also wanted to know if funds advanced to schools would be made available on an equal basis at both black and white schools. After reaching an agreement so that funds would be dispersed on equal terms, Wheeler raised no objections to Sanford's program.⁹⁹⁶ It is worthy of note, too, that seeking Wheeler's endorsement was " 'the first time anybody from the foundation's top echelon had gone to a black man,' " recalled Ford Foundation public affairs director Paul Ylvisaker.⁹⁹⁷ North Carolina Fund executive director George H. Esser also confirmed that without Wheeler's endorsement, the Ford Foundation would have packed their bags and bypassed funding Sanford's initiative altogether.⁹⁹⁸ With Wheeler's endorsement, in no time the Ford

⁹⁹⁶George Esser with Rah Bickley, *My Years at the North Carolina Fund, 1963-1970: an Oral History* (Research Triangle Park: George Esser, 2007), 28, 36-39.

⁹⁹⁷Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right these Wrongs*, 82.

⁹⁹⁸Robert R. Korstad and James L. Leloudis, *To Right these Wrongs*, 83; George Esser, *My Years at the North Carolina Fund*, 39.

Foundation pledged \$7 million to be used in tandem with forthcoming contributions from the Z. Smith Reynolds and Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundations.⁹⁹⁹

Once the North Carolina Fund received its official incorporation on July 18, 1963, the names of John Wheeler alongside Governor Terry Sanford, *Charlotte Observer* newspaper editor C. A. McKnight, and Charles Babcock appeared as the new organization's incorporators.¹⁰⁰⁰ In addition to the above-mentioned individuals, the new agency's board members included Gerald Cowan (Asheville), Anne Forsyth, Tom Pearsall (of the 1956 Pearsall Plan), Sam Duncan (president of the all-black Livingstone College and a close personal friend of Wheeler's), James A. Gray, Jr., Hollis Edens, Rosa Parker, Wallace Murchinson, Hargrove "Skipper" Bowles, and W. Dallas Herring. Robinson O. Everett, the DRC chairman, became the agency's attorney.¹⁰⁰¹ As noted by Korstad and Leloudis, "This was the first step in building a relationship that within a year's time would involve Fund leaders in drafting the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, establishing the federal Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), and launching President Lyndon Johnson's national war on poverty."¹⁰⁰²

In addition to urban renewal, the North Carolina Fund was another resource by which John Wheeler could broker additional concessions on behalf of blacks as well as a realistic way to "implement" the gains already being won by them as a result of the civil rights

⁹⁹⁹"Statement by Governor Terry Sanford, September 30, 1963, North Carolina Fund Papers; Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right these Wrongs*, 82; George Esser, *My Years at the North Carolina Fund*.

¹⁰⁰⁰"Articles of Incorporation of the North Carolina Fund," July 18, 1963, in North Carolina Fund Papers in the North Carolina Fund Records #4710, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

¹⁰⁰¹North Carolina Fund Meeting Minutes, July 26, 1963, North Carolina Fund Records; George Esser with Rah Bickley, *My Years at the North Carolina Fund*, 43-46; Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right these Wrongs*, 83-85.

¹⁰⁰²Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right these Wrongs*, 87.

movement. It came as no surprise when North Carolina Fund board members decided on Durham as the central location for its headquarters. It spoke directly to Wheeler's reach within the new organization. It also made sense that Durham was its headquarters since the Fund's lawyer was Robinson O. Everett, chairman of the DRC. The Fund set-up shop on Parrish Street, long recognized as the primary hub of Durham's black financial institutions, in close proximity to M&F's headquarters. M&F also benefited from the new antipoverty agency, as it became the official depository of Fund dollars; Wheeler also became treasurer of the Fund's board.¹⁰⁰³ One of the first CAP programs that the Fund gave a grant to was Durham's Operation Breakthrough. With the Fund and the urban renewal program headed in the right direction, Durham had significant resources to help implement Wheeler's ideas of New South prosperity with more effective weapons than ever before. In March, Wheeler served as the official U.S. delegate at the international trade fair in Tripoli, Libya on behalf of former North Carolina Governor and then Commerce Secretary Luther Hodges. Later in the year, President Kennedy selected Wheeler to become the ambassador to Nigeria; however, the latter declined citing his expanded banking responsibilities.

In 1964, when the time came for George Esser to hire a comptroller for the Fund, John Wheeler suggested the name of Nathan Garrett, a black Durham native and a certified public accountant. Garrett's father, York Garrett, Jr., owned a successful drugstore in Hayti and the young Nathan took a real interest in learning the business—everything from operation costs to bookkeeping. When the time came, the elder Garrett sold his drugstore to the DRC in cooperation with the city's urban renewal program. In 1952, Nathan Garrett graduated from Yale University—the first African American from Durham to attend an Ivy

¹⁰⁰³North Carolina Fund Meeting Minutes, September 12-13, 1963, North Carolina Fund Papers; Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right these Wrongs*, 89.

League school. He went on to receive additional training from Wayne State University. Garrett lived and worked in Detroit, Michigan for a few years before returning to Durham where he opened his own accounting firm. In Durham, Wheeler followed Garrett's career trajectory and handpicked him as the Fund's potential comptroller. This was in keeping with Wheeler's objectives to seek employment for qualified black professionals in top-level positions. As a member on the PCEEO, Wheeler would have had no opposition from Fund officials when the time came to consider Garrett's employment, given his continuous work in equal employment opportunities for blacks, which he constantly pressed Sanford on.¹⁰⁰⁴

Once federal funds arrived in April, Durham began the urban renewal process in earnest. On a rather somber July 28, just a few weeks after the incorporation of the Fund, the "Old Boys Club," a "relic of [a] bygone era," became the first building leveled under the DRC's first urban renewal project. The Old Boys Club had some historical significance; at one point it had been the home of barber John Wright, the business partner to John Merrick when the two first made their way to Durham in the late nineteenth century to open up their first barbershop. The building, located on the corner of Pettigrew and Fayetteville Streets, later became the residence of notable black leaders such as P. B. Young, the editor of the black *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, and Dr. James E. Shepard. From there, the structure became integral to community life in Hayti as it housed the Harriet Tubman YWCA and then the John M. Avery Boys Club, where Wheeler served as a board member since the organization began in 1939.¹⁰⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰⁴Interview with Nathan Garret by Brandon Winford, August 4, 2008.

¹⁰⁰⁵"Urban Renewal Ready to Start in Earnest with Federal Grant," *Carolina Times*, April 20, 1963; "Relic of Bygone Era Reduced to Rubble by Urban Renewal," *Carolina Times*, August 3, 1963; Fitzhugh Brundage, *A Clash of Southern Past*, 218; Jean Anderson, *Durham County*, 408.

In only a few weeks removed from the Old Boys Club's demise, the first among many housing issues related to urban renewal surfaced in Hayti. It began when the city council approved a rezoning recommendation for an area in the Burton School community for a 150-unit housing development proposed by the newly formed "Lincoln Hospital Foundation for Urban Renewal," a black investment group formed by Asa Spaulding and several other black business leaders. City councilman John Stewart, president of the Mutual Building and Loan Association, abstained from the city council zoning vote because of his membership on the foundation. Both the Lincoln Hospital Foundation and the DRC pressed the city council to approve the apartments in order to house residents displaced by urban renewal; it is unclear whether Wheeler was also a member on the Lincoln Hospital Foundation, but if so he would have also abstained from any votes the DRC would have had about the matter as well. There was opposition right away from blacks who lived in the area because the section was originally zoned for individual families "displaced by Urban renewal." However, with the possibility for a new subdivision next to the McDougald Terrace critics believed the building plans would "result in 'intolerable congested' conditions and would overburden already crowded education and recreational facilities in the area." In other words, blacks believed it would create a "ghetto" and concentrate them in one area of the city as opposed to opening-up space in previously all-white residential neighborhoods. Despite protests from 300 homeowners in the community, the city council moved forward with the zoning change.¹⁰⁰⁶

The assassination of President Kennedy in November left the nation without direction and the civil rights movement was without a powerful force to advance legislation. In the

¹⁰⁰⁶"Controversial Housing Project Is Approved Despite Protests," *Carolina Times* August 10, 1963; "The Lincoln Hospital Apartment Matter," *Carolina Times*, August 10, 1963; "Controversial Zone Change May Not Yet Be Settled," *Carolina Times*, August 17, 1963; "Controversial Project Zoning Gets Approval," *Carolina Times*, September 4, 1963.

months that followed, however, Lyndon B. Johnson stepped into his new role with determination. Wheeler and Johnson were born in the same year and had become good friends through their work with the PCEEO. While fond of Kennedy, Wheeler had a great deal of confidence in Johnson's leadership and ability to get the country back on track. In his first State of the Union address on January 8, 1964, Johnson outlined a broad legislative agenda moving forward; integral to his address was a commitment to civil rights legislation. "This administration today," Johnson also proclaimed, "here and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America."¹⁰⁰⁷ In a few months, Johnson embarked on his Appalachian tour and also made a trip to Rocky Mount, North Carolina to evaluate one of the Fund's Community Action Programs (CAP) in May. Wheeler was part of the North Carolina delegation that accompanied Johnson across the state. A *Business Week* magazine article described the racial tensions that Wheeler faced as a black power-broker in the South with frequent contact with white power-brokers:

At times, the irony of his position is striking. Wheeler recently went with a small group from the North Carolina Fund to 11 towns that had applied for assistance. At many meetings he presided over discussions that included mayors, city managers, other officials, and prominent businessmen. Yet, careful arrangements were necessary to insure that Wheeler could be served meals without incident. In one strictly segregated town a newspaper reporter, watching Wheeler talk to city officials, observed: 'Look at the way he handles those people. And that man couldn't even buy a cup of coffee across the street.'¹⁰⁰⁸

It was John Wheeler's desire to see those same concessions afforded to all black Americans but without the requirement of having to make special arrangements. In the fall of 1964, when the Lady Bird "Victory" Special—the name given to the train carrying First Lady

¹⁰⁰⁷Lyndon B. Johnson, "State of the Union Address," January 8, 1964, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/lbj-union64/>.

¹⁰⁰⁸"Banker with a Mission," *Business Week*, May 16, 1964.

Johnson on a whistle-stop tour to campaign for President Johnson in the South—made its way through North Carolina in October, Wheeler received an invitation to board the train from Richmond all the way through North Carolina where it made stops in Greensboro and Charlotte.¹⁰⁰⁹

In May, on the same day that President Johnson toured Rocky Mount, he gave the commencement speech at the University of Michigan where he expounded on his vision for the country. He brought with him a promising message to the ambitious young Americans where he stated "Your imagination and your initiative, and your indignation will determine whether we build a society where progress is the servant of our needs, or a society where old values and new visions are buried under unbridled growth. For in your time we have the opportunity to move not only toward the rich society and the powerful society, but upward to the Great Society." Johnson ended his speech by asking the students, "will you join in the battle to give every citizen the full equality which God enjoins and the law requires, whatever his belief, or race, or the color of his skin?" "Will you join in the battle," Johnson continued "to give every citizen an escape from the crushing weight of poverty?" "Will you join in the battle to build the Great Society, to prove that our material progress is only the foundation on which we will build a richer life of mind and spirit?"¹⁰¹⁰

In addition to President Johnson's Great Society declarations that year, John Wheeler officially began his tenure as SRC president. In his SRC presidential acceptance speech at the end of January, Wheeler told the annual gathering "we have been able to sift out the ills

¹⁰⁰⁹Letter from LBJ to Wheeler, October 11, 1960, Wheeler papers.

¹⁰¹⁰"President Lyndon B. Johnson's Remarks at the University of Michigan, May 22, 1964, <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/640522.as>; <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/lbjthegreatsociety.htm>; <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americalexperience/features/primary-resources/lbj-michigan/>; George Esser with Rah Bickley, *My Years at the North Carolina Fund*, 81-83.

and establish the morals in the South, and in many ways point the way to the techniques that have been helpful. We plan to continue to point the way in some fields which we have not yet touched."¹⁰¹¹ In responding to congratulatory letters about his election to SRC's presidency, Wheeler told one well wisher that "Those of us who have been associated with the Council for a long period are more than pleased at the manner in which it has been able to expand the range and quality of its services. We have also come closer to the point of realizing the full extent of our own commitment to the task of stimulating courses of thought and action which point the way to new heights of cultural and economic achievement in our Region."¹⁰¹² Wheeler used the organization's annual meeting in November to speak directly to Johnson's ideals about the Great Society and the War on Poverty. He particularly spoke about the relationship between civil rights and poverty.¹⁰¹³ Wheeler stressed SRC's agenda of "unfinished business" in fostering that ideal. He pointed to the civil rights movement's emphasis on direct action at the beginning of the decade, which "signaled the point at which we have now formalized another and more enlightened effort to achieve an open society in which freedom of movement, equal opportunity in employment, equal justice under the law, and full voting rights are the goals of a South whose battle scars and whose frequent rendezvous with conscience should enable it to achieve the Great Society before other regions of the country are able to do so." As always, Wheeler especially pointed to the importance of opening up more job opportunities to blacks in the government and eliminating institutional forms of discrimination from government agencies. Thus, Wheeler

¹⁰¹¹SRC Annual Meeting Minutes, January 29-30, 1964, folder SRC 1964, Wheeler Papers.

¹⁰¹²Letter from Wheeler to Bertha Hamilton, March 25, 1964, Wheeler Papers.

¹⁰¹³SRC Annual Meeting Minutes, January 29-30, 1964, Wheeler Papers, 8.

pointed to SRC's responsibility to define the next steps in their battle for freedom, as "we find a challenge for renewed efforts on our part to give life and substance to what is now only the framework of an open society."¹⁰¹⁴

By the mid-1960s, SRC had become an effective and bona fide civil rights organization. The organization continued with VEP nearing its third year. As SRC president, Wheeler wasted little time trying to sure-up resources from philanthropic foundations to help SRC with continuing its mission while also paving the way for new endeavors. In March, Wheeler and SRC's executive director Leslie Dunbar met with Arthur Hollis Edens, a North Carolina Fund board member and executive director of the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, to discuss future SRC programming.¹⁰¹⁵ Moreover, Wheeler and SRC made a concerted effort that year to convince President Johnson not to appoint segregationists to federal judgeships in the South. In this regard, Wheeler sent a letter to Johnson on SRC's behalf. Leslie Dunbar also wrote to other civil rights leaders to have them make similar appeals. In his letter to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Dunbar explained, "It would be most helpful, I think, if you could find an early opportunity to say, even more emphatically than does John Wheeler in his letter to the President, that no segregationist should be appointed or promoted to any vacancy." "With a probable six places to fill," continued Dunbar, "I think the pressure on President Johnson to give one to a designee of Senator [James O.] Eastland and [John C.] Stennis [both of Mississippi] will increase, and should be strongly counteracted."¹⁰¹⁶ In December, Wheeler, Dunbar, Nat Welsh, and a Dr.

¹⁰¹⁴John Wheeler, "Poverty and Segregation in the South: New Concepts, Old Truths," *New South*, November 1964, 4, 9; Steven P. Miller, "Wither Southern Liberalism in the Post-Civil Rights Era? The Southern Regional Council and its Peers, 1965-1972.

¹⁰¹⁵Letter from Leslie Dunbar to Arthur Hollis Edens, March 27, 1964, Wheeler Papers.

¹⁰¹⁶Letter from Leslie Dunbar to Martin Luther King, Jr., January 5, 1964, SRC box, Wheeler Papers.

Williams met with Vice President Hubert Humphrey's administrative aides to discuss a special resolution passed at SRC's annual meeting related to the judicial appointments in the Fifth U.S. Judicial Circuit Bench.¹⁰¹⁷ Wheeler had some success the previous year in getting Henry Frye appointed as an assistant U.S. attorney for the Middle District of North Carolina. The judicial system's treatment as well as the level of injustice exacted upon black southerners was a matter of importance to Wheeler and SRC. In his role as SRC president, Wheeler continued to recommend individuals for federal judicial appointments in the South. In 1966, for example, he recommended civil rights lawyers Donald L. Hollowell (Georgia) and Wiley A. Branton (former lawyer for the Little Rock Nine and the first VEP director) for appointments to the federal bench.¹⁰¹⁸

John Wheeler also made every effort to link SRC's activities to urban renewal, housing, and poverty. In 1966, when his friend Robert C. Weaver became the first black cabinet member with his appointment as the secretary of the newly created Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Wheeler contacted Weaver about SRC's new housing initiative, the urban planning project.¹⁰¹⁹ In 1965, the SRC, under the cover of Wheeler's signature, also sent the important memorandum, "New Federal Programs in the South," to national leaders including members from the president's cabinet and virtually every federal agency, to lobby for equal employment opportunities during the

¹⁰¹⁷Letter from Wheeler to John Stewart (Administrative Officer to Hubert Humphrey), December 28, 1964; Letter from Leslie Dunbar to Billy Moyer (Special Assistant to President Johnson), December 7, 1964.

¹⁰¹⁸Letter from John T. Duffner (Executive Assistant to the Deputy Attorney General) to Wheeler, 1966, Wheeler papers, SRC box, Wheeler papers.

¹⁰¹⁹Letter Moreland Griffith Smith to Wheeler, January 12, 1966, SRC box, Wheeler papers; Letter from Moreland Griffith Smith to Robert C. Weaver, January 14, 1966, SRC box, Wheeler papers; Letter from Wheeler to Robert C. Weaver, February 14, 1966, SRC box, Wheeler papers; Letter from Robert C. Weaver to Wheeler, February 21, 1966, SRC box, Wheeler papers; Letter from Moreland Griffin Smith (Director of SRC's Urban Planning Project) to Wheeler, April 12, 1966, SRC box, Wheeler papers.

"implementation" phase. Wheeler sent the memorandum to President Johnson who forwarded the memo directly to Sargent Shriver, the head of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). Wheeler also offered to come to Washington to sit down with Shriver and discuss the memorandum more fully. The memorandum speaks to Wheeler and SRC's concern that African American be involved in implementing new federal policies and that they had a role on the local governing bodies for the Community Action Programs like those supported by the North Carolina Fund. In his reply to Wheeler, Shriver pointed to one of Wheeler's main concerns. "We, too," Shriver explained to Wheeler, "are concerned with the need to appoint Negroes to top level jobs in Federal programs in the South. Staffing in our Southern (Atlanta) and Southwestern (Austin) Regional Offices had not been completed; however, the appointments we have made thus far indicate that minorities will share in top-level assignments in these offices. Of the 10 professionals thus far assigned in Atlanta, for example, two are Negroes. And in Austin, one of the six professionals thus far assigned is a Negro." Shriver assured Wheeler that his office would adhere to a strict policy to ensure that local communities "complied with our requirements for fair representation of minorities and the poor."¹⁰²⁰

TWO IMPONDERABLES: "BLACK POWER" AND "WHITE BACKLASH"

By 1965, the civil rights movement had undoubtedly made significant gains that culminated with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In North Carolina, a moderate governor had laid the groundwork for the state's War on Poverty, which in its application

¹⁰²⁰Letter from Sargent Shriver (Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity) to John Wheeler, May 3, 1965, SRC box, Wheeler papers; Letter from Bill Moyers (Special Assistant to the President) to Wheeler, March 15, 1965; Letter from John W. Macy, Jr. (Chairman of the U.S. Civil Service Commission) to Wheeler, March 25, 1965; Letter from Baton Bryant to Wheeler, March 15, 1965.

helped shape the political discourse more forcefully toward the rights of poor Americans, aiding them in their growing activism. At the same time, Durham's urban renewal program increasingly ran out of favor in the black community. Yet, other looming challenges hung in the balance as the movement continued to shed light on voting discrimination in the South with renewed vigor—highlighted by the violent battle of Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, Alabama that March—and the hope that Johnson would pass sweeping reform legislation in that area.¹⁰²¹

On August 6, the President signed into law the Voting Rights Act of 1965, an unprecedented bill with powerful implications on New South politics. The SRC's Voter Education Project (VEP), now in its third year, had played an integral role in helping to increase black voter registration in the South.¹⁰²² Nevertheless, Leslie Dunbar cried foul when his organization failed to receive a formal invitation to the actual signing ceremony. In a stinging letter to the president's special assistant Lee C. White, Dunbar pointed out:

The Council is composed of white and Negro Southerners who believe not merely in civil rights but bi-racial cooperation toward a truly integrated political and economic order. No other organization has longer or more constructively worked to end voter discrimination and to encourage Negro voter registration in the South.¹⁰²³

In the previous three years, noted Dunbar, SRC administered VEP and the organization's research and field reports related to voter registration were used as evidence in support of the bill. Moreover:

¹⁰²¹Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 43-45; Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 126-131.

¹⁰²²Watters, Pat and Reese Cleghorn, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder: The Arrival of Negroes in Southern Politics* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1967).

¹⁰²³Letter from Leslie Dunbar to Lee C. White, August 16, 1965, Wheeler papers, 1.

The Council's long involvement in this field has been climaxed, for the present, by our administration during 1962-64 of the Voter Education Project, through which at least 700,000 new voters were enrolled in the eleven southern states.

Dunbar bitterly complained that not one SRC official received an invitation to witness the actual signing. Therefore:

We find it strange that although a horde of people were invited to the August 6 signing of the Voting Rights Act, representation of the Council was not requested. Our president, Mr. John H. Wheeler of Durham, was invited, but as an individual, and he was not among the score or so selected to witness the signing. Ironically, on that same day he was one of a small group meeting to form realistic plans for making the new Act a success. In devotion to that end, a devotion certainly not recognized by the White House planners, and despite fatigue, he flew back South to re-join the conference by 4:00p.m. As far as I can note, invitations to the affair of August 6 excluded Negro and white Southerners unequivocally committed to a bi-racial approach to an integrated society, and as retiring staff head of the Council I want to express my chagrin and regret.¹⁰²⁴

In spite of the gross oversight related to the signing ceremony, and a half-hearted apology from White, Wheeler, Dunbar, and the SRC continued to agitate policy makers at the federal level to seek greater implementation of the gains already won.

As civil rights leaders and their organizations celebrated the new voting milestone, a violent disturbance erupted in Watts, Los Angeles on August 11. The Watts Riot was triggered by the arrest of a black resident suspected of being intoxicated. Nevertheless, it centered on the issue of police brutality, high unemployment, poor schools, and substandard housing. After five days of violence, and the deaths of thirty-four people, the riot left the city with millions of dollars in property damage and the destruction of hundreds of buildings.¹⁰²⁵

As John Wheeler explained in a speech at SRC's annual convention in November,

¹⁰²⁴Ibid., 1-2.

¹⁰²⁵Gerald C. Horne, *The Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1997), 3; 53-60; Peniel Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 121-122; Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, *America Divided: The Civil War of the 1960s* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 131-133.

“Frequently the question has been raised as to whether a concentrated attack upon conditions of poverty could have prevented the devastating riots which have swept the Watts section of Los Angeles twice within recent months.” “Based upon results obtained in other parts of the country,” Wheeler continued, “it appears that an adequately-financed community action program, properly staffed and operated within [Office of Economic Opportunity] guidelines, could have done much to change the feeling of hopelessness and despair which triggered the riots.”¹⁰²⁶ An urban crisis had clearly taken shape and in his speech to the annual SRC convention, Wheeler tried to make sense of it all by delineating the role that he believed the War on Poverty could play in helping to solve the dilemma. In doing so, Wheeler reminded the audience that, while the riots were seemingly spontaneous, the level of discontent in urban America had festered for decades. These challenges were not completely on the radar of the southern civil rights movement but the events in Watts forecasted a pivotal shift in the battle for freedom.

Although Durham seemed to be worlds apart from Watts, a similar powder keg of ingredients was nevertheless present. The day before the Watts Riot, a group of public housing residents organized the McDougald Terrace Mothers Club. On the same day as the Watts Riot the Durham Housing Authority sent an eviction notice to Joyce C. Thorpe, a single mother and McDougald Terrace tenant since November 1964. Thorpe had until the end of August to vacate, and her eviction also came just a day after she was elected president of the Mothers Club. Moreover, Thorpe was not given an official explanation as to why she was being evicted. But when Sherriff’s deputies arrived at her apartment to remove her from the premises, she made it clear she would not leave and warned the deputies that they would

¹⁰²⁶John H. Wheeler, "Civil Rights Groups—Their Impact Upon the War on Povert," 31 *Law and Contemporary Problems* (winter 1966), <http://scholarship.law.duke.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3102&context=lcp>, 152-158.

have to dodge bullets from her loaded shotgun if they wanted her gone. After unsuccessful attempts to obtain the reasoning behind her eviction, Thorpe's attorneys filed suit on the grounds that it violated her First Amendment rights. Thorpe's case brought the policies of the Durham Housing Authority under intense public scrutiny in the black community and set the stage for a U. S. Supreme Court challenge. As it happened, the impetus for the Mothers Club came at the encouragement of Operation Breakthrough staff, particularly Charlise Hedgspeth and Ben Ruffin, who sought to organize poor blacks at McDougald Terrace and other low-income areas where there existed undemocratic housing policies; both Hedgspeth and Ruffin were two black "field technicians" working for the North Carolina Fund's local CAP.¹⁰²⁷ In other areas of Hayti, Hedgspeth and Ruffin assisted local residents in launching neighborhood groups such as the Progressive Community Council to take on neighborhood cleanup efforts and to petition the city to tear down "old houses[,] which had long outlived their usefulness and rightful places in the community." They were also concerned with getting local landlords to make significant improvements on rental properties in the area as well.¹⁰²⁸

While Wheeler's regional role in the battle for freedom expanded, Durham's urban renewal program continued to take a disappointingly downward spiral, which also exacerbated the city's housing situation. In September, *Carolina Times* newspaper editor Louis E. Austin raised questions about the slow pace of urban renewal and captured the

¹⁰²⁷Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 105-106, 109-113; Korstad and Leloudis, *To Right these Wrongs*, 186-187; Rocklin, Ross, "Durham Housing in the 1960s: A Story of Discrimination and the Fight for Tenants Rights," Public Policy Paper, Terry Sanford Institute of Public Policy, Duke University, May 2003, 20-21; "Supreme Court to Review McDougald Terrace Eviction Case," *Carolina Times*, December 10, 1966; "The McDougald Terrace Case," *Carolina Times*, December 10, 1966; *Thorpe v. Housing Authority of the City of Durham*, 386 U.S. 670; *Housing Authority of the City of Durham v. Joyce C. Thorpe*, 271 N.C. 468.

¹⁰²⁸"Progressive Community Council Launches Cleanup Campaign in Hayti Section of City," *Carolina Times*, August 28, 1965.

sentiments of black Hayti residents. He placed congested living conditions at the forefront and particularly called on the DRC to build new public housing for displaced residents. Otherwise, it would continue to make an already depressed housing situation worse. By this time, it was clear to blacks that earlier promises made to them were short in coming. Austin highlighted the quickness at which the DRC carried-out the clearance part of the program, while at the same time dragging their feet in replacing demolished residential areas. In addition to this, homeowners criticized the DRC for what seemed to be "below market value" offers to purchase their homes. "So far as the Hayti section of Durham is concerned," the editorial went, "urban renewal is not only a farce but just another scheme to relieve Negroes of property they own too close to the downtown business section of the city." There was a serious question about whether the low-cost housing developments would ever come. The answer to that question came by way of a grandfather living in Hayti when he said "I have already put it in my will that when my great grandson moves into one of the apartments erected under the Urban Renewal program to not forget that his old great great grandpappy dreamed of such a day."¹⁰²⁹

While the Hayti grandfather waited for new public housing to go up, perhaps in vein, long overdue concerns about the city's existing policies persisted. In October, McDougald Terrace residents were up in arms against the Housing Authority and its executive director Carvie S. Oldham in particular. The residents had a laundry list of grievances ranging from deceitful leasing agreements, which residents never received official copies of, to unexplained charges on rent and utility bills. The McDougald Terrace residents again received assistance from Operation Breakthrough staff who helped residents present their

¹⁰²⁹"A Farce or Reality," *Carolina Times*, September 25, 1965.

grievances before the city leaders. If the Housing Authority failed to address the problem, explained another newspaper article, “McDougald Terrace [would persist as] a veritable seething cauldron which [might] erupt at any moment into an explosion of a more devastating nature.”¹⁰³⁰ By December, the Housing Authority announced changes to its policies, which included new rental agreements, a new requirement that all tenants be given an explanation for eviction, and the elimination of excessive water bills. Yet in other ways the Durham Housing Authority continued to ignore black demands. In early 1966, for example, the housing body bypassed another opportunity to appoint Babe Henderson to the chairmanship, voting instead to appoint its newest member Carl R. Harris. By that time, Henderson was the senior ranking member and the only original appointee of the group. The Durham Housing Authority's continued rejection of Henderson's chairmanship said as much about its views on race as did the actions of its executive director. By that time, Henderson served as treasurer at NCM where he oversaw millions of dollars for the black-owned company. The Housing Authority's continued refusal to appoint Henderson was frustrating at a time when someone like Henderson could help mitigate the city's deteriorating housing situation.¹⁰³¹

The housing crisis reached a boiling point during the summer of 1966. As Durham's housing crisis grew worse, African Americans in the city collectively organized to push city leaders toward finding a reasonable solution to improving those conditions. The efforts were led by poor and working class black women who succeeded in the establishment of an

¹⁰³⁰“The McDougald Terrace Revolt,” *Carolina Time*, October 9, 1965

¹⁰³¹“Durham Housing Unit Tenants Stage Revolt,” *Carolina Times*, October 9, 1965; “The McDougald Terrace Revolt,” *Carolina Times*, October 9, 1965; “Durham Housing Authority Institutes Changes in Policy,” *Carolina Times*, December 25, 1965; “The Durham Housing Authority Chairman,” *Carolina Times*, January 15, 1966; “Chairman Thrown ‘Mickey’ Again by Slick City Official,” *Carolina Times*, February 12, 1966; “The Durham Housing Authority,” *Carolina Times*, February 12, 1966.

association they called the United Organizations for Community Improvement (UOCI). The UOCI was a collective that included several active neighborhood councils from across the city, including the one at McDougald Terrace, which formed the previous August. The UOCI wanted local slumlords, especially white real estate developer Abe Greenberg, to improve the living conditions at their rental properties. By February, Durham's Edgemont Community Council charged Greenberg with maintaining houses that were "below standard." After investigating the charges against Greenberg, city housing code inspectors agreed that the homes were "below city building code standards." In addition, the Edgemont Community Council followed up on their complaints by "picketing Greenberg's offices, [and] City Hall" and when black businessman David Stith defended Greenberg, the group targeted his home as well. The Edgemont Community Council specifically provided city leaders with a "fact sheet," which detailed significant violations such as " ' holes in the ceiling, no bath tubs, plaster falling down inside of houses, bad wiring conditions, no hot water, no screen doors, air condition without air condition, no paint on outside, broken down porches, holes in the floor, roaches, rats, snakes, bugs, etc.' " in twenty-one homes.¹⁰³²

Despite the public outcry, Greenberg made only minimal attempts to repair the homes. On top of that, he charged exorbitant rents for properties that had been rented to previously all-white tenants; he raised rents once blacks displaced by urban renewal, who had very few options for affordable housing, moved into the neighborhoods. While Greenberg was by far the worst offender, there were also black slumlords that owned rental properties in the same condition as those owned by Greenberg; this also meant that the housing problems

¹⁰³²"Inspector Finds Houses of Abe Greenberg Substandard: Owner Agrees to Repair and Paint Dwellings," *Carolina Times*, February 26, 1966.

in Durham were complicated by issues of class.¹⁰³³ Meanwhile, the U. S. Supreme Court decided it would hear oral arguments on the Joyce C. Thorpe eviction case against the Durham Housing Authority. The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. represented Thorpe in the proceedings. The Thorpe case held even larger implications as it related to due process and because it became "the first time the nation's highest court has agreed to review the 'rights of a tenant' in public housing to be free from arbitrary eviction. There are approximately 1400 local housing authorities with low-rent projects throughout the United States." Thorpe went on to win her case, setting a legal precedent while at the same time the circumstances surrounding her eviction forced HUD to make major changes in its national housing policies; it specifically stated that local housing authorities had to notify tenants in writing about the reasons for their evictions and had to also give the tenants an opportunity to appeal the decision.¹⁰³⁴

In 1966, the civil rights movement turned another pivotal corner with the decisive shift to "Black Power" consciousness. It transpired in dramatic fashion as Stokely Carmichael, the new SNCC chairman, captured black frustrations in a fiery speech during the "Meredith March." The SNCC election that Carmichael won against John Lewis, a protégé of Dr. King, represented a departure from the strict adherence to the philosophy of nonviolence and integration. James Meredith initially conceived of his "March Against Fear" as a one-man crusade where he was planned to trek from Memphis, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi until he was shot days into his journey. The national civil rights

¹⁰³³"Better Housing for all Durham Citizens," *Carolina Times*, July 2, 1966; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways*, 124-126.

¹⁰³⁴"Supreme Court to Review McDougald Terrace Eviction Case," *Carolina Times*, December 10, 1966; "The McDougald Terrace Case," *Carolina Times*, December 10, 1966; *Thorpe v. Housing Authority of the City of Durham*, 386 U.S. 670; *Housing Authority of the City of Durham v. Joyce C. Thorpe*, 271 N.C. 468.

leadership, in their unwillingness to concede to fear or violence, rallied behind Meredith and continued the march; Meredith survived the ordeal and by the time the marchers made it to their final destination, he was able to join them. While the Meredith March included participants from all over, the three main organizations that spearheaded its continuance were SNCC, SCLC (with Dr. King as its president), and CORE (headed by Durham attorney Floyd B. McKissick since January). In Greenwood, Mississippi, Carmichael was arrested on trespassing charges; but after being released, he told the crowd of marchers that he had enough of going to jail. In a passionate speech on the evening of June 16, he told the crowd that "The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin' us is to take over. What we gonna start sayin' now is Black Power." By the time his speech ended, Carmichael led the crowd in a call and response: "What do we want?" "Black Power!" the crowd chanted repeatedly at Stokely's command.¹⁰³⁵

The utterance of Black Power and the slogan itself sparked controversy and debate about its meaning. Some civil rights leaders viewed it as irresponsible because it had a strong appeal to Black Nationalism (when the mainstream civil rights movement operated under a decidedly integrationist framework); others felt the term was too ambiguous and could therefore be left to interpretation. CORE chairman Floyd B. McKissick, however, embraced Black Power because it represented the moment that African Americans rejected their status as "Negroes" and demanded to be called "Black." McKissick also explained that

¹⁰³⁵ *Eyes on the Prize: The Time Has Come, 1964-1966, Episode 7* (Alexandria, VA: PBS Video, 1987); John Hope Franklin and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, ninth edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 2011), 557-559; Peniel Joseph, *Waiting 'Till the Midnight: A Narrative History of Black Power* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), 141-142; Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership* (New York: Quill, 1984), 544-546; Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 187-192

" 'whites could not subtract violence from black power.' "¹⁰³⁶ About a week after Stokely Carmichael introduced Black Power the Mississippi rally, John Wheeler traveled overseas to Greece, Egypt, and Syria as a lecturer for the U. S. State Department. Upon his return to the states, however, Wheeler's health took a serious toll on him and he grew extremely ill; he did not make a full recovery until sometime around early October.¹⁰³⁷ Wheeler's physicians believed he actually suffered from depression and a temporary nervous breakdown, which stemmed from the stresses of work and his many civic responsibilities. These burdensome commitments were compounded by marital problems with his wife of over thirty years, Selena. In consultations with a psychiatrist, Selena complained that John Hervey's mother, who he moved to Durham ten years earlier, continued to come first in his life. Upon his doctor's orders, Wheeler took a break from his work to recuperate, at which point he spent several weeks at a rest home in Capahosic, Virginia.¹⁰³⁸

Despite his declining health, Wheeler was at least well enough to give an address at SRC's annual meeting in November, where he focused on the Black Power slogan and the challenges it now posed to the civil rights movement. "When it all is totaled up," argued Wheeler, "1966 unfortunately will be remembered as the year of two imponderables—the Black Power slogan and the term White Backlash." The White Backlash explained Wheeler

¹⁰³⁶ *Eyes on the Prize: The Time Has Come, 1964-1966, Episode 7* (Alexandria, VA: PBS Video, 1987); John Hope Franklin and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, ninth edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 2011), 557-559.

¹⁰³⁷ Letter from Vivian Patterson to Milton A. Gilbert, August 8, 1966, SRC box, Wheeler papers; Letter from Vivian Patterson to Mildred Johnson, August 8, 1966; Letter from Mildred Johnson to Vivian Patterson, August 16, 1966, SRC box, Wheeler papers; Letter from Paul Anthony (SRC executive director) to Wheeler, November 28, 1966, SRC box, Wheeler papers.

¹⁰³⁸ Interview with Dr. Charles Watts (Lincoln Hospital), 1968 FBI Field Reports, U. S. Department of Justice; Interview with W. L. Cook (NCM executive), 1968 FBI Field Reports, U. S. Department of Justice; Interview with Dr. Irwin A. Brody (Neurologist at Duke Hospital), 1968 FBI Field Reports, U. S. Department of Justice; Interview with Dr. Alton Mayberry (psychiatrist), 1968 FBI Field Reports, U. S. Department of Justice.

represented "poorly concealed racism," bolstered by a complete abandonment of the need to protect the citizenship rights of black Americans; he criticized and dismissed White Backlash as being false conservatism. "Genuine conservatism," continued Wheeler, "seeks to identify that which is worthwhile and preserve it." At the same time, it "should support every honest effort toward the betterment and orderly development of our nation." Yet the language of Black Power helped fuel negative white attitudes no matter what the intent. He said that if Americans were to accept the popular explanation for Black Power, they would recognize it as "greater political, economic, and cultural leverage for Negroes." If that reasoning were true, noted Wheeler, then it was something he and organizations like the SRC had worked to achieve for decades. Nevertheless, the Black Power slogan "generated discordant overtones." In other words, it was not a good idea to exchange one form of racism for another.¹⁰³⁹

Yet as much as the Black Power slogan elicited wrong-headedness, noted Wheeler, the underlying problems that contributed to its upsurge had been decades in the making. Therefore, those issues had to be fully understood and no longer ignored. "If we take the trouble to listen," Wheeler explained, "we can hear an urgent message in this slogan—a message of patience worn thin, of hopes too often shattered, of promises too long unfulfilled." In other words, the Black Power slogan could not be used as a scapegoat or as a rationale for what Wheeler perceived as white racism. Wheeler's overall point to SRC members was that neither "Black Power" nor "White Backlash" would move the country forward productively. They were opposite extremes that actually had the potential to distract

¹⁰³⁹John Hervey Wheeler, "Of Conflict, Growth and Progress," *New South*, vol. 22, no. 1 (Winter, 1967), 2-9; "Whither Southern Liberalism in the Post-Civil Rights Era? The Southern Regional Council and its Peers, 1965-1972," *The Georgia Historical Quarterly*, vol. 90, no. 4 (Winter 2006), 355-357.

them from the larger battle for racial and economic equality. Moreover, Wheeler feared that the two "imponderables" would stall the move toward greater freedom and reverse the hard-fought gains, similar to what happened to African Americans after Reconstruction. Last, Wheeler believed that the battle for freedom could not be won without interracial cooperation because it was also "about freeing the southern white man...freeing him from the shackles of bigotry and the enslaving hypnosis of the political demagogue."¹⁰⁴⁰

By this time, Wheeler decided to resign as SRC president in an effort to reduce his obligations so that he could improve his health. However, SRC's new executive director Paul Anthony pleaded with Wheeler to continue on as president because "it would be extremely unfortunate to lose your leadership at this time," especially since "during the past year and a half, there have been a number of staff changes at the Council and it would be very unfortunate if it appeared to the public that there were more changes than would be desirable for a continued, stable operation as the Council is known by its friends and supporters." Anthony assured Wheeler that "we can see to it that you have called to your attention an absolute minimum of the affairs of the organization; particularly any of the details which would tend to interrupt you or require time of you." Wheeler agreed and stayed on as the organization's president until 1969¹⁰⁴¹

Despite Wheeler's poor health, which posed a problem for him again during the latter half of 1967, he continued with his involvement in several progressive developments in Durham and across other parts of North Carolina.¹⁰⁴² By this time, the North Carolina Fund

¹⁰⁴⁰Ibid.

¹⁰⁴¹"Letter from Paul Anthony to Wheeler, November 28, 1966, SRC box, Wheeler papers.

¹⁰⁴²"President of M&F Bank Still Improving: LBJ Sends Message," *Carolina Times*, October 14, 1967.

had begun to support independent spin-off agencies to help sidestep the political developments unfolding from the New Right. These were the challenges that Wheeler warned about when it came to the "implementation" phase of the black freedom movement. In January, as the "White Backlash" strengthened its resolve and conservative politicians targeted the War on Poverty, Wheeler helped start the Low-Income Housing Development Cooperation (LIHDC) and also became its president. As the North Carolina Fund sought to "increase the supply of housing for low-income people" it received approval from the OEO to set-up a spin-off program for that purpose.¹⁰⁴³ According to LIHDC history, it was:

organized to develop and assist local nonprofit housing sponsors. LIHDC does not produce housing itself, but hopes to establish knowledgeable and sophisticated groups to operate housing programs on a self-sustaining basis in the future.¹⁰⁴⁴

The establishment of spin-off programs like the LIHDC became necessary as the North Carolina Fund and its CAP programs came under intense scrutiny by the state's Republicans, particularly U. S. Congressman Jim Gardner. Gardner and others sought to block further Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) funding and also wanted to roll-back the liberal policies of the Johnson administration's Great Society because they believed the Fund used government funds for political activities, which they believed to be outside the scope of the OEO agencies.¹⁰⁴⁵ To get started, the LIHDC received its initial grant of \$345,406 directly from OEO and approximately \$41,875 from the North Carolina Fund. When the LIHDC first started it operated in Durham, Greensboro, Salisbury, and Charlotte. By 1970, it had spread to about eighteen cities throughout the state.¹⁰⁴⁶

¹⁰⁴³George Esser, *My Years at the North Carolina Fund*, 266-275.

¹⁰⁴⁴Memorandum from Frank T. DeStafano (Director, HDC Monitoring) to Wheeler, June 29, 1970, Box 28, Low Income Housing Development Corporation, Wheeler Papers.

¹⁰⁴⁵*Ibid*; George Esser, *My Years at the North Carolina Fund*, 266-275.

In February, John Wheeler also helped lay the groundwork for the establishment of the North Carolina Voter Education Project (NCVEP). At the initial luncheon (which was also attended by VEP director Vernon E. Jordan) Wheeler gave an overview of the DCNA's experience and history in voter registration as the organization had "one of the highest percentages of registered Negroes voters in the State" Therefore, he strongly "supported the formation of a statewide [voter education] council."¹⁰⁴⁷ The North Carolina Council on Human Relations was one of the strongest SRC branches, which meant that an additional SRC entity could prove to be just as effective. A few weeks after the meeting, Jordan wrote to Wheeler with optimism, saying "your presence at the meeting and the interest demonstrated there convinced me that a state-wide project there is more than a mere possibility." At another planning meeting in March the NCVEP's thirty-one member steering committee, selected John Edwards as executive director. During the direct action protest during the early 1960s, Edwards had been one of the student leaders; he later became the DCNA's chairman during the 1980s. In addition to the "small one-year operational grant" from SRC, the NCVEP also received a "six-month program development grant" from the North Carolina Fund. The NCVEP used its North Carolina Fund grant to "workshops were held on how to organize voter registration campaigns, how to get out the vote, election laws of North Carolina, community organization and voter registration, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act." The Operation Breakthrough's Howard Fuller gave the keynote on "the Negro and politics." In October the NCVEP staff along with representatives from UOCI, the

¹⁰⁴⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁴⁷Minutes of the North Carolina Voter Education Meeting, February 27, 1967, SRC box, Wheeler Papers; Letter from Vernon E Jordan (VEP director) to Wheeler, March 11, 1967, SRC box, Wheeler Papers; "First Annual Report of the North Carolina Voter Education Project," December 31, 1967, SRC box, Wheeler Papers.

Durham NAACP, and the DCNA traveled to Fayetteville where they held similar workshops for "the Fayetteville Public Housing Tenant's Organization."¹⁰⁴⁸

By April 1968, Lyndon B. Johnson had announced to the American public that he would not seek another run for the presidency largely due to the failures of the Vietnam War. Nothing could have prepared John Wheeler, the black freedom movement, or nation for what took place on April 4, 1968. On that day Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated by an unknown assassin's bullet; King had been in Memphis to support a mostly black sanitation workers' strike, which underscored the remaining economic injustices. The date normally held another kind of significance for the Wheeler family as John Wheeler's daughter Julia Wheeler Taylor (now following in her father's footsteps as an officer at M&F's Raleigh branch) was to celebrate her thirty-second birthday. Wheeler had known King since the civil rights leader was a boy and then a young man coming of age as a student at Morehouse College where Wheeler served on the board of trustee at the storied Atlanta institution. Over the past decade, Wheeler had the opportunity to work with King on several projects related to black higher education in the South (both King and his father also served on the Morehouse board at the time of his assassination) along with civil rights. In the aftermath of King's death both the DCNA and SRC passed resolutions and sent condolences to Coretta Scott King. The DCNA's resolution said King's " non-violent program made great contributions to the progress of Negroes and their efforts to achieve first-class citizenship," and "the nation has lost its champion of civil and human rights for common men." The DCNA also cautioned Durham's black community to "exemplify self-restraint and self-discipline which

¹⁰⁴⁸Ibid.

will be the greatest memorial to our fallen leaders.”¹⁰⁴⁹ The SRC's resolution read in part, “This is the time for white American to forego lecturing black Americans against violating the non-violent philosophy to which Dr. King’s life will stand as a memorial for all time...Let white America acknowledge that black Americans, as Dr. King has proved, have equal moral personality as human beings and have the qualities of leadership and courage and dignity which all Americans need.”¹⁰⁵⁰ At its next meeting, the Morehouse College board of trustees discussed starting a fund for King's children and before ending the meeting, Wheeler challenged all board members at the meeting to pledge their contributions to the fund right then and there; the board raised \$107,000 before adjourning.¹⁰⁵¹ King's death led to widespread race riots in virtually every major U. S. city across the country. In Durham, a day after King's death, there was a silent protest march from Fayetteville Street to City Hall. However, in the ensuing days Durham fell victim to widespread arson, which forced local leaders to bring in the National Guard and institute a citywide curfew. While King's death left a huge void in the civil rights movement, it also stood out as a reminder to the entire country of how far it had to go before it could reach a truly free and prosperous society.

CONCLUSION

In 1969, former Vice President Richard M. Nixon began his first term as the President of the United States. Nixon's election effectively ended what had been one of the most optimistic, yet tumultuous decades in American history. In Wheeler's final year as SRC

¹⁰⁴⁹“A Resolution Pertaining to the Death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. by the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs, Durham, North Carolina,” DCNA Box, Wheeler Papers.

¹⁰⁵⁰Minutes of the Executive Committee Meeting, April 6, 1968, SRC Box, Wheeler Papers; Steven P. Miller, “Wither Southern Liberalism,” 557-558.

¹⁰⁵¹Interview with Julius A. Locket, 1968 FBI Field Reports, U. S. Department of Justice.

president, black power consciousness made its way to the offices of SRC in Atlanta, Georgia. The organization's black staff formed their own grievance committee and looked to Wheeler to help their cause. In addition to the SRC that year, black students took on their administrators at college campuses across the country. In Wheeler's hometown of Durham, a group of black students at Duke University took over the Allen Administration Building in order to force the school to provide black studies programs and to increase the overall enrollment of black students at the university. In Atlanta, Wheeler and other members of the board of trustees at Morehouse College were held hostage by a group of students seeking similar demands for the school to incorporate more courses that reflected the recent stream of black consciousness. The decade ushered in a new generation of Americans who looked to fulfill the promises of American democracy and brought with them an incipient civil rights movement, followed by the ideals of a Great Society.

CONCLUSION

INSTILLING GREATER INCENTIVE AND RESPONSIBILITY IN THE RISING GENERATION: THE LEGACY OF JOHN HERVEY WHEELER

The fight is far from over. Many, many objectives have not been achieved. Some are yet only barely sighted. Equality is still more an ideal than a fact. Until it is a fact, the crusade needs every ally it can get.

—John Hervey Wheeler, 1967

Most gracious father whose bountifulness knows no end, we thank Thee that Thou hast allowed us to prosper as we have to this moment. Grant us the wisdom to make the right use of all Thy gifts. Grant also that these facilities and this building may become a benefit to those whom we serve in the name of Him who came that we might have life and have it more abundantly, even Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.¹⁰⁵²

—Dedicatory Prayer at M&F's Charlotte Branch Opening, 1962

“On the wall behind Wheeler’s desk is a candid photograph of Wheeler and former President Johnson working together” went a 1970 “Tar Heel of the Week” article in the *Raleigh News and Observer*. Wheeler approvingly called Johnson “quite a person” as the two had come to know and work closely with one another beginning in 1961. At M&F, Wheeler also kept “personally autographed pictures on his office wall [that] include[d] [one with] Hubert Humphrey...John Kennedy, and Ralph Bunche.” “And,” noted another newspaper article, “Wheeler has never forgotten his first love: education.”¹⁰⁵³ In the last decade of his life, John Hervey Wheeler continued his activism and refused to relinquish the bulk of his numerous responsibilities. In 1971, for example, Wheeler supported a bill to

¹⁰⁵²Dedication Ceremony Program (held at Johnson C. Smith University Church), March 4, 1962, Asa and Elna Spaulding Papers; Prayer by Dr. Peter G. Crawford, Minister of the Bethel AME Church, Charlotte, N.C.

¹⁰⁵³“The Tar Heel of the Week – John Wheeler: Working Quietly for the Progress of Blacks,” *News and Observer*, March 15, 1970; “Wheeler: His Commitments Go Far Beyond His Bank,” *The Carolina Financial Times*, February 9, 1976.

abolish the death penalty in North Carolina. "At this period in our history," argued Wheeler in a speech before the North Carolina General Assembly's House Judiciary Committee, "little or no reason remains for us to continue the exercise of vengeance by man against man." Furthermore, "the death penalty," explained Wheeler became "recognized as a cruel and unusual penalty, inflicted for the most part against the poor, the black population[,] and the uneducated."¹⁰⁵⁴

During this same time, Wheeler was on the receiving end of many awards and accolades for his work in the field of civil rights. In 1967, his alma mater presented him with an honorary doctorate degree for his tireless leadership as a member of the school's board of trustees. In 1970, he was also awarded an honorary doctorate from Duke University, where former North Carolina Governor Terry Sanford became president.¹⁰⁵⁵ That same year, he received the Frank Porter Graham Civil Liberties Award for his defense of freedom for all North Carolinians; the next year, North Carolina Central University bestowed upon him an honorary doctorate as well. In 1976, Morehouse College formally dedicated "John H. Wheeler Hall" as the school's Social Sciences and Business Administration Building. At the dedication ceremony, Wheeler told the audience "the establishment of this new facility is many times more important as a tool for training young black leaders to take their appointed

¹⁰⁵⁴“To End Capital Punishment: Death Penalty Bill Supported” in the local and state section, April 9, 1971, *Durham Morning Herald*, Wheeler Papers.

¹⁰⁵⁵Letter from Wheeler to Sanford, June 9, 1970, Terry Sanford Papers, Duke University; Citation by Terry Sanford, June 1, 1970, Terry Sanford Papers; Letter from Terry Sanford to Wheeler, March 16, 1970, Terry Sanford Papers.



Figure 8.1. John Hervey Wheeler Hall, Morehouse College (*Photo in Author's Possession*)

places in American life than the honor which Morehouse [has] bestowed upon me."¹⁰⁵⁶

Wheeler Hall is fittingly flanked by several tennis courts, a sport that Wheeler loved and played until three years before his death. Today, as a lasting testament to his vision of New South prosperity, virtually every institution where he had a hand in shaping continues to thrive. These include the Mechanics and Farmers Bank, the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, Morehouse College, the Atlanta University Center (AUC), St. Joseph's AME Church, (the original building, which has operated as the St. Joseph's Historic Foundation since 1975, continues to preserve black Durham's history and doubles as a community meeting place), and the Stanford L. Warren Library continues as a branch within the larger Durham County Library System. In the 1970s, the DCNA changed its name to the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People and although its yields less political

¹⁰⁵⁶“Morehouse Dedicates John H. Wheeler Hall,” 1976.



Figure 8.2 John Hervey Wheeler Hall, Morehouse College, the fence to the left guards the tennis courts. (*Photo in Author's Possession*)

power that in years' past, it remains as an active civil rights organization.

The ultimate beneficiaries of John Wheeler's lasting legacy were his two children Julia Wheeler Taylor and Warren Hervey Wheeler. Their mother, Selena Wheeler, also deserves a great deal of credit for the prominent role she had in rearing them, even more so than their father. John Hervey lost his beloved mother on December 29, 1976; just three days shy of his 68th birthday.¹⁰⁵⁷ Because of their father's activism and sacrifices, the Wheeler children had access to an increasingly integrated American society. Both children became pioneers in their career fields of choice. Julia eventually followed in her father's footsteps at M&F where she became the institution's first woman president in 1983. Although she eventually followed in her father's path as a banker, Julia made the decision early on to forge her own identity, regardless of her father's reputation in business. It was in 1955 that Julia

¹⁰⁵⁷Obituary of Margaret Hervey Wheeler, January 2, 1976, William Jesse Kennedy, Jr. Papers.

first went to work for M&F at its Raleigh branch where she temporarily replaced another female employee who went on maternity leave for three months. Although she had yet to decide on a career in banking at that time, she recognized that there were limitations placed on the professional aspirations of black women in society. The traditional gender roles limited her initial career options to becoming a nurse, teacher, or secretary. Julia, much like her mother before her, knew for sure that she did not want to become a teacher.¹⁰⁵⁸

While her father fought for employment opportunities for black Americans, there were still restrictions placed on how far women could advance in business, even at her father's bank. At one point, Julia served as acting branch manager at the Raleigh location but it was made clear to her that she would have the position only until a "qualified man" could be hired as a permanent replacement. Julia eventually broke down some of those barriers because of her skills and abilities in finance. In her determination to also break free from her father's shadow, Julia struck out on her own because she "knew she had to go somewhere and prove [herself] on [her] own." Thus, in 1961 she packed up her car and drove across the country where she ended up in Los Angeles, California for a time. Once there, Julia quickly managed to obtain three job offers and went to work for Bank of America as the secretary to a branch manager there. While her father could not devote as much of his time to his children, Julia remembered that he nevertheless encouraged her to "do your best in whatever you do." Julia was quickly lured away from Bank of America and landed a job with the Broadway Federal Savings and Loan Association. There, she witnessed first-hand women in positions of authority as officers, which was something that served as a serious awakening for her. Julia herself became an officer with the financial institution. Los Angeles provided

¹⁰⁵⁸"Tar Heel of the Week: A Family Banking Tradition gets a Woman's Touch," *News and Observer*, April 6, 1986; <http://paulimurrayproject.org/durhamstories/bwswomen/juliataylo.html>; <http://paulimurrayproject.org/durhamstories/bwswomen/JuliaTaylor.mp3>.

her with a strong sense of "fulfillment" and accomplishment because she had enormous success; in the meantime, she was married for a brief period. Julia returned to North Carolina in 1965 and went back to M&F's Raleigh branch. She became assistant cashier in 1966 and vice president manager a year later. Julia became the branch's senior vice president in 1978. After working at the bank for eighteen years, in 1983 Julia became head of the institution, which made her the third generation to carry on the family's management of the bank, an institution her maternal grandfather helped found. Julia blazed a new path for African American women in corporate America, while also continuing the legacies of an early generation of black women who worked at the North Carolina Mutual and M&F. Between 1983 and 2000, when Julia retired from M&F, she helped propel the bank forward and steered it into the twenty-first century. As a strong proponent of computer literacy, she guided M&F's transition to online banking.¹⁰⁵⁹

Warren Hervey Wheeler took an even more unconventional career path than did his sister. It began in 1957, when his sister, who at the time took flying lessons, brought her younger brother along with her in the air. From that moment, Warren Hervey recalled being "sky struck." At age sixteen, Warren began taking his own flying lessons. After graduating from high school, he briefly attended NCA&T for about a year, where he contemplated a career in electrical engineering; however, college interested Warren very little so he left. After leaving NCA&T, Warren enrolled in the American Flyers School in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. By age nineteen, he had a commercial pilot's license. Despite earning his pilot's license, Warren was unable to obtain employment with any of the major commercial airlines as he had anticipated—partly because of his limited flying experience and lack of flying

¹⁰⁵⁹"Tar Heel of the Week: A Family Banking Tradition gets a Woman's Touch," *News and Observer*, April 6, 1986; <http://paulimurrayproject.org/durhamstories/bwswomen/juliataylo.html>; <http://paulimurrayproject.org/durhamstories/bwswomen/JuliaTaylor.mp3>.

hours—but also because airlines refused to hire black pilots at the time. To accumulate the required flying hours in order to pursue a job with a major airline, Warren Hervey started a small flying school in Chapel Hill with financial assistance from his parents. In 1966, Piedmont Airlines hired Warren at the age of twenty-two, which at that time made him one of the youngest pilots with the airline as well as its first African American pilot. Warren was hired partly due to his father's political connections with then Governor Terry Sanford. During Sanford's term as the state's chief executive officer, Warren had the opportunity to fly the governor across the state on chartered flights. Sanford, therefore, had some first-hand knowledge about his flying ability. The governor personally contacted Piedmont Airline's president Tom Davis. Thereafter, Davis allowed Warren to take their pilot's examination, which he passed; thereafter the company hired him on fulltime. In 1969, Warren made an even bigger leap by starting his own business—Wheeler Flying Service, which he billed as a "charter, air cargo, and aircraft maintenance service."¹⁰⁶⁰ Within a few years, Wheeler Flying Service transitioned into Wheeler Airlines where it carried about 1,000 passengers by the mid-1970s. Wheeler Airlines specialized in flights to rural parts of eastern North Carolina, a void left by the larger airlines. Wheeler Airlines had scheduled flights between Charlotte and Durham, as well as Greenville and Charlotte; it also travelled to Newport News and Richmond, Virginia. While managing Wheeler Airlines, Warren Hervey stayed on as a pilot with Piedmont Airlines. For seventeen years, before closing in 1986, Wheeler Airlines also had the distinction of training over 100 African American pilots for careers in aviation; it

¹⁰⁶⁰"Aviation: Wheeling Wheeler," *Time*, July 21, 1975; Martin Weston, "First Black Airline Gets off the Ground," *Ebony*, April 1976; " 'You Can Get there From Here,' " *Raleigh News and Observer*, December 8, 1974; "Black Pilot Can Fly You Anywhere," unidentified newspaper article (1976); "Wheeler Airlines to Add Plane, Expand Service," *Heraldsun*, 1974; Betty Kaplan Gubert, Miriam Sawyer, and Caroline M. Fannin, "Warren H. Wheeler," in *Distinguished African Americans in Aviation and Space Science* (Westport, Conn.: Oryx Press, 2002), 289-291; "Wheeler Airlines: An American First," *Tar Heel Junior Historian* 43:1 (Fall 2003), <http://avstop.com/history/F03.wheeler.airlines.pdf>.



Figure 8.3 John Hervey Wheeler, 1960s. (*Photo Courtesy of the Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center*)

also made hiring and training minority pilots a priority, another important Wheeler legacy, which began with his father.¹⁰⁶¹

In September 1978, 600 people gathered at the Raleigh Civic Center where they attended a \$100 a plate dinner honoring the life of John Hervey Wheeler. On July 6, Wheeler died, two weeks after suffering a stroke at his home in Durham. The celebratory evening was chaired by former Chapel Hill Mayor Howard N. Lee, who at the time was Secretary of North Carolina's Department of Natural Resources and Community Development. Some of the notable political luminaries in attendance included North Carolina Governor James B. Hunt, Jr., House Speaker Carl J. Stewart, State Senator Kenneth

¹⁰⁶¹Ibid.

B. Royall, New York Congressman Allard Lowenstein, former HUD Secretary Robert C. Weaver, North Carolina Court of Appeals Judge Richard Erwin, State Senator Clarence E. Lightner, U. S. Attorney H. M. "Mickey" Michaux, John W. Winters, and State Representative Henry E. Frye. The dinner was an occasion to mark Wheeler's lifelong accomplishments as a businessman, lawyer, political and civil rights activist, civic leader, and philanthropist.¹⁰⁶²

It was also held to kick-start the John H. Wheeler Foundation, a scholarship fund that Lee hoped to grow to \$5 million. According to Lee, he initially brought the idea to Wheeler about a year before his death, but the elder statesman initially rejected the idea on the grounds that " 'what I did, I did because I wanted to, because I enjoyed it and I don't want the attention.' " After more prodding from Lee, Wheeler agreed to allow him to move forward with a foundation in his honor.¹⁰⁶³ After Wheeler's death, it looked as though the charity would never happen but Lee was determined to make it a reality. At the October event former North Carolina Governor Terry Sanford, along with Vernon E. Jordan were listed as honorary co-chairs.¹⁰⁶⁴ After continuing his efforts to keep the foundation going for a short time (and because of uncertainty on the part of the Wheeler family about the foundation), Lee eventually gave up on the idea and gave the remaining funds (\$80,000) to the North Carolina Central University Law School, where Wheeler had been among the first law school

¹⁰⁶²"Establish Foundation for John H. Wheeler," *The Oracle*, Fall 1979, 13; "600 Attend Fund Raiser Honoring John Wheeler," *Raleigh News and Observer*, October 2, 1978.

¹⁰⁶³Interview with Howard Lee by author, February 29, 2008 #U-0298, in the Southern Oral History Program Collection #4007, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Interview with Vernon Jordan by author, March 9, 2010, in the Southern Oral History Program; "Establish Foundation for John H. Wheeler," *The Oracle*, Fall 1979, 13; "600 Attend Fund Raiser Honoring John Wheeler," *Raleigh News and Observer*, October 2, 1978.

¹⁰⁶⁴Interview with Howard Lee by author; Interview with Vernon Jordan by author; "Establish Foundation for John H. Wheeler," *The Oracle*, Fall 1979, 13; "600 Attend Fund Raiser Honoring John Wheeler," *Raleigh News and Observer*, October 2, 1978.

graduates four decades earlier. To date, the John H. Wheeler Endowment and John H. Wheeler Scholarship Fund are still in existence and continue to financially support generations of law students at the university, which is now among the top four clinical law schools in the country.¹⁰⁶⁵ Lee felt honoring Wheeler was important because he "had really been a key to bridging the gap between the ethnic groups," and therefore "his life [needed to] be extended through reaching into future generations and helping those generations both financially and psychologically."¹⁰⁶⁶

The John H. Wheeler Foundation was representative of the fact that Wheeler became a mentor to a rising generation of black political leaders in North Carolina. Lee initially met Wheeler ten years earlier after Lee gave a speech at the state Democratic Convention; by that time, Wheeler was the state Democratic Party's treasurer. Reflecting back on his speech, Lee recalled saying something to the effect of "black power plus white power divided by green power would lead to people power." Wheeler seemed really impressed by the speech because it reflected his own philosophical outlook and emphasis on economic power; in the years that followed, Wheeler took Lee under his wing. Then when the state Democratic Party restructured itself after the 1968 Democratic National Convention fall-out in Chicago, Illinois, Lee became the state Democratic Party's second vice chair, a move that he credited Wheeler with helping to "mastermind." Through the years, Lee continued to seek Wheeler's political advice on a range of issues. When Lee decided to run for lieutenant governor in 1976, he went straight to Wheeler since he was considered to be the "king-maker" for blacks seeking statewide political office. Although Wheeler felt Lee's plan to run for that particular

¹⁰⁶⁵*Of Counsel: The Magazine of North Carolina Central University School of Law*, http://law.nccu.edu/wordpress/img/uploads/2010/09/ofCounsel_Spring2010.pdf.

¹⁰⁶⁶Interview with Howard Lee by author.

office was premature because “North Carolina wasn’t ready for a black lieutenant governor,” when Lee ran Wheeler gave his full support; Lee ultimately lost the Democratic nomination in a primary run-off.¹⁰⁶⁷ Since that time, Lee has held several political offices, including becoming a state senator during the 1990s. In 2003, he became the chairman of the North Carolina State Board of Education.

In addition to Lee, Vernon E. Jordan fondly recalled how John Wheeler mentored him, "laid on hands," and opened up new leadership opportunities for him. In recognizing Jordan's leadership potential, Wheeler frequently sent the young leader to represent him as a stand-in on national commissions and boards that the banker served on. Wheeler provided Jordan with "an opportunity to meet people...but also to be a part of the discussion of issues at the national level that related to local problems." In his memoir *Vernon Can Read!* Jordan wrote that as their relationship grew, Wheeler became "an advisor and confidant" to him over the years. "I was never with John Wheeler," noted Jordan, "without being instructed and inspired" by "lessons in leadership." In 1965, in keeping with his concern to see that qualified blacks received top-level management positions, Wheeler asked SRC's executive committee to consider Jordan for the executive director's post. In 1977, Wheeler handpicked Jordan to succeed him as the second board chairman of the Atlanta University Center (AUC). Jordan later became executive director of the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) and from there the National Urban League. Jordan also enjoyed a successful business career in corporate America where he served on the board of directors at American Express; after the

¹⁰⁶⁷Interview with Howard Lee by author; *Paths toward Freedom: A Biographical History of Blacks and Indians in North Carolina by Blacks and Indians*; "The Tar Heel of the Week: Lee Brings Moderate Approach to Resources Post," *News and Observer*, 1977.

1992 presidential election, Jordan headed president-elect Bill Clinton's transition team, the first and only African American to hold such a position.¹⁰⁶⁸

In addition to Lee and Jordan, John Wheeler became a mentor to several other young and ambitious black leaders. Most notably in Durham, he mentored Nathan Garrett (the two also became tennis partners) and Wheeler put Garrett on the board of directors at M&F. The individual that perhaps stands out above others in relations to Wheeler's mentorship was the black militant Benjamin Sylvester Ruffin, Jr., the former Operation Breakthrough community organizer. In the late 1960s and 1970s, Ruffin became one of Wheeler's biggest critics and challenged his leadership within organizations such as the DCNA. Yet there was one important lesson that Ruffin received from Wheeler, which helped seal their relationship. In one particular instance, Ruffin "decided to take on the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs" and accused "the Committee of not being open enough" because of the continued practice of holding meetings behind-closed-doors in matters that concerned the entire black community. Ruffin eventually scheduled a meeting with Wheeler in the latter's M&F office to discuss the issue. At that moment, Ruffin had unintentionally become a party to the kind of behind-the-scenes tactics he so despised; without hesitancy, Wheeler reminded Ruffin of that very fact. Wheeler taught Ruffin that it was always unwise to enter into "controversial" meetings where important decisions had to be made without first caucusing supporters beforehand; in that way, it ensured certain measures would pass; the meeting "blew [Ruffin's] mind." Wheeler later helped him in a development project called Unity Village. Some blacks saw Wheeler's embrace of Ruffin as self-serving, as Wheeler feared his own political leadership would be

¹⁰⁶⁸Interview with Vernon Jordan by author, March 9, 2010, in the Southern Oral History Program; Vernon Jordan, Jr. with Annette Gordon-Reed, *Vernon Can Read!* (New York: Public Affairs, 2001), 77; Sermon given by Vernon E. Jordan, Jr. at Watts Street Baptist Church, Durham, North Carolina, January 17, 2010, 1-2, in author's possession; John Hervey Wheeler FBI Files, 1968.

eclipsed by the younger activist who had large appeal with the black masses; this was especially true during the height of the black power movement. To avoid this sort of drama, however, Wheeler refused to call yearly mass meetings to elect DCNA officers, as the organization's constitution had stipulated.¹⁰⁶⁹

Whatever Wheeler's motives for taking Ruffin under his wings, he nevertheless nurtured the young leader's potential; he appointed Ruffin to the board of directors at M&F. Once Jim Hunt, Jr. became North Carolina's governor in 1977, Wheeler assisted Ruffin in obtaining a position as one of the governor's staff members. Ruffin first became the director of the North Carolina Human Relations Council and then the governor's special assistant to minority affairs in 1978. From the perspective of some black leaders, they saw Ruffin's appointment as Wheeler's move to have a "direct pipeline into the governor's office." In some ways, Ruffin's appointment tempered his own bent towards militancy as he now worked from within the establishment to seek black inclusion in state government. Ruffin was later credited with increasing the number of African Americans in state government and particularly had a hand in increasing the number of black judges throughout the state from two to seventeen. After Ruffin's stint in the Hunt administration, he joined corporate American and went on to work for the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company. From there he joined RJR Nabisco as director of corporate affairs; he also served in that same capacity with R. J. Reynolds Tobacco. Like his mentor, Ruffin also became a leader in higher education. Most notably, Ruffin received an appointment to the Board of Governors of the University of North Carolina System in 1991. In 1998, he made history by becoming the board's first African American chairman; his leadership in higher education in North

¹⁰⁶⁹Interview with Nathan Garret by Brandon Winford, August 4, 2008.

Carolina was also representative of Wheeler's determination and insistence during earlier decades that African Americans enjoy power sharing at integrated institutions. As the UNC System's board chairman, Ruffin was a very vocal advocate on behalf of Historically Black Colleges and Universities operated by the state. Between 1998 and 2002, Ruffin helped steer a \$3.5 billion bond deal toward "construction and renovations on UNC and community college campuses. This was the largest bond referendum in the history of American higher education."¹⁰⁷⁰

Although John Hervey Wheeler always shied away from public recognition, there were opportunities to reflect on whether North Carolina and the region had achieved New South prosperity. The answer to that question would have proudly recognized the progress made, while at the same time pointing to the challenges—new and old—that lay ahead. In 2012, Charlotte, North Carolina had the honor of hosting the Democratic National Convention, with President Barack Hussein Obama receiving the party's nomination for a second term. The party's new but sobering battle cry was "Forward," rather than "Hope," or "Change." Obama told the audience that "We have been there, we've tried that, and we're not going back. We are moving forward, America." "The path we offer," Obama continued, "may be harder, but it leads to a better place, and I'm asking you to choose that future."¹⁰⁷¹

¹⁰⁷⁰Jo-Ann Robinson, "An Interpretive Biography of Benjamin S. Ruffin, the first African American Chair of the UNC Board of Governors: How Life Experience Informs Practice," Ph.D. Diss., North Carolina State University, 2009; "A Joint Resolution Honoring the Life and Memory of Benjamin Sylvester 'Ben' Ruffin, Jr.," North Carolina General Assembly 2007 Session, <http://www.ncleg.net/sessions/2007/bills/senate/pdf/s1183v1.pdf>; "Benjamin Ruffin Posthumously Higher Education," <http://www.northcarolina.edu/news/index...>; "Benjamin Ruffin Moves to Advisory Relationship Honored for Service to with RJR," RJ Reynolds Press Release, February 11, 1999; William V. "Bill" Bell, "Ben Ruffin: A Tribute," December 13, 2006, <http://www.indyweek.com/indyweek/ben-ruffin-a-tribute/Content?oid=1200059>; "Ben Ruffin, Former UNC and RJR Executive, Dies in Winston-Salem," *The Business Journal*, December 7, 2006; <http://www.bizjournals.com/triad/stories/2006/12/04/daily28.html>; "Benjamin S. Ruffin to Speak at UNCG Commencement May 19," UNCG Press Release, May 13, 2002, <http://www.uncg.edu/iss/ruffin.html>;

¹⁰⁷¹<http://www.npr.org/2012/09/06/160713941/transcript-president-obamas-convention-speech>.

As the nation's first African American president gave his acceptance speech in a city that also had a black mayor (now the Secretary of Transportation), one could not help but think about its meaning and significance. It was in 1964 that North Carolina sent its first black at-large delegate—John Hervey Wheeler—to Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Yet this go around, there was no denying that the party itself now reflected a greater degree of diversity as scores of ordinary Americans came from all walks of life. In so many ways, the state of North Carolina, the Democratic Party, even President Obama, owed those possibilities to Wheeler and other "North Carolinians who were freedom fighters." Vernon E. Jordan called them "courageous individuals in times when courage was in short supply in North Carolina and the South."¹⁰⁷² In July 2014, the nation will mark the fiftieth year since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and August marks the fiftieth anniversary of the Democratic National Convention held in Atlantic City. Let us not celebrate these monumental occasions with rest; let us not pass the moments by with a sense of victory—though victory we have. But let us wake up to the pleas of "Moral Mondays," led by activists both young and old from across North Carolina. Let us use them as an opportunities to remind ourselves that the "battle for freedom begins every morning."

¹⁰⁷²Speech by Vernon E. Jordan at Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina, January 17, 2010, speech in author's possession.

APPENDIX

JOHN HERVEY WHEELER LIFE TIMELINE

- 1908-----Born January 1, 1908, Kittrell College Campus, Kittrell, North Carolina (Vance County), grows up in Atlanta, GA.
- J. L. Wheeler resigns from Kittrell's presidency at the A. M. E. Church's General Conference in Norfolk, Virginia.
- John L. Wheeler comes to work for the N.C. Mutual Life Insurance Company. Wheeler is "ridiculed by his associates who felt that he was degrading his profession to engage in the insurance business."
- Mechanics and Farmers Bank is found begins operations in August.
- 1912-----J. L. Wheeler moves his family to Atlanta, GA and becomes assistant agency director in charge of Tennessee, Alabama, South Carolina, and Georgia?
- 1915-----Ku Klux Klan re-emerges in Stone Mountain, GA. The racist film *Birth of a Nation*, releases. The Association for the Study of Negro Life and History is founded by Dr. Carter G. Woodson and others.
- 1921-----Begins attending Morehouse Academy, a high school that is part of Morehouse College. Atlanta had no public high school for African Americans. Benjamin E. Mays, later president of Morehouse from 1940-1967, comes to the school as an instructor from 1921-1924 and teaches Wheeler high school Algebra.
- 1922-----High School at Morehouse Academy.
- 1923-----High School at Morehouse Academy.

- 1924----- City of Atlanta builds Booker T. Washington High School, its first public high school for blacks.
- High School at Morehouse Academy.
- 1925----- Graduates from High School, enters Morehouse College.
- 1926----- College Years (Morehouse College)
- 1927----- College Years (Morehouse College). In 1927-1928, Wheeler directs operations of the Morehouse College Library while the librarian was away studying.
- 1928----- College Years (Morehouse College)
- 1929----- Receives A.B. Degree in Business Administration (Summa Cum Laude) from Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. He has two job offers to teach in the music department at Tuskegee Institute for \$150 per month or to be a teller in the Mechanics and Farmers Bank in Durham, NC for \$60 per month. Chooses the job in Durham and moves there in the spring. Becomes a bank teller for the Mechanics and Farmers Bank. Once arriving in Durham, Wheeler becomes the roommate of Asa T. Spaulding, president of the N.C. Mutual from 1958-1967. The two live in the home of the widow of Dr. Aaron McDuffie Moore, founder of the N. C. Mutual.
- 1930----- Registers to vote. Blacks wanting to register to vote in Durham during this time have to wait for a long period of time and have to do a lot of reading.
- 1931----- Appointed as a board member of the Colored Library, later named the Stanford L. Warren Public Library.

- 1932-----Meets his future wife, Selena Wheeler for the first time.
- 1933-----Also Employed by the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company as Member of its Securities Investment Committee. *Hocutt vs. Wilson*, Challenges Segregated Higher Education.
- 1935-----Becomes a member on the Board of Trustees at Atlanta University and Morehouse College.
Marries the former Miss Selena L. Warren of Durham.
Durham Committee on Negro Affairs is founded in August.
- 1936-----First child, Julia Wheeler, was born on April 4, 1936.
- 1939-----Elected as cashier of Mechanics and Farmers Bank after an apprenticeship as assistant cashier.
- 1940-----Father-in-Law Stanford L. Warren dies.
- 1943-----Shortages of students during World War II force the North Carolina College Law School to schedule its classes at night.
Begins attending night classes at the N. C. College Law School.
- 1944-----Elected Vice-President of Mechanics and Farmers Bank.

Becomes a member of the Durham Recreation Advisory Committee.
- 1947-----Graduates law school from N.C. College with his LL.B. Degree in 1947.
Admitted to Practice Law in the Courts of North Carolina.
- 1949-----On May 18, 1949 black Durham school aged children and their parents file suit against the Durham Public School District alleging

that the “defendants are depriving the plaintiffs of their rights under the 14th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States in that the Negro school children are being denied the equal protection of the law, on account of their race and color, by discriminating against them in the public school facilities. Wheeler argues case for Equalized Educational Facilities in Durham, NC along with attorney M. Hugh Thompson and law firm Hill, Martin and Robinson of Richmond, VA. NCC Law students file suit aimed at getting them admitted to the School of Law at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, arguing that facilities there were better. Wheeler serves as a member of the suits legal counsel.

- 1950-----Receives the “Page I Award” from the Durham Press Club due to his achievements in civic and community progress and for his service in the fight for equal educational facilities in Durham, NC.
- 1951-----On January 26, 1951, Judge Johnson J. Hayes hands down his decision in the Durham Equalization of Education facilities case in favor of the plaintiffs deciding that the plaintiffs are being discriminated against on account of their race and are entitled to injunctive relief. UNC admits its first three African American students to its law school: Floyd McKissick, Harvey E. Beech, and J. Kenneth Lee.
- 1952-----C. C. Spaulding dies and Wheeler becomes President of the Mechanics and Farmers Bank, Durham, NC.
- 1953-----R.N. Harris becomes first African American to be elected to the City Council in Durham, NC.
- 1954-----*Brown vs. Board of Education* decision is handed down.

- 1955-----Admitted to practice law in U. S. Supreme Court.
- 1957----- Becomes Chairman of the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs (1957-1978). Father J. L. Wheeler dies on March 30, 1957.
- 1958-----Becomes a member of the Durham Redevelopment Commission.
- On May 12, 1958 a suit is filed on behalf of Jocelyn McKissick and her mother Evelyn McKissick against the Durham City Board of Education (*McKissick v. Durham City Board of Education*).
- Royal Ice Cream sit-in occurs in June.
- 1959-----On September 4, 1959, decision is handed down in the court case *McKissick v. Durham City Board of Education*
- 1960-----Admitted to practice law in U. S. Courts, Middle District of North Carolina and Circuit Court of Appeals for Fourth Circuit. Greensboro sit-ins occur on February 1, 1960.
- February 8, 1960 Durham College students begin sit-in protests
- 1961-----Becomes member of President John F. Kennedy's committee on Equal Employment Opportunity, headed by Vice-President Lyndon B. Johnson.
- 1962-----Holds Doctor of Humanities (L. H. D.) Honorary Degree conferred by Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee Institute, Alabama in 1962.
- Mechanics and Farmers Bank opens a branch office in Charlotte, NC; Dedicates building on March 4.

- 1963-----Elected President of the Southern Regional Council (1964-1969).
- Receives Doctor of Laws (LL.D.) Honorary Degree conferred by Johnson C. Smith University, Charlotte, NC in 1963.
- Serves as representative of the secretary of commerce to the International Trade Fair in Tripoli.
- Governor Terry Sanford establishes the North Carolina Fund to improve the economic conditions among the state's poor citizens.
- The North Carolina Fund is incorporated in July and Governor Terry Sanford names himself, Wheeler and two others as the incorporators. The term "war on poverty" is coined and becomes a national slogan. Wheeler is chosen by Governor Sanford to serve on the North Carolina Fund's Board of Directors. Wheeler becomes treasurer of the Board and Mechanics and Farmers Bank is chosen as the depository. Durham is chosen as the N.C. Fund's headquarters.
- 1964-----Appointed by President Lyndon B. Johnson to a team of Americans visiting the Republic of Germany to review progress under the Marshall Plan.
- Governor Terry Sanford names Wheeler as an at-large delegate from North Carolina to the National Democratic convention, the first black from North Carolina to be a delegate to the national convention.
- Civil Rights Act
- 1965-----Voting Rights Act.

- 1966-----Serves as a consultant and lecturer for the State Department in Egypt, Syria and Cyprus in 1966.
- 1967-----Holds Doctor of Humanities (L.H.D.) Honorary Degree conferred by Morehouse College, Atlanta, Georgia in 1967.
- Becomes president of North Carolina Low Income Housing Development Corporation.
- 1968-----Was once again a delegate from North Carolina to the National Democratic Convention.
- Becomes assistant treasurer to the state Democratic Party and later becomes financial director for the state party.
- President Johnson appoints Wheeler one of the incorporators of the National Housing Corporation authorized by the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968.
- Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated in Memphis, TN.
- 1970-----Holds Doctor of Humanities (L.H.D.) Honorary Degree conferred by Duke University, Durham, NC in 1970.
- Receives the Frank Porter Graham Civil Liberties Award in 1970 for his work in civil rights in the state.
- Becomes a Board member of the Soul City Foundation, Inc.
- 1971-----Holds Doctor of Humanities (L. H. D.) Honorary Degree conferred by North Carolina Central University, Durham, NC in 1971.
- 1976-----Sunday, January 4, 1976, formal dedication of John H. Wheeler Hall, Social Sciences

and Business Administration Building, is
named in his honor.

1978-----Dies on July 6, 1978. John H. Wheeler
Foundation is established.

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