

Desegregation of Virginia Education (DOVE) on the Eastern Shore: What We Learned When We Got There

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In 2008, Old Dominion University Libraries in Norfolk, Virginia formed a statewide organization known as the Desegregation of Virginia Education (DOVE) Project composed of librarians, archivists, historians, and private citizens with the primary goal “to identify, locate and preserve records that document Virginia’s school desegregation process.”¹ Beginning in the mid-1930s, Virginia had been involved in several state and federal court cases brought by African American citizens seeking equal treatment in public education, one of which, *Davis v. Prince Edward County*, was included in the landmark school desegregation case decided by the United States Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* in 1954. As it had done during the Civil War, Virginia willingly assumed a position of leadership among the southern states and crafted legislation, known as the “Massive Resistance Laws,” to oppose the court’s ruling. In 1958, Virginia’s governor invoked the Massive Resistance Laws and closed public schools in several localities ordered to desegregate by federal authority. This action affected thousands of Virginia public school students, white and black, until federal and state courts ruled Massive Resistance unconstitutional in early 1959, ushering in the sometimes bumpy three-decade ride to a racially desegregated public school system.² While surviving public records and newspaper accounts document much of this turbulent history, a great deal remains unrecorded, particularly the stories of how Virginia’s school desegregation process personally affected those who lived it.

¹ Old Dominion University Libraries, “Desegregation of Virginia Education (DOVE) Project,” Old Dominion University, <http://www.lib.odu.edu/specialcollections/dove/> (accessed August 16, 2012).

² Peter Wallenstein, *Cradle of America: Four Centuries of Virginia History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 341; 344-9; Brian J. Daugherty, “Keep on Keeping On: African Americans and the Implementation of *Brown v. Board of Education in Virginia*” in *With All Deliberate Speed: Implementing *Brown v. Board of Education**, eds. Brian J. Daugherty and Charles C. Bolton (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2008), 44-5.

In the spring of 2012, DOVE partnered with the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), the Virginia State Conference National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Urban League of Hampton Roads on a project entitled “School Desegregation: Learn, Preserve, and Empower.” The partnership created a traveling exhibit to encourage the donation of relevant documents as well as to obtain oral histories from those who lived during this period of time. The exhibit traveled to six venues in the spring and summer of 2012.

The first event was scheduled to be held in the town of Melfa, on Virginia’s Eastern Shore in April 2012. In preparation, DOVE volunteers conducted research for specific historical events related to school desegregation unique to the area. Yet attempts to find records or specific events related to school desegregation on the Eastern Shore proved quite challenging. Researchers contacted Eastern Shore libraries, historical societies, and colleges and drew on the resources in the DOVE catalog. Researchers also utilized the rich archival resources created by NAACP attorneys school desegregation lawsuits filed in several counties statewide.³ No significant court cases or lawsuits related to school desegregation on the Eastern Shore were discovered. Beyond a photograph of an African American school, and a few historic highway signs marking the sites of other long abandoned schools, state history resources contained scant sources as well. These findings caused DOVE researchers to ask the following: Was it possible, indicated by the scarcity of documented events and primary sources, the Eastern Shore had been immune from the turmoil associated with Virginia’s school desegregation or were other factors at work? The answer lies in understanding the unique culture of the Eastern Shore.

The two counties, which comprise Virginia’s Eastern Shore, Accomack, and Northampton, are geographically isolated from the rest of the state by two natural barriers, the Chesapeake Bay on its western banks, the Atlantic Ocean to its east, neatly enclosed by its border with Maryland to the North. It is a close-knit community of small towns and coastal villages, a peninsula nearly 75 miles in length, eight miles at its widest, encompassing, excluding tidal wetlands and offshore islands, roughly 700 square miles of inhabitable land. The current racial demographic of Eastern Shore residents is about 65% white, 33% African American, with a steadily growing Latino population.⁴ The first European settlers arrived in 1614, mostly refugees from the western settlements near Jamestown in search of fertile land on which to seek their fortune. Surviving public records reveal that a vibrant and diverse community soon developed, composed of white European farmers and landowners, indentured servants and slaves, as well as free born and

³ J. Douglas Smith, *Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 293-4; Wallenstein, *Cradle*, 349.

⁴ United States Department of Commerce, United States Census Bureau, “State and County QuickFacts” <http://www.quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/51000.html> (accessed August 16, 2012). Figures quoted are an average of the two counties based upon 2010 United States Census data.

manumitted Africans - many of whom became property owners in their own right.⁵ Numerous descendants of the early settlers still live on the Eastern Shore who, like their ancestors, remain largely dependent upon farming, fishing, or a combination of both to earn a living and who, just like inhabitants of any small town, welcomes outsiders with a combination of genial friendliness and a touch of polite wariness. Spared the effects of fire, natural disaster, and war that have destroyed many public records in other parts of Virginia, the Eastern Shore counties are fortunate to possess complete and unbroken court records dating from 1632 to present.⁶ Yet some records, particularly late nineteenth and early twentieth century school board records remain incomplete, if they exist at all. The reason for this according to the late Henry Wise, a former Eastern Shore County school superintendent during the 1920s, is these records “just became lost” or “were not considered important enough to keep.”⁷ Therefore what DOVE was able to learn about the development of public education on the Eastern Shore or of its segregated past prior to the event in Melfa, existed for the most part, in the memoirs of Mr. Wise.⁸ What DOVE discovered upon arriving in Melfa was that a rich history related to public school desegregation on the Eastern Shore did indeed exist; one that survives in the memories of those who lived during this period through stories and personal remembrances shared between the generations. This is where DOVE focused its attention.

Approximately thirty-five people attended the Melfa event, and much to DOVE’s surprise, few people donated documents about their experience. Yet, the event did provide a treasure trove of new information in other ways. DOVE and AARP volunteers, trained as oral history facilitators by George Mason University archivist Bob Vay, interviewed eight African American Eastern Shore residents ranging in age from 50 to 80. Those interviewed included former students who had either attended segregated schools or integrated all white schools, a former schoolteacher, a former school librarian, and a community activist. While from a sheer numerical standpoint, eight interviews may seem disappointing. However the value of these interviews belies their small number. They revealed a great deal of information about the history of Eastern Shore school desegregation previously unknown about the region. For example, respondents told stories of relatives who had donated land on which African American schools were built. Another told of an Eastern Shore African American educator, a woman mentioned in the Wise

⁵ William Crawford Samuel Adams, *Free Born: 350 Years of Eastern Shore African-American History : The Adams/Beckett Family* (Bowie, Md.: Heritage Books, 2000), 15-7; Susie M. Ames, "Law-in-Action: The Court Records of Virginia's Eastern Shore," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (1947): 177; Henry A. Wise, *Over on the Eastern Shore*, [1st ed. (Onancock, Va.,: Eastern Shore News, 1962), 39-40; Joseph Douglas Deal, *Race and Class in Colonial Virginia: Indians, Englishmen, and Africans on the Eastern Shore During the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Graham Hodges, Studies in African American History and Culture (New York: Garland, 1993), 207-12; 17-19.

⁶ Ames, "Law-in-Action," 177-8; Deal, *Race and Class in Colonial Virginia*, 207.

⁷ Wise, *Over on the Eastern Shore*, 52.

⁸ Henry A. Wise, *Yesteryears on the Eastern Shore, and Some Other Things*, [1st ed. (Onancock, Va.,: Eastern Shore News, 1968), 43-54; Wise, *Over on the Eastern Shore*, 39-43; 49-57.

memoirs, who had been a contemporary of the respondent's mother, who worked tirelessly to establish public schools for black children in Accomack County in the 1930s. The interviews revealed a great deal about cultural interaction between whites and blacks, and how some elements, such as scholastic sports, a recurring theme DOVE encountered in other interviews conducted throughout Virginia, were a tremendous social equalizer in an otherwise segregated society. Informal discussions revealed the names and locations of many African American schools not documented by state history resources, including some mention of schools supported by early twentieth century philanthropist Julius Rosenwald; four Rosenwald schools are known to have existed on the Eastern Shore.⁹

DOVE's experience on the Eastern Shore led to several conclusions, primarily that a paucity of primary sources certainly does not reveal an absence of history. Just because a great deal of the Eastern Shore's history, particularly its social history, has been greatly ignored, it is not lost. This rich history can still be recovered from the memories of its residents whose personal recollections can then provide numerous leads for follow up research. DOVE has concluded the body of knowledge on the Eastern Shore can be greatly increased by sharing what it has learned so far with local libraries and historical societies, and then collaborating with these agencies to encourage local community support to gather additional documentation such as documents languishing in attics and cellars, along with the recording of oral histories. Much of what DOVE discovered on the Eastern Shore in essence validated the project's reason for being. Subsequent follow up research post-Melfa indicated that several projects related to school desegregation were ongoing throughout Virginia, although they were not widely known. Such conditions illustrate the value of creating a central database statewide cataloging location and specific content of archival data related to Massive Resistance and school desegregation in Virginia as an aid to scholars, teachers and students, a fundamental long-term goal of the DOVE project. Without such efforts, the story of Virginia's Massive Resistance and quest for civil rights in public education, particularly on its Eastern Shore, will just quietly fade away, a victim of the natural consequence of time passing by.

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⁹ Virginia Center for Digital History at the University of Virginia, "Rosenwald Schools of Virginia," Virginia Center for Digital History, <http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/schools/index.html> (accessed August 16, 2012).

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