

WILLIAMSBURG AND RACE RELATIONS IN THE EARLY 1960'S
From The Heart, February 15, 2009
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During the 1950's I followed the emerging civil rights movement with great interest, but it had no immediate personal impact on me until I moved to Williamsburg in September 1960 to take up a faculty position at William and Mary. It was my first time living south of the Mason-Dixon Line and my first direct exposure to the realities of Jim Crow. Superficially, Williamsburg appeared to be a placid community, one that seemingly lacked the tensions and drama associated with civil rights struggles elsewhere in the South. But, as I learned over the next few months, the calm on the surface was misleading. It covered up widespread resentment among the town's African-Americans over numerous instances of racial discrimination. And it well illustrated the limited understanding among even well-intentioned whites of the feelings and desires of much of the black community.

Williamsburg in 1960 was a lily white town in a state that had been committed to "massive resistance" to school integration. Six years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the public schools remained rigidly segregated by race. The College of William and Mary was not open to African-Americans. The Greyhound bus terminal on North Boundary Street had separate white and colored rest rooms and drinking fountains. The Williamsburg Theater in Merchant Square, which was owned by Colonial Williamsburg, would, in theory, admit African-Americans, but, in conformity with the Virginia Public Assemblage Act, they had to be seated in a distinct roped off section. Virtually all African-Americans refused to subject themselves to such humiliation. If they wanted to

enjoy a movie in town, they could go to the drive-in movie on Richmond Road across from Ironbound Road.

The color line was drawn in a whole range of activities. Blacks were denied admission to hotels. They could not eat in most restaurants, nor could they use the bowling alley. With one or two minor exceptions churches remained black or white. So did medical care. Dr. J. Blaine Blayton, a much admired African-American, served the black community from an office/hospital on Prince George Street. There was no black dentist, and white dentists did not treat African-Americans, so dental care required a trip to Richmond or Hampton. Until the ratification of the 24th amendment in January 1964, Virginia's notorious poll tax continued to limit poorer folk from voting. This had, by intent, a disproportional impact on African-Americans.

My education into the realities of local race relations was enhanced by an organization known as the Williamsburg Area Interracial Study Group. Founded in the spring of 1959, it was composed of several locally prominent blacks and a number of liberally inclined whites. In 1962, when I chaired the group, it became the local affiliate of the Southern Regional Council. Our group was obviously a moderate organization, although given the climate of those times; many white people regarded us as being somewhat radical. Even to find a place to hold our meetings was no simple matter. Fortunately the priest at St. Bede's made a room available to us on a regular basis. What the group did do was to educate its members about the ideas, concerns, and realities of daily life of those on the opposite side of the racial divide. It seemed to me, incidentally, that our African-American members knew a lot more about the ways and interests of whites than whites knew of blacks.

Some of the things we did might seem to you to be simple or even banal. But one must understand the climate of the times. Racially integrated activities in Williamsburg were rare and viewed by much of the white community with great suspicion, even, for example, such a simple event as holding an interracial Christmas Party in 1962 at the First Baptist Church or the inclusion of an African-American friend at my son's birthday party. One of our projects was to try to get an African-American dentist to come to Williamsburg. Unfortunately we failed. Another was an attempt to have our group be allowed to send a representative to the Williamsburg Community Council. This was a voluntary organization composed of representatives of various local civic groups. But even this simple request was turned down. I was informed that "the time was not yet ripe" for such a step.

Our interracial organization may have had a very limited impact on Williamsburg in the early 1960's, but, for its members it was not without value. Through it, whites and blacks established friendships that probably would not have otherwise occurred, and our understanding of each others problems and concerns was clearly strengthened. My involvement in it certainly affected me personally as it opened my eyes to the widespread poverty in the African-American community and to the constant obstacles they faced in accomplishing the ordinary tasks of daily living. It also led me to shift my scholarly interests as a historian to matters of African-American history in an effort to better understand race relations in our multi-racial society. To be sure, much remains to be done to achieve justice and equality in race relations, but as my review of the early 1960's must suggest, we have come a long way towards that end.

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January 30, 2009