

CHAPTER 4

BLACK LIVES IN CHAPEL HILL AND THE ORIGINS OF THE ACTIVIST CORE, 1937-1960

It would be extremely misleading to leave the impression that black struggle and resistance took place primarily in the public arena, carried out by male activists through organizations they led. Moreover, no analysis of the larger political and cultural dynamics of a period can explain the actual unfolding of human events or the human condition. While these levels of interpretation are indispensable, to neglect deeper investigations into social and personal history is to view historical events from afar, that is, from a position of aloofness and complacency.

To be black in Chapel Hill was a constant struggle for survival, dignity, and human growth. In particular, families carried on this struggle in many subtle ways. As much as any organization or institution, the family was a training ground for dealing with the tension between accommodation and resistance that was part of everyday life. Work, school, and church were also particularly significant locations of training for life. And finally, there were the streets—the block where black men hung out, the stone walls and hot dog joints where the school kids gathered, and Granny Flack’s front porch. It was in all of these social spaces that the older generation tried to live and provide a foundation for their children, and where the younger generation came of age.

Focusing on the actual lives of black people in Chapel Hill also helps explain why the freedom movement of the 1960s was not initiated or led by black adults. For without the support of unions or civil rights organizations, black working people in Chapel Hill had to defend their rights with only the aid of friends and family. For the most part, it was all they could do to keep their heads above water, and often, the only way to do that was to rely heavily on white goodwill. Although they were not slaves, there was a constant pressure to conform to standards of conduct that met the approval of employers and white authority generally. Even those who did not develop habits of deference like those Elizabeth Cotton disliked in her mother could do little more than stand up for themselves.

Black youths, however, did not have either their parents’ overwhelming responsibilities or their caution. And while youths of Elizabeth Cotton’s generation could only conceive of escaping Jim Crow by leaving the South, black youths coming of age in the 1950s sensed that perhaps the South could be changed. Growing criticism and opposition to segregation, as well as the defensive reaction of the white South, were widely known facts, and they indicated the weakening of Jim Crow. And while the youths may not have understood exactly how the shifting geo-political forces of history, including their

own people's struggle, were creating new opportunities for black people in the 1950s, they felt it. They felt the opportunity. And they acted on their dreams. Yet exactly **how** these youths developed the idea that segregation could be challenged, that the time for patience and silent suffering was over, that they should lead, and that direct confrontation should be their strategy is not well understood. It is to these questions that we now turn.

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Jim Crow was more than anything else a method of social control. Just as slave masters had designed a set of rules, punishments, and rewards to preserve the system of slavery, established authority in the South designed methods of social control to preserve black subjugation despite emancipation.

Although violence against African Americans and their allies was employed to establish and maintain Jim Crow, law and custom became increasingly important mechanisms of control.¹ In particular, every effort was made to induce African Americans to become resigned to their place in society. As W. E. B. Du Bois wrote in 1909:

There are ever those about [the Negro] whispering: "You are nobody; why strive to be somebody? The odds are overwhelming against you—wealth, tradition, learning and guns. Be reasonable. Accept the dole of charity and the cant of missionaries and sink contentedly to your place as humble servants and helpers of the white world."²

At the same time, Jim Crow placed restrictions on African Americans to limit their options. Just as slave masters made it illegal for slaves to learn to read in order to limit their freedom, segregationists tried to limit the kind of education available to African Americans in the South to a standard in keeping with their "place." And in the school of life, segregationists always tried to teach African Americans that their "place" was inferior and it was hopeless to rebel.

From the point of view of established authority, therefore, organizations like the CIO that tried to build black-white solidarity in defense of workers' rights could not be tolerated. And while such organizations inevitably developed out of

¹For an insightful discussion of the dynamics of social control and their relationship to mass democratic protest see the Introduction to Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). See, for example on page xi: "A far more permanent and thus far more desirable solution to the task of achieving domestic tranquility is cultural—the creation of mass modes of thought that literally make the need for major additional social changes difficult for the mass of the population to imagine.... Though for millions of Americans the fact is beyond imagining, such cultural dynamics describe politics in contemporary America."

²W.E.B. Du Bois, *John Brown*, American Crisis Biographies, ed. E. P. Oberholtzer (Philadelphia: n.p., 1909), 390; quoted in Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion* (New York: Humanities Press, 1966), 107.

the needs of dominated peoples, it was exceptionally difficult for them to survive and maintain their democratic principles.

In the 1950s, in Chapel Hill, there is no evidence that any militant grassroots organizations existed, or even that traditions of organized resistance survived from earlier periods.³ How, then, did black youths learn to rebel? And can it be said that the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s was linked in any way to earlier efforts to enlarge black freedom?

Just as black individuals had to accommodate to survive in the Jim Crow South, black institutions had to accommodate. African American youths did not necessarily learn to think for themselves during the 1950s from black schools and teachers, black churches and ministers, or black families. Certainly, some black youths learned to question **white authority**, and all were at least taught to survive it, in these black institutions. But black youths were not often encouraged to question **black authority** in these settings. And since these institutions had to accommodate to white power to survive, and black leaders had to depend on the goodwill of powerful white people to gain concessions for the black community, and black parents did not want their children getting in trouble with the law or lynched, there was a tendency for the training that black youths got in these institutions to be about how to survive and succeed in a white-dominated society. And yet the black youths who initiated the lunch counter protests in 1960 defied such training. How did this happen?

It turned out that the young people who initiated the protests in 1960, at least in Chapel Hill, were not those young people who passively accepted the leadership of black institutions, let alone the authority of white institutions. They were not the ones who did everything by the book. Some thought of themselves as rebels, renegades, or radicals. A good many were deep thinkers and risk-takers with relatively broad experience. These youths became the local activist core of the Chapel Hill Civil Rights Movement.

Part of what these youths drew on to develop their rebellious outlook were the traditions of resistance and solidarity embedded in African American culture. Even though accommodation was the norm within the black community, much of it was no more than a realistic adjustment of behavior to overwhelming white power. As such, it was not at odds with traditions of resistance. And as the

³This statement is not based on exhaustive research. It is possible that some of the families of the black youth civil rights activists had links to the Chapel Hill CIO, although none of the activists interviewed mentioned any such influence. It is also possible that some of the youths may have met, or heard a speech by, Floyd McKissick before 1960, or they may have known about the NAACP Youth Councils that existed in other cities. Linkages to previous, or then current, traditions of organizational resistance do not seem to have been prominent factors in the social experience of those interviewed. However, some activists were not interviewed, and not all of those interviewed were asked the question.

youths matured, they found certain individuals who encouraged them to rebel. One such person was Granny Flack.

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Although the schoolbooks provided to black students offered only a very limited and biased account of black history, there was no way that Jim Crow could completely rob black children of their freedom legacy. Braxton Foushee was a case in point. Eventually, he became very active in the Civil Rights Movement, but first, Braxton had to learn a great deal about how to struggle for freedom. In his case, much of this learning took place outside of school.

“Probably the most fondest memory I had was Church Street,” Braxton recalled:

There was an old lady—Grandma Flack. That’s where I learned all my history—slavery.

Braxton was small, perhaps five or six, when Mrs. Tempe Flack began teaching him. He and many other children would spend their days with the old woman on Church Street while their mothers were at work:

We used to sit on her porch late in the afternoon.... She’d always talk to us about slavery. Say, “Son, this is what it used to be like when I was growing up....” [Her father] was sold and she never saw him again....

Granny Flack explained to the children how the slaves had resisted, the methods they used, and how they carried on the struggle for generations:

[She told us how the slaves used] religious songs, and how they sang them. And if someone was stealing something out of the big house, how they would let the people know that The Man was coming back at that time.... They were warned by songs. It was a tradition in the slave quarters that you had these messages that were tied up in hymns ... that they just passed down from generation to generation....

These stories, and Granny Flack herself, made a deep impression on Braxton. He felt that it was from her that he learned his people’s true history. And what made the greatest impact was her endorsement of resistance to white power, her confidence that a new day was coming, and the example of her own perseverance:

I reckon that what impressed me the most was her survival, how she lived through all of that. And, her main word, her theme, was that you gotta fight for what you want. And she told us our day would be comin’. And, “There are gonna be times, son, when you’re gonna have to stand up to the master.” And, in a sense, when the sixties rolled around, that’s

exactly what we did. I mean, that was a vivid portrayal of standin' up against the master, being the white man.

Just a few years before the lunch counter protests began in Chapel Hill, Granny Flack's health finally began to fail. By this time the children who used to sit on her front porch while their mothers worked had become young men and women. And even as they moved to break with traditions of deference and accommodation to segregation, they also carried on the traditions of community solidarity and respect that had enabled black people to survive Jim Crow. Now they took care of Granny Flack.

Braxton recalled that taking care of Granny Flack was something like a community project:

Everybody in the neighborhood took care of her, you know, when she got really old and couldn't do for herself. We'd build fires. Somebody had to go by and build her fire. Somebody had to cook for her. Somebody had to cut her wood. And all that continued until she died.⁴

Mrs. Tempe Flack died in 1958, but more than thirty years after her death, strong memories of her persisted among those for whom she cared. It seemed she represented something of great importance to the community, and to children in particular. She was the memory of people—history.

The history she passed on to the young was more than oral tradition. She embodied the essence of that history herself. It was flesh and blood, her house, her spinning wheel, her "old well." Even more, it was working until she could not, caring for the next generation, sharing her pain, her hope, what she knew because she had seen it with her own eyes.

Such history has seldom been recorded. To those who write the memory of nations—that is, the national myths created in service to national elites—such history is either irrelevant or subversive. But it is not possible to understand those young people who led the Chapel Hill freedom movement in 1960 without understanding why they cherished the memory of Grandma Flack, or why they built her fires, cooked her meals, and cut her wood when she got too old to do for herself.

Gloria Mason Williams, another Civil Rights activist, called Grandma Flack "a lady of wisdom... steadfast and strong...":

If you were confused, Granny Flack would set you straight. She was everybody's grandmother.... Sometimes you wouldn't feel right if it was a bad day and you went by and didn't see her.... If you saw her it made all

⁴All preceding quotes about Granny Flack are from Braxton Foushee, Interview by author, 15 March 1991, Chapel Hill, tape recording in the possession of the author.

the difference in the world.... She was truthful, genuine, you knew she was concerned. She never told you anything that was wrong... all things about life... how to be responsible, and make it, and grow up.... She was a historical person, a legend in the community.⁵

In the long reach of her life, Granny Flack embodied the black struggle for freedom and the kind of caring community that was the goal of the struggle. In this sense, she was a formidable threat to segregation.

The story of Granny Flack, therefore, stands for more than what she meant to Braxton Foushee and Gloria Williams. It also stands as a symbol and an example of how traditions of resistance and solidarity were passed on to black youths in Chapel Hill.

At the same time, these youths were constantly exposed to traditions of submission as well. Parents told them stories about lynchings. Parents bent under the daily humiliations of Jim Crow and took it out on their families and themselves. Teachers accommodated. Preachers accommodated. And so, the young people had to decide which aspect of their culture to embrace.

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Often, the way they came to their own conclusions had a great deal to do with places they congregated with their friends to talk, social spaces that were free from white domination and black adult control. It was in such gathering spots that the youths forged their own traditions, building upon what their elders had established, but taking it a step further. One such place in Chapel Hill was known as “the Rock Wall,” or simply “the Rock.”

The Rock Wall had a significant history. During David Lowery Swain’s tenure as president of the university, he put professor Elisha Mitchell, who was from Connecticut, in charge of building rock walls around the campus. The walls were needed to keep pigs and other animals from roaming at will. Rocks were plentiful, and there was an abundance of slave labor to carry out the work. It was in this way that the tradition of rock masonry began among African Americans in Chapel Hill.⁶

Building the rock walls required a tremendous amount of labor and took several years. The work also demanded a high level of skill. Therefore, it was not surprising that as rock walls became a fashion in later years, only Chapel Hill’s well-to-do families could afford to have such walls built. On the other hand, a good many slaves became skillful masons, and after slavery they were able to continue their trade, building additional rock walls for the university and for

⁵Gloria Mason Williams, Interview by author, 12 April 1991, Chapel Hill, tape recording in the possession of the author.

⁶James Vickers, *Chapel Hill: An Illustrated History* (Chapel Hill: Barclay Publishers, 1985), 56.

private families. Even after Jim Crow forced many black workers out of skilled trades, the black rock masons of Chapel Hill were able to hold their ground.⁷ And so, the tradition of building with rock among African Americans embodied both the oppression and the resistance of black workers.

During the 1930s, houses in the black community were often built with unpainted siding, no insulation, and no underpinning. The community itself was a maze of dirt roads and dead ends. Mrs. Fannie Bradshaw worked for a white man who had a house built for her on the corner of Cotton Street and McDade in Pottersfield. For years, she and her daughters worked for the white man to pay for that house. In the early 1940s, when Atlas Cotton was building a house near Mrs. Bradshaw, he had to blast away a lot of rock. And he gave some of the rock to Mrs. Bradshaw and her husband so that they could build a rock wall in front of their house. Just as the walls around the university had been built to control stray animals, Mrs. Bradshaw hoped to keep people from walking through her yard. Mrs. Bradshaw's husband and a boarder built the wall in front of the house along McDade Street. Mrs. Bradshaw herself used some of the rock to build steps up to her front door, and eventually she was able to buy enough additional rock to underpin the house.⁸

The wall served its purpose of keeping people out of the yard, but it had an unexpected result as well. As soon as it was built, people began sitting on it. Older folks coming up the hill would stop and sit for awhile. Neighbors would come by to chat and sit on the wall. As time passed, however, the Rock Wall became a favorite gathering place for young people. There were several teenagers in the house, including Carol Purefoy and Alton Purefoy. They were all popular, and their friends would come by, boys and girls, and sit on the wall under the shade of a big tree during the day and under the street light at night.

It happened that Harold Foster lived around the corner, William Cureton up the street, the Geer boys and the Foushee brothers nearby. These boys became friends, and as the 1940s passed into the 1950s, they spent more and more time hanging out at the Rock Wall. Mostly, the young men talked about their dates, sports, movies, and other social things. But as the decade of the fifties waned and a new day began to break, they sat on the Rock wall *late* into the night, and increasingly their conversation turned to more serious issues like religion, their futures, and freedom.

When the Civil Rights Movement hit, these same young people met at the Rock Wall to talk through the events of the day and decide what to do next. In this way, they took what their parents' generation had built and turned it to their

⁷Walker Perry, for example, with whom the author worked on a racial discrimination grievance, was the first black supervisor of a skilled trades group, the brick masons, at the university.

⁸Willie Mae Patterson, Interview by author, 8 January 1995, Chapel Hill, tape recording in the possession of the author.

own purposes. And yet they also continued the long tradition of struggle and self-determination that was embodied in the wall itself.

Both Granny Flack's front porch and the Rock Wall were staging areas for the black youth revolt of the 1960s in Chapel Hill. The Rock Wall actually figures prominently in the story of the movement. It was a place that was both physically and socially free. It was a space controlled by the young black men of Pottersfield. And as will be seen, such spaces were critical to the development of the movement.⁹

No less important than spaces where the youths could forge their own traditions were the influence of people like Granny Flack who passed on the wisdom and traditions of the past to the youth. And while Granny Flack herself does not figure prominently in the story of the Chapel Hill movement that follows, there were numerous people who nurtured the rebelliousness of youth in their own way, some with words, some by example.

For the rest of this chapter, then, let us turn to an examination of the lives of some of the people who played a key role in the Chapel Hill movement. In particular, I have focused on the process by which a friendship group of teenage males became the leading group within the activist core of the Chapel Hill movement. My account focuses on certain individuals, including members of the Mason family, William Cureton, James Brittan, Harold Foster, Marie Roberson, and Stella Farrar. In part, these persons have been chosen because of the significant roles they played, but there are others who were equally important in the movement.¹⁰ What follows, therefore, is not meant to be definitive or comprehensive. Rather, my aim is to open windows on the process of how the freedom movement grew out of black lives in Chapel Hill.

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The growing of the movement took place silently in the lives of individuals, like seeds unfolding under the earth. In Chapel Hill, it was not a conscious process. The young people involved did not *intend* to build a movement at first,

⁹The concept of "free spaces" has been developed by Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte, *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986). For a discussion of how African Americans created subtle "paths of resistance" through the "landscape of domination" that constituted the necessity of their lives see, for instance, Robin D. G. Kelley, "We Are Not What We Seem": Rethinking Black Working-Class Opposition in the Jim Crow South," *Journal of American History* 80, no.1 (June 1993). For a useful, though backward looking, discussion of the question of resistance by oppressed peoples in the South, both black and white, see David Thelen, *Paths of Resistance: Tradition and Dignity in Industrializing Missouri* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

¹⁰Some of the leading activists who are not written about here in any detail include James Foushee, Charles Foushee, Hilliard Caldwell, Peter Leake, Quinton Baker, Rosemary Ezra, and John Dunne. Except for Pat Cusick, I have not written much about either white activists or older adult activists since my focus is on black youth. Also, as is true for all historians, I have had to use the sources that were available to me, and I have been limited by considerations of space.

and their associations did not revolve around political organizations or activities. Nor was it a visible process to observers outside the community. Nevertheless, this process of preparation and gathering can be documented as it unfolded in response to concrete historical conditions. The youths observed, felt, and understood these changes to varying degrees. Because of the particular experiences of their growing years, however, they all felt called to act. Increasingly they saw themselves—as individuals, friendship groups, and families—standing out from their peers in ways associated with leadership and rebellion. And when news of the Greensboro lunch counter protests reached Chapel Hill, they knew that the challenge was theirs.

To a great extent, the movement in Chapel Hill grew from families and from friendship groups. Certain families stand out for the number of activists they produced. Among these are the Foushee family and the Mason family. What follows is a questioning of how activism developed in the Mason family and in the lives of James Brittan, Harold Foster, William Cureton, Stella Farrar, and Marie Roberson.

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Matthew Mason was born to a sharecropping family in nearby Durham County in 1911. He began “ploughing with a mule” at eight, and had to stop school after third grade when his father got sick. At thirteen he went to work at the Liggett and Meyer tobacco factory in Durham, where he worked for three years. By the time Matthew was sixteen his father was dead and he was the main support of the family. In 1927 they moved to Chapel Hill where he got a job at Harry’s Grill, eventually becoming a waiter. Two years later he married Fannie Lou Strowd, a young woman from Chatham County. In 1934 students at the Phi Delta Theta fraternity house asked him to work for them. Since they were offering \$12.00 a week and he was only making \$7.00 a week at Harry’s, he took the job. He worked there from 1934 until he retired in 1972. He also worked a second job at the Hollywood Cab Company.¹¹

Sally Baldwin Strowd, Mrs. Mason’s mother, lived with the Masons in Chapel Hill after the marriage. She had attended Shaw University in Raleigh at a time when it was unusual for a black woman to go to college. She was a former school teacher, having taught in the Baldwin School House, a one-room school in Chatham County.

Although her sister went to college, Fannie Lou Strowd married Matthew Mason at a young age and stayed at home to raise her six children. She worked taking in laundry from the fraternity boys as well. She bore and raised two girls and four boys between 1931 and 1944, and she died in 1963.

¹¹Matthew Mason, Interview by author, 6 February 1993, Chapel Hill, tape recording in the possession of the author.

Gloria, the oldest girl, was born in 1934. She recalled that she did not feel poor growing up in Chapel Hill, partly because most people she knew owned their own homes.

I guess we were a poor family, but I never knew it. I never knew I was poor until I was grown and realized what poverty was.... We were never hungry, and we had clothing, and I grew up feeling that I was rich. And my father and mother were both very religious, and we grew up in the church.... And we were taught to care for each other as sisters and brothers.... The family meant a lot. And my father's mother lived next door to us, so I had two grandmothers. And I had a host of aunts and uncles. And they had the right to discipline us just as much so as my own parents did. So I was enriched with a wonderful family.¹²

She remembered that there were a lot of benefits to her family because of her father's job at the fraternity. The fraternity boys would drop by "whenever they wanted," sometimes bringing their dates to visit, or coming to play the piano, and sometimes bringing gifts. In particular Gloria remembered a gift she received as a child: "The first pet I ever had, I remember one of my father's boys gave me a black cocker spaniel in a basket with a red ribbon on it and I thought that was the prettiest thing I'd most ever seen in my life."

In fact, in addition to the relatively good wages Mr. Mason brought home from the fraternity, he also brought home extra food for the rest of the community, particularly during the Depression. Moreover, the fraternity made him an honorary brother and contributed substantial funds to help his children go to college. This was one of the main reasons Matthew Mason stayed at his job:

I stayed so long because they was always good to me and I ain't never wanted for nothing. If I'd ask for anything I would get it. That's why. They was good to me, nice to me (laughs). That's why I stayed there.... Like I told you, when people, at that time a lot of 'em, the children and different families, you know, need some food or something to eat, I'd ask the fraternity—"Let me take my friends some food," or something else. They'd give it to me. Let me take it to 'em. I would be a fool to run away from there, wouldn't I (laughs)?

To some observers it might seem that Mr. Mason's job required a great deal of bowing and scraping and was inherently humiliating. Indeed, Mr. Mason was no outspoken critic of segregation or community activist. Like nearly all African Americans in Chapel Hill he spent most of his time working. His job title of "houseboy" was demeaning, and he was, after all, a black man servant to a bunch of rich white boys. Nevertheless, while there was undoubtedly a good

¹²Gloria Williams interview.

deal of patronizing in the good will of some Phi Delt brothers, it appears that there was much genuine respect as well. For apparently Matthew Mason bent to segregation only as a practical matter, while at the same time he exercised a genius for drawing the young white men across the color line into true human relationships. In this way “Dr. Reet,” as he was affectionately called by the fraternity brothers, transformed his “menial” position into a base from which to challenge Jim Crow with human kindness.

A close inspection of the influences of Matthew Mason on his children reveals similar patterns of resistance to Jim Crow within a framework of accommodation. One has to ask, to begin with, why this “houseboy,” who was never active in political or civic affairs in Chapel Hill (except for faithful attendance at PTA meetings), had three children who were leaders in the freedom struggle of the 1960s. Thomas, at fifteen, was one of the instigators of the first lunch counter protest at the Colonial Drugstore. Mary, then a student at North Carolina College in Durham living in Chapel Hill, was one of the first elected leaders of the movement in 1960. And Gloria, then twenty-six, worked behind the scenes as an organizer and facilitator. When asked why he had three children in such prominent roles Mr. Mason replied simply, “My other three children weren’t here.”

Undoubtedly, Mr. Mason believed his children were leaders. And when asked if Mary was the kind of person who would stand up for her rights he replied, “Oh yeah, she would stand up for her rights. All of them would, far as that’s concerned....” However, when prodded about an incident mentioned by Gloria concerning a racist white neighbor, Mr. Mason told a story that revealed much about his own influence on his children.

After getting married “down in the bottom,” the Masons bought a house on West Rosemary Street on the edge of the black community. A white man named Cheshire lived across the street:

Oh, that’s the man I told you had the store across the street. That man didn’t have no children.... He didn’t have no children, you know. And [the hedges in my yard] was growed up pretty high, you know. And he told me he wanted to let ‘em grow up higher so he couldn’t see the children playing over there in the yard, you know—He’s a kind of funny old white man—so he couldn’t see the children growin’ over there in the yard. And I cut the hedges **all** the way down, real low, so he could see ‘em **good**, yeah.

Gloria credits her father as a strong influence and she gives her mother a great deal of credit as well.

My mother stayed at home, but she took in home laundry. And she raised us. And she exposed us to more than one religion. She also kept up with

the things that were happening, like the fashions, and the trends, and the changes in times. She was an excellent mother.

It was Mrs. Mason who read a great deal and kept her children abreast of what was going on in the town and throughout the country. They had an “old timey radio” and they would listen to the news. Gloria’s mother introduced the children to black history and shared old family documents with them. She made them aware that things were not right and things were not supposed to be that way, and that times had to change. As the events of the 1950s unfolded, Gloria’s mother interpreted the Supreme Court decision of 1954 and the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 to her children and she encouraged them to be prepared to do their part. Gloria recalled:

And that’s what I was tellin’ you that my mother kept up with. She would sit down there and try to give us what she thought the implications of those decisions were and all of that, and that we would have a role to play, that somebody had to take some leadership responsibilities.

Gloria believed that it was the support she got from her family that enabled her to be a rebel.

I thought the world was mine and I thought that it was there for me to venture out and that the best should come. I was always looking for the best. And I read with intensity. It was nothing for me to read a hundred books in a year.... I’ve always been a real outspoken person... one of the renegade children.... My dad used to tell me he didn’t think I was gonna live till I got fifteen.... So I began to believe it. And when I woke up and I was fifteen I said, “Gee whiz, I’m still living.” Whatever was on my mind, regardless if it was my principal, or my teacher, or anybody in the store, I could not live with myself until I spoke my point of view. And so, even though that there was segregation I didn’t respect it that much because I sort of said what I wanted to the people and did what I wanted to do.... And everything that was radical I caused.... I would think up ideas for the rest of the children to do....

Although Gloria could not recall any really hurtful experiences resulting from segregation, she was certainly aware of the way black people were treated as inferiors. And the rebelliousness of her youth that was frequently directed against traditional black authority figures like her father, teachers, or preacher, was also directed against segregation. In the case of Mr. Cheshire, action took a collective form.

Gloria’s brother Matthew, chauffeured Mr. Cheshire, who lived across the street and owned a laundry. And Matthew told Gloria, “Yes, I’ll chauffeur him. I’ll chauffeur him in West Hell and leave him.” And sometimes Matthew would get the children together and they would go across the street to bother Mr. Cheshire.

Since he did not want to see the children at play, sometimes with white friends, they decided they did not want him for a neighbor. So they would go over and sing songs, and the other neighbor children would join in. That sang “Bah Bah Blacksheep,” “The Black National Anthem,” “The Star Spangled Banner,” and other songs.¹³

Mary, who was also involved in these raids, remembered that Mr. Cheshire’s laundromat was segregated, and some of the older boys including Matthew would paint over the man’s “white” and “colored” signs at night. Cheshire would repaint the signs, and the young men would again paint them over. Finally, in 1953, these tactics forced the integration of the laundromat. Mary recalled that at first the whites didn’t use it, but after awhile they came back.¹⁴

Mary, born in 1939, came of age in the early 1950s and considered Gloria her “second mother.” She became a tomboy while Gloria was more “the young lady.” While she remembered that the black public schools taught them to become “strong citizens and responsible persons,” segregation was not openly discussed. It was outside the school system that she became aware, reading at the university library and experiencing discrimination directly trying to get summer jobs.

It was during my teenage time that I realized how much racism did exist and just how ugly it really was. And I think it was the first time that it really touched me is when I attempted during my summer breaks to go out and get summer employment. And we knew quite a few of the white children there in Chapel Hill because we lived there on Rosemary Street, which was the last house in the black community on that street and the beginning of the white section. So there were children next to us and across the street that we had associated with quite a bit.

Unlike many black children who knew few whites, Mary was in a good position from an early age to learn about the way segregation affected job opportunities. And as she experienced discrimination first hand, she felt deeply hurt.

And my first experience was to go to the Roses 5 & 10 and apply for a summer job. And I was told “No,” and simply because they did not hire blacks. And that to me was very disappointing and it hurt deep inside. And then I realized what racism really was for the very first time. I was sixteen at that time.

¹³ibid.

¹⁴Mary Mason Boyd, Interview by author, 18 April 1991, Chapel Hill, tape recording in the possession of the author.

Following this experience, a kind of group dynamic developed each summer when Mary and other teenage friends who had also experienced discrimination would “test the system.” It was at this time that Mary decided that she would always try to fight “in my own way, some how” to break those barriers.

As a group of us teenagers, each summer, after having realized that you couldn’t always get jobs anywhere—and basically the only things that you could do was baby-sit, for the girls, I don’t really remember what any of the young boys did except when they became maybe eighteen, nineteen maybe wait tables—because we did realize this, we would test the system sometimes and go to places like the bus station and some of the restaurants in town and just test to see how far we could go. And go in on the white side, sit in the bus station on the white side, or go to the restaurants and drink out of the water fountain that said “white.” But we were always, you know, deterred from that and told that we were not allowed, and sometimes we were threatened. Sometimes racial slurs were made.

I think during that time is when things became instilled in me that there would be something greater to come, and it was gonna be a struggle, and, you know, we would have to really work for it.

From 1955 on, Mary and her friends would test the system. Usually, Mary’s younger brother Thomas would be involved. According to Mary, Thomas was a step ahead of most children in terms of racial awareness and assertiveness: “[He always had a] lot of depth, insight, and perception.... He would always be a little bit more aggressive and would recognize a lot for a young child, even as much, or moreso, than I did so far as racism was concerned.... We were sort of radicals, you might say, in that day.”

Also Thomas’s best friend, James Brittan, would come along sometimes, and Esphur Foster, perhaps with her younger brother Harold, “who was a lot like Thomas,” and Delores Jones, Ida Battle, and Delores Harris.

The testing of segregation by young people such as these was a learning process, a process of their rite of passage into the adult world, and closely connected to the formation of their identities. Like all black children growing up under segregation, they became more deeply aware of “how ugly” racism really was as they began to experience it more directly in their own lives. Unlike other generations, they developed this appreciation at a time when segregation was being challenged and they could begin to feel the coming movement gathering itself.

Both the depth of racism and the possibility of challenging it became most clear to those young people who were able and willing to challenge authority. These were not the young people whose main concern was being acceptable and successful in a white world. They were not the aspiring Booker T.

Washingtons of Chapel Hill. They were far more akin in spirit to W. E. B. Du Bois and Margaret Walker.¹⁵

When black youths “tested the system,” they learned about racism in ways other young people did not. And just as importantly, they learned the way the system worked, its strengths and weaknesses. They also learned about themselves, for in many ways they were testing themselves, developing their resolve, their understanding, their skill. And they were finding each other, the ones who could be counted on, who felt the same way. They were, in fact, building a movement, although they may not ever have been fully conscious of that process.

For those who became engaged in this process of “doing something about it,” that became the standard by which they measured all people, institutions, and beliefs. In particular, the moral leadership of the black community came under their scrutiny.

Like a number of the rebellious young people, Mary Mason developed many concerns about her religious faith and the church. She wondered how God could be who the church said he was and allow such hatred and discrimination toward black people. She knew, even as a child, that a person of any white ethnic group could come to America and eventually be accepted and respected, but that this was not true for an African American. So she questioned whether or not God was a racist.

Unlike many of the other young people her age, who she felt had similar questions but were afraid to say anything, Mary Mason asked her minister about this. She was in ninth grade.

Rev. J.R. Manley was the new minister at First Baptist Church, and Mary Mason liked him and had a high opinion of him:

So far as the religious side of my life went there were a lot of questions and there were never any answers. And I thought, well finally, at last there’s someone that would have some of these answers.

And I remember on one occasion I was at church, and church was over, and I thought I’d wait, and I had this one question that I wanted to ask a minister or someone who I thought would know a little bit more about God, the meaning of God, where He came from, and what have you. And I asked him this question, and he was appalled. He asked me, “Why—how dare you ask such a question? You don’t ever question God, you just believe him.” He said, “I’m really disappointed in you and I think I’ll just have to talk with your parents.” And so, he called my parents,

¹⁵For a discussion of what kind of people initiate mass democratic movements see Goodwyn, xix: “Democratic movements are initiated by people who have individually managed to attain a high level of personal political self-respect. They are not resigned; they are not intimidated. To put it another way, they are not culturally organized to conform to established hierarchical forms.”

matter of fact he came by, and my mother being the person that she was... told him that she was disappointed in him 'cause he was a leader in the community and a religious person.... And if I had that question to ask, then he should have some answers to give me. Even if it was to the point that he did not know, then he should have been man enough to say, "Well, I don't know," but not reprimand me for asking a question that I felt that I needed to ask.

Mary believed she learned to be her own person, think for herself, and make her own decisions from her mother. And increasingly, a number of young black men and women were developing similar temperaments. And as they learned to live such lives, they were, in fact, developing both the inner strength and the bonds of solidarity that would enable them to carry forward the democratic struggle for self-determination.

Thomas Mason, Mary's younger brother remembered that he became part of a group of male friends with rebellious attitudes. "Despite age differences, those who stood out hung together." ¹⁶ They were intellectuals in the "sense of challenging the given norm." They were "critical thinkers," tended to be good students, and read a lot. In this way, they broadened their horizons.

The black schools, of course, were under the direct control of the white school board and superintendent, even though all the administrators and teachers were black. When Thomas scored in the ninety-eighth percentile on a standardized test, the superintendent, Mr. Howard Thompson, called Thomas into the office and in front of the black principal of Lincoln High School, Mr. C. A. McDougal, told him, "No nigger could score this high."¹⁷

So it was the exception, rather than the rule, when black youths would learn critical thinking or be encouraged to question authority by black teachers. The black educational system was in fact a hierarchy dominated by white power that at best taught aspiring black youths to succeed in a white world. While many of the teachers and administrators worked tirelessly to instill self-esteem and skills in black youths, they also taught deference to authority and acceptance of "the norm," at least for the time being. In all fairness, of course, if they had bucked the system openly they would have clearly risked losing their jobs.

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James Brittian was born November 26, 1944, a middle child out of six. Like most black children in those days, he was born at home. His family lived at that time in a big white house on West Rosemary not far from the Masons. A

¹⁶Thomas Mason, Interview by author, 17 April 1991, Chapel Hill, tape recording in the possession of the author.

¹⁷ibid.

black midwife, Miss Minnie Thompson, delivered him and a good many others of his generation. He was raised mostly by his older sister and his aunts because his mother worked almost all of the time.¹⁸

When James was a child he would drive with his father out to Chatham County. There was a baseball field over near the Fearington area, and on weekends there were games. “It was a regular affair,” James recalled:

My father and I, we would go there usually on weekends... and then everybody would eat their barbecue and drink their white liquor and have fun. And then they’d fight each other, and it would be brother against brother, families against families, those types of things.

During the week, James’s father worked at the Texaco service station across from the bus station on Franklin Street. He did mostly mechanical work:

Wasn’t probably paid the wages that was doing. And on weekends he drank a lot. There was a lot of arguing and those type of things. And then it gets to a point where I guess he felt that he could not be a man and take care of his family, because if you don’t feel good about yourself and your situation, then you don’t feel like you’re taking care of your family fully. And that type of thing went on.

Like Elizabeth Cotton’s father, Thomas Brittian had a difficult time dealing with the rage he felt at his daily humiliations and lack of opportunity. Sadly, he turned his anger against himself, and that also hurt his family. Nor was his story exceptional. As James’ account of weekend drinking and brawling attested, certain kinds of destructive behavior were commonplace in the black community.¹⁹

Around 1954, when James was ten and the Supreme Court overturned “separate but equal,” Thomas Brittian left his family. He stayed in Chapel Hill, but he did not stay in touch. James remembered: “Our communication afterwards usually probably during that time, once separation occurred then there was very little communication.”

At the time, James thought as a child. Undoubtedly he was hurt, and he coped the best he could. To grow up in a household disrupted by drunkenness and fighting, and to be abandoned by a parent—these things create deep and everlasting wounds. Still, what a person does with such wounds is at least partially a matter of individual character and choice. James Brittian leaned into

¹⁸James R. Brittian, Interview by author, 27 November 1990, Chapel Hill, tape recording in the possession of the author.

¹⁹The destructive behavior in the black community was, in many respects, the mirror image of destructive behavior in the white community, i.e. the culture of domination.

his pain and turned his life into an ongoing crusade against the system that drove his father down.

In later years, James thought as an adult. He had spent much time pondering why so many black men got drunk on weekends, fought “brother against brother,” and abandoned their families. He noted, for instance, that black parents did not talk about their jobs:

It was very rare, I would think, if during that period... a black father or mother would discuss their work, because I don't think they feel good about doing it... Even during that time they must have felt that they could do things better than that, but the opportunity wasn't there, and they knew the opportunity wasn't there, so there was no fuss about it. So when you are denied and you're limited, and you know that you have the skills to do something else, you don't feel good about it, so you don't want to discuss it... I never heard anybody discussing about their work in any household that I ever went into, regardless of whatever it was. And even those people that worked at the university—I mean, it was bad then and it's bad now.

Whether black parents did not talk about their work because they felt bad about themselves, or because they were trying to shield their children from the harsh reality of segregation, they were not successful in hiding the truth of things completely. James learned what it meant to work for white employers because he and his friends loved to go to the movies:

Say, if you wanted some money for the weekend or something like that, then your friends, you'd go where your father and you'd go where their father worked. You'd go everywhere all of your friends' parents worked so that you could get money that Friday to go to the movies. [The movie started at] seven o'clock and they may not get home in time. So you heard all of these things.

I had a good friend of mine whose father worked at the First Baptist Church on Columbia Street. The minister there didn't call him by his name. I mean, it was anything that they could think of at that time. I mean, they didn't care whether or not they called them by their names, or whatever their name was. It was whatever they could think of. “Go tell John”—his name may have been Joe. “Go tell Mike”—anything they could think of, you know, to say to these people, to black people. So therefore, you have what you call an overflow, an aftereffect that was brought back into the home. Therefore, the black families were disrupted. And the same thing still today it happens.

James also noticed that “there were very few... male head of households.” And even when both parents were present in the household, he observed that men very seldom spoke for the family:

If there was a male, black male head of household, and he and his wife lived together—for example, if they had a daughter—you never talked to the father about taking the daughter out. You always talked to the mother. So the females were looked upon as the head of household. They were the matriarches of the black household. And very rare you will talk to a father. I hardly saw that in any situation with any of my friends or anything. It was the mother that did the talking for the house, because the mother was always recognized, ... Now! I know *now* why it happened.... If the insurance man came to your house, which was white, then he talked to the female. And that was to, not to ever allow the black male to know that he had any type of authority, and that's the reason for that.

Segregation did not impact men and women in all of the same ways. In particular, those who had power in the South, white men, saw black men as physical threats and sexual competitors as well as sources of labor. They saw black women, on the other hand, as laborers and potential sexual partners or victims. Not infrequently, particularly among the more well-to-do, white men felt a closeness to black women, having been raised by them. Consequently, segregation maintained its power by concentrating its most lethal physical and psychological repression on men. While parents worried about their daughters being raped by white men, they worried about their sons being killed. And while black women were generally accorded the traditional female role of nurturer by white society, black men were generally denied the traditional male role of provider and protector.

For these reasons, part of the black male response to the rising tide of black struggle in the 1960s was motivated by a deeply felt desire to reclaim the dignity of manhood. This dynamic does not seem to have been present, or at least it was not as strong, for women. Nevertheless, when 1960 came, women rallied to the cause in numbers at least as great as men.

James' mother, Mary Brittan, was a domestic worker. She worked for several different families when James was young, but her longest employment was with Bob Cox, chairman of the Jaycees and a former Carolina football player who teamed with the famous Charlie "Choo Choo" Justice.

Every weekday she would leave home about 6:30 A.M. and travel to a part of Chapel Hill known as Greenwood. This was also home to Sandy McClamroch, prominent businessman and mayor, and James Taylor, dean of the Medical School. James remembered:

All of them lived in Greenwood at that particular time. That was the social elite white people lived in the Greenwood area. There was no Lakeshore Drive and all these other developments that, you know, you see now.

It would be six-thirty or seven in the evening when Mrs. Brittan would get home. Then on most weekends from September through March or April, she

would baby-sit for students or for her regular employers while they attended sporting or social events. She also took in laundry. In this way the energy of her days was drained so that well-to-do whites could enjoy life, so they could be “free.”

This helps to explain why James Brittan became an activist in the freedom struggle: his parents, and the household peace he deserved as a child, were taken away from him by the system of white domination. Like other black children, he observed the disrespect that fathers received from white employers. He felt the rage and despair his father felt when he experienced the shouting, the drinking, the fighting. He knew that his mother was not there to take care of him because she had to be in the homes of the rich white people taking care of their kids, cooking their meals, doing their laundry. He understood these things, even if he had no words to express them until he was older. And he coped. But the fact that James pondered these issues and devoted his entire life to struggling against such injustice demonstrates that he was deeply moved, even as a child, by the social experiences of his youth.

By the time James was eleven or twelve he was able to put words to much of what he saw that was unjust. James was Thomas Mason’s running buddy and best friend, “lifelong, from toddlers up.” His knowledge of the world was enlarged by his contact with that family. He participated when Thomas accompanied his older sister, Mary, on their small skirmishes with segregation in the mid-1950s. And even though they were younger, he and Thomas began to hang with Harold Foster. They were kindred spirits, and together they sought out reading material about black history and culture and discussed how to challenge segregation.

James recalled that the Supreme Court decision of 1954 was discussed in school, but it was clear to him that black adults were still very cautious about talking openly about such things. A few years later, however, a new sense of possibility seemed to take hold of the youth and the black community as a whole. James remembered:

Well, I think that teachers more or less talked about the 1954 Supreme Court decision not openly. Ok. They didn’t teach it. The only thing they would say is “You need to be prepared to walk in the door when the opportunity comes because that’s going to happen one day, and if you’re not prepared then there won’t be an opportunity for you.”

Then there was talk about civil rights.... When I can remember it was probably the late fifties. Even though the Supreme Court had made the decision, I think it was around fifty-eight, fifty-nine when everybody begin, well most of the black kids, the black community began to—I think they were relieved, and they really began to believe that something was going to happen because of the boycotts, and the demonstrations, and the marches and things that had begin to take place.

What such comments indicate is that it was not the decision of the Supreme Court per se that really brought black youths and adults to the point of believing that things might change. It was also black struggle—Montgomery, Little Rock, Greensboro.

Although such feelings were not common among black youths in Chapel Hill during the late 1950s, James Brittan and Thomas Mason began actively talking about how to strike some blow at segregation when they were twelve or thirteen. They discussed this issue, including the possible use of the sitdown tactic, with each other and with the older Mason children and a few other friends. Thomas Mason recalled:

James and I had discussed something like [the Greensboro sitdown protests] before. I mean, we wanted, someday we **would** do it. Before the Greensboro thing ever took place, I believe, we talked about this, **what** we were gonna—We knew then that we had to take some action, but we didn't really know what we were going to do. We had considered [the lunch counter tactic], but we didn't know exactly what we were going to do. We knew we were going to challenge it some way.

Although James and Thomas felt motivated to make some kind of move against segregation by the time they were twelve or thirteen, most of the other youths did not. The two friends knew their own minds and they sought out other like-minded associates:

Well, for the most part, James and I had our own, you know, role down... so we were expandin' out. And... there were just a few people who... were aware, you know, who were not confined as a result of lack of exposure to different things. And one of the people that, he was a little older, that we could talk to was Harold Foster, that was Esphur's brother. William Cureton at times, you know. He was not **always** there.... There were other people who we'd talk with but finally decided that, "Hey, we can't talk with these people because their own objection is that "This is morally wrong. This is, you know, you just don't do things like this...." There was a relative, David Mason, who occasionally participated in these kinds of things... but not very often. Weren't, just weren't very many.... I used to talk to my sisters about it.... James and I and my sisters and brothers, you know, occasionally talked about things like that. And they were very favorable, but we had our own little thing too, you know.²⁰

Thomas and James, then, learned to protest because the conditions of black life in Chapel Hill called out for redress, because they were encouraged by older siblings and friends, and because they were aware that a rebellious trend

²⁰ibid.

was growing throughout black America in response to new historical conditions. Most importantly, they decided to rebel and in that way transformed themselves, turning their lives toward freedom.

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Harold Foster was born in 1942. He grew up with his mother and two older sisters on Cotton Street in the heart of Pottersfield. According to lore passed on to him from his mother, the area had been “a graveyard site for paupers, but they eventually moved the freed slaves over there and they began to set up residences.”²¹ It was an historic neighborhood in other ways as well. Although Elizabeth Cotton moved up north before Harold was born, she had grown up on Cotton Street singing “them old worldly songs.” Her mother, Louisa Nevill, had owned the lot on the corner of Cotton Street and McDade Street. During Harold Foster’s time Mrs. Fanny Bradshaw’s house stood on this corner. It was under the street light in front of her house, sitting on her rock wall late at night, that Foster and his friends came to know each other’s minds and solved “the problems of the world.” Across the street from the Foster home, Granny Flack sat on her porch caring for the new generation.

Historically, Pottersfield was economically and socially better off than the other black sections of Chapel Hill. In 1920 there was a greater percentage of home ownership in Pottersfield and a higher proportion of “mulattoes.”²² During the 1930s researchers noted a higher standard of living in Pottersfield and a relatively high level of church attendance. Since these patterns probably held true in the 1950s, it could very well be that Pottersfield children might have had the opportunity to observe differences in social standing moreso than children in other areas. Harold Foster, at least, recalled that he and his mother were acutely aware of such differences.

It seems that from an early age, Harold Foster was aware of his family’s status and achievements in relation to others in the community. He put a tremendous amount of energy into observing social relationships and expanding his “knowledge base,” as he called it. This was not mere curiosity. Rather, it stemmed from the concern he learned from his mother about the family’s standing in the community and how this could effect their survival.

Harold noted, for instance, that Granny Flack’s sister had married a Robinson. As Harold was growing up he heard people talk about how Mr. Robinson had sent his daughters to “finishing school” in Sedalia.

But I had contrasted that with the fact that even though they had gone and done all this, none of them had made no particular mark in the area and

²¹Foster interview, 1993. All subsequent quotes in this chapter from Harold Foster are from the author’s 1993 interview unless otherwise noted.

²²1920 manuscript census

they all eventually left, and left the home place in a shambles and all. In contrast to my *mother* who didn't finish high school, but had to go out and start workin', and she became very respected in the community and, like, sort of a leader in that she worked hard, saved her money, and gained the confidence of people who helped her eventually build a home.

Another neighbor up the street was Mr. Ephriam Mitchell who was married to "this high yellow woman" and "they had a influence in town." Harold believed that Mr. Mitchell "had a big influence in the First Baptist Church which was up on Franklin Street at that time."

They were somebody that you didn't try to get too friendly with. They were to be seen at a distance. Mr. Mitchell had this air about him—there were times you didn't go up in this big field and play because he didn't want us up there, or something like that. You always had to handle yourself very gingerly around them.

Foster later came to believe that part of the reason his mother warned him against acting up around Mr. Mitchell was because they could not afford to "make waves" in the neighborhood. They were living in a house that did not belong to them. It had been abandoned, and the people moved far away. Mrs. Foster had moved in and fixed it up. But Harold speculated that his mother felt it was important not to aggravate any of the older people in the neighborhood who knew the history of the property. Likewise, it was a matter of "not wantin' to be seen in a bad light by influential people in the community, especially someone who had close ties to the Baptist church, which was a very powerful influence."

In contrast to the Mitchells, Foster liked and respected his next-door neighbor, Mr. Ed Stewart. "He owned a horse, a cow, he plowed the fields—he would turn the fields up for people to plant." Harold remembered him as "a big, tall, very muscular man. He earned his livin' by the sweat of his brow with his muscles." Rebecca Stewart, Ed's wife, was a bootlegger and many people, including the two black policemen of Chapel Hill, congregated at the Stewart house to partake of her "white lightenin'."

Mr. Stewart owned the lot on the corner of Cotton and Brooks Street. He often contracted with the university to haul dirt in his wagon or dig a ditch. He also dug graves. Harold liked Mr. Stewart because he was very friendly. He would let the kids watch him work, let them ride on his horse, sit in his wagon. "He never seemed to feel that we were in his way, or botherin' him." And Harold admired Mr. Stewart as well, perhaps because of the way he commanded respect in the community because he was self-sufficient. "He didn't have to work for a white man," Harold recalled.

From his childhood neighborhood experience, then, Harold Foster began to feel a distance from the people who had standing and influence and a closeness to the laboring people who did not display a sense of superiority. He

began to make the connection in his mind between material advantages and social attitudes. In other words, he began to form concepts of class and status and a sense of where his family fit into the social structure and with whom he felt solidarity. The people who had not “made a mark” in the community were the ones sent to finishing school, not the ones like his mother who had few advantages and had to work for everything. The man who was unfriendly, who was bothered by the children, and who might harm the family if aggravated was a person of influence in the church, a person who had married “up” in the skin color hierarchy, a leading citizen. The man whom Harold Foster liked and admired had a friendly and sharing attitude, dug graves and “turned the fields up for people to plant,” and was not dependent on the white man.

In these early years, much of what Harold Foster learned about the social structure of the black community, as well as basic life values, came from his mother. Even though he rebelled against his mother’s authority from an early age, and saw his leadership of the black struggle in the sixties as a challenge to “all the things she feared,” there is no doubt that she was the most important early influence on his character.

Haddie Boothe grew up in Chapel Hill in the 1920s and 1930s. Her parents both died when she was very young and she was raised by a white family. What her experience was growing up as a black child in a white family is not known. She did not talk about it with her children.²³ She did not finish high school and married Charley Foster as a teenager. They had three children by the time she was twenty one. When Harold was growing up, his mother worked as a domestic and his father worked as a cook at a Chapel Hill restaurant.

Mrs. Foster set an example for her children of how hard work and perseverance could enable a person of few means to prevail. By being active in civic affairs, a member of the Elks, director of the First Baptist youth chorus, and especially by being president of the PTA, Mrs. Foster taught her son about leadership and the value of being involved in community efforts. By getting Harold to follow along with the text of her PTA speeches as she practiced her presentations, she helped him to learn to read and to speak in public. She also emphasized the importance of getting a good education. While Harold was growing up she worked toward her high school degree studying at home out of textbooks titled “High-school Subjects Self-Taught.” And she spoke to Harold about the importance of learning:

[She placed] a very high value, a supreme value [on education], and especially for me. It was always “Study, study, study. Learn. Get it in your head. Because if you get it in your head, nobody can take it from you.” So there was a big emphasis on learnin’ and havin’ things in your brain rather than acquirin’ material possessions. Because she always

²³Esphur Foster, et. al., Interview by author and Jennifer Alford, 14 April 1991, Chapel Hill, tape recording in the possession of the author.

warned me that people could take things from you. They would tax 'em from under you, and if they couldn't handle you, they would eventually kill you. Because, of course, this probably had been her experiences in life of things she had seen happen to black men. So education had a high priority for her right up to the day she died. She always said, "Just stay in school if you don't do nothin' else."... This was repeated because most blacks have always put a great emphasis on education, that, you know, "We can educate ourselves out of this problem."

And Harold did excel in school. He got A's for everything except conduct in 4th grade. Whatever the teachers gave out, he mastered. He was the teacher's pet. He helped others. He was "showcased" by the teachers and given a separate seat. And he always volunteered to help the teacher. He was being groomed for leadership.

But at the same time his mother was teaching him to develop his critical judgment with regard to blacks. She had always taught Harold not to think he was better than others, and she was very critical of those in the community who exhibited self-importance:

She also saw the shortcomings of blacks, especially in situations, like, with teachers and certain other people who were supposed to be leadin' blacks in the community. They came in for critical evaluation too.... If I'd said somethin' about 'em that was like, sounded like I was givin' them some praise, there was always somethin' forthcomin' to show that they weren't (chuckle) as up there on a pedestal as I thought. 'Cause I was goin' by sense impressions, and of course, when you go by sense impressions you can always be taken as a sucker 'cause you'll go for, you know. So certain people had to be downsized in order for me not to want to imitate, because really, deep down within, they weren't that much.... And so when I confronted these people [in the sixties] I had already had a mindset on them.... [Before the sixties], if I had any kind of dealin's with them, I still had a prejudiced view on 'em because I had gotten it from my mother. This included teachers, and preachers, and regular townfolk too.

Harold Foster realized that the knowledge his mother had about these leading members of the community did not come from "sense impressions." She was president of the PTA, so she dealt with the teachers a lot. She was secretary for various civic organizations, so she knew the civic leaders:

She would not pass this judgment on 'em until she had gotten close to 'em and actually saw them close up. It was sort of like you could see that these people are well-to-do and this, that, and the other, but when you find out how they got their money you want to spit on them, you know.

(chuckle) So it was like that. Like, after she got close up to find out how these people really were, then they came in for very critical evaluation.

While Mrs. Foster taught Harold to be skeptical toward influential black people, she warned him against white people generally. If you “got too high and too powerful,” if you “outmaneuvered the white man in a way that offended him, he would call you a uppity nigger and kill you or somethin’”. And all this was smartin’ off the occurrences of things like the death of [Mack Charles] Parker, they talked about him, and Emmett Till, which drove home the fact that whites thought they always had open season on blacks.”²⁴

White people were to be outwardly respected, and to be stayed away from as much as possible, but if you did have to encounter ‘em say “Yes, sir” and “No, sir,” and be honest and go on about your business. Because “White people could do some things that could really hurt you,” as witnessed by so and so, and so and so, and this incident, and this incident....

The lessons that Haddie Foster taught her son gave him a knowledge of the social structure of the black community that was a step ahead of others his age. This kind of knowledge was part of what eventually made Foster a leader:

She would constantly point out to me the different sections of town: “These people stay here, and they think this way about us, and this way about these people here.... And I would tell the other people that, and they wouldn’t believe it. And then we’d go check it out and it would be proved. So when it came down to giving an analysis of different parts of the community and who they were, they looked to me for that...[people like] Bill Cureton, and eventually the white community. They saw that I had the most experience in all the communities of the black community.”²⁵

So Foster gained his ability to analyze social dynamics and his awareness of the need for self-protection initially from his mother. He also gained this knowledge through his own experience as he grew older.

²⁴A young black man named Mack Charles Parker was accused of raping a white woman in Poplarville, Mississippi in 1959. He was taken by a white mob, beaten, murdered, and thrown in the Pearl River. This lynching was publicized around the nation, and despite evidence presented by the FBI to a grand jury, “the jury refused to act on the matter or even to acknowledge that a lynching had occurred.” See, Fred Powledge, *Free at Last? The Civil Rights Movement and the People Who Made It* (n.p.: Little, Brown and Company, 1991; reprint, New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Harper Perennial ed., 1992.), 191.

²⁵Harold Foster interview, 1974.

I had a paper route that carried me through all the [communities] when I was eleven or twelve. I had been a child prodigy in journalism, so I had written things for the school paper in fourth or fifth grade, you know, school, class reporter. And I went on from that to have a paper route. Well, at that time my mother started tellin' me about thinkin' I was better than people. You know, "Don't do that.... Go ahead and get along with everybody, but defend yourself, protect yourself, cause you're out there by yourself. You don't have a father, you don't have no brothers." And that's the way I came up.... I had to make it on my own, gain no sympathy from nobody else.²⁶

Looking back on this growing period, Harold Foster described the black community of the 1950s as a place of ignorance as well as poverty. He felt that there was a great deal of sifting of rumor, hearsay, and other bits of information that a child had to do growing up, "and if you have no way of siftin' it you grow up believin' that what you heard is true."

In his early years Foster relied a good deal on his mother to help him sift things. But as he grew older he developed his own ways of deepening his knowledge. He read a lot, and he extended his reach into all the black communities of Chapel Hill. This developing self-reliance was accelerated by his early break with his mother.

Something happened, and my mother came home and said "How did this happen?" I said, "I didn't know. I didn't do it?" [I was] maybe six or seven, seven or eight. She said, "You did do it, and I'm gonna whip you for it." And I cried, and against all my protestations she still whipped me. What I felt then was I felt betrayed—because I had put all my trust in her, and I believed everything she said, and she couldn't do no wrong. She was never wrong. She was always right. But in this instance when she was wrong, and I knew that she was wrong because I hadn't done this, I cried, and in spite of that she still whipped me. And so I made up my mind then that—I just lost faith. I lost trust. I felt that I was left to my own. So anything that she said not to do, I was gonna challenge it. And I remember becoming very rebellious at that time....

All young children feel that their lives depend on their parents, and in this case Harold had only one parent he could count on. Harold's father was gone from home most of the time, even though he and Haddie Foster did not get formally divorced until 1956 or 1957. Harold thought his father was incarcerated part of that time, but he wasn't sure. In any case, he had few memories of Charley Foster.

²⁶ *ibid.*

I didn't remember too much about my father except as a drunk. And he came to symbolize alcoholism to me. I remember seein' him get drunk, and fall down the street, and crawl the rest of the way home. I remember him bein' drunk and fightin' my mother, and me bitin' him on the leg. I must have been three or four.... I remember him comin' home one day severely burned because he had gone to work drunk and grease had splashed all on him.... He was a cook.... And that's just about it.

He never said anythin' that left an indelible mark on my mind. Never spent time with me playin' games or anything else. Except I remember one time, I was very small when he came, [he] had been away to camp. He would always send these camp pictures home that he had taken, because he was a cook for the boy scout camp. So they would always include him in the pictures. So I remember him with the white outfit on, and everything. When he came home one time I remember him bouncin' me up on him and I had tied a string around the end of his, of his nipples on his titties, (chuckle) or whatever you call 'em and I pulled on it (laughter). But other than that, that was the only moment that I ever shared with him that had any humor to it.

So young Harold really had put all his trust in his mother and had tried to live up to her expectations. Like the teachers and preachers, Mrs. Foster was like a god to Harold as he was growing up. And he depended on her completely. But the sense of betrayal he felt following his whipping resulted in a momentous reordering.

It made me lose the supreme faith and trust that I had in her to be right. So I started questioning things she said, and started lookin' for things to prove that she was wrong, even academic wise.... I just never got over that, I never got over that. I don't know if it was the hand of fate, or what. But I grew up to challenge whatever was said, and whatever was put down as edict, because I had been betrayed in this one instance.... The challenge to segregation was an extension of the challenge to a lot of other theories that she had....

Harold relied less and less on his mother and other adults, and more on himself. He began running with a group of male friends who shared many of his feelings. They gathered on the Rock Wall near Foster's house, during the summers especially, and talked late into the night.

We went up there to The Rock, and that's where we had our arguments, and fusses, and fights and got to know each other. It was right there at the corner of McDade and Cotton. It was a stone rock wall like the same work they did for the university. This lady, Miss Fannie, Miss Fannie Bradshaw, yeah, she was a lady that, you know, she sort of looked out, she had a daughter had a lot of children so she kind of looked out for all the children in the neighborhood. She took in laundry from the university

students. Like, she specialized in doin' shirts and they would wash and iron shirts all day long. She had these grandchildren that we played with and there was a rock wall there, and we all would go up there. [It was] right in front of her house.

Harold's sisters did not go up to the Rock Wall. They weren't allowed, according to Esphur. "I didn't know they weren't allowed to go," Harold recalled. "I know they just didn't, because it was somethin' that the guys did."

The young men played sports together, sometimes competing with white youths or sneaking into UNC football games. They talked about segregation and sized up black institutions like the church and the schools, finding the leadership of the preachers and teachers on this central issue lacking. And they began to gain a sense of themselves as being the young leaders from an historic part of town.

Harold consciously set out to compete with adults on a knowledge basis and to challenge whatever they "put down as edict." He and his friends sought out sources of black history and culture beyond what was offered in school. Reading, in particular, broadened Foster's knowledge of the outside world. Harold began to read at three years old, and he did a lot of it. Eventually he found black history.

I learned a lot about black history. But, you know, when I read about black history it was like, I felt like I was in on something that was a secret. And that everybody didn't know about this. I guess that's because I felt some kind of shame. Felt like, what I was feelin' when I read it wasn't to be revealed. But when I acted out I felt that everybody should know why I was actin' out, that they should know what the history of our people had been.

This knowledge was different from the black history Foster had learned in school. That version had not penetrated deeply the cause of things, and had taken the viewpoint that black people should be proud of men like Booker T. Washington who came "up out of slavery." But Foster's vision for himself did not start from coming up out of slavery. As a child he was excited by the possibility of learning, developing his talents, and doing. While most other young black men were following in the footsteps of their fathers, for whom work had of necessity taken precedence over education, Harold followed in the footsteps of his mother and sisters.

In Foster's mind this interest in intellectual matters was associated with the female influences in his life. He felt that he was excluded from a lot of things that his mother and sisters would talk about. And he felt that more was expected of them:

Opportunities for them would be greater.... So the problem was what do you say, or how do you raise a male in a matriarchal society where there are mostly females.... I was constantly surrounded by female influence and there was no male influence. It's just lucky that the things that I chose to be interested in were intellectual things, like the newspaper, like writing. Other people who had that bent had no avenue to pursue it like I did. People just didn't, you didn't walk around talkin' about being a poet."

Foster believed that this was so because the nature of Jim Crow society forced more young men to be sacrificed "at the education altar" than young women:

It was ok for the boy to drop out of school, but the girls had to finish. You find that more boys were sacrificed at the education altar than girls. That's why we had more girls finishin' high school than boys, because boys would drop out and try to get some kind of work or help the family income, or something. So, that's what I'm sayin' that more was expected of them in terms of bein' prepared for opportunities. If there were ones, they were to go to the black woman. Which is, I guess, part of the matriarchal system, as I look at it now. The woman represented more stability, she was to be the stablin' factor in the family, because, I guess she was not as endangered, or at risk as much as the male. Bein' that the black male was the target of denigration in society.

Perhaps for these reasons Mrs. Foster encouraged her son to concentrate on getting an education rather than accumulating material possessions. In any case, although his mother and sisters could not provide him with the same kind of counseling or support that a father might have provided, they did support his intellectual interests. These interests came to embody what Harold Foster wanted to be at an early age:

Somewhere along the line I'd read the boys' biography of Benjamin Franklin. And that moved me. I was moved by Benjamin Franklin and I may have made a critical mistake of reading his biography before I read Booker T. Washington's. [Washington's] biography paled up against Benjamin Franklin in terms of what I would have like to have been like.

Foster did not see Benjamin Franklin as a white man, but rather as somebody he admired and wanted to be like. He was more of an inspiration than a role model. Booker T. Washington, being the foremost proponent of "industrial education," had not encouraged young black men to develop their minds or pursue higher education. Nor did Foster like the man's attitude:

I liked the way [Franklin] was able to be talented in many directions. He was an achiever. He was inventive. He was a thinker. He was always doin'. Those things turned me on. I was moved by those things.

Whereas with Booker T. Washington, I saw him as a black who had been in slavery and overcame the odds to get educated. But some of his methods seemed soft to me.

When you're comin' up that age, and you read, and want to see how men defended themselves, up against other men. And I remember Booker T. Washington got knocked down and his response to it was tell the person he didn't have time to fight him back because he could spend his time in a more useful way bein' constructive. And he also made the statement about not lettin' a person bring you so low as to make you hate him. And that kind of theme was to repeat itself when I saw the Jackie Robinson story, about how Jackie Robinson was to have to eat crow and be totally non-violent in light of all this violence that people wanted to perpetrate on him, just because he wanted to play baseball. And then to hear it again when I read Martin Luther King's book. This thing of non-violence is deballin' a man. But then I've grown to understand that it takes more fortitude and guts to be non-violent in the face of violence than it does to strike back.

But as a teenager Harold Foster did not appreciate the courage of non-violence. He was determined to learn to defend himself against a hostile world and against hurt feelings.

That's why I went on to play football and stuff, because I wanted to learn to be tough. I wanted to stop bein' sensitive and havin my feelin's hurt because people said things. I wanted to be able to take those things and let 'em roll off me like water, you know, off a duck's back. I wanted to be tough. I wanted to see just how tough I could get.

In this way, young Foster extended himself, widened his horizons, pushed himself to take on new challenges, and developed both the means and the attitude for increased assertiveness. And when the challenge of the Greensboro sitdown protests occurred, Harold Foster was prepared by his broad knowledge and associations, his standing among his peers, his temperament, and his experience challenging authority to lead.

In Chapel Hill's black community no issue of race, class, gender, generation, attitude, or point of view stood outside the dynamic of the color line. Black children in the 1940s and 1950s learned from their parents and other adults at first, but increasingly they learned from their own direct experience. In particular, young black men were taught that they were the main target of white hostility. And it was constantly repeated to them that their prospects, even their very survival, required learning how not to offend white people. Most of them learned, as well, that their role in life was to labor with their hands, although a lucky few could "make it in a white world."

Increasingly, however, the teachings and warnings of black adults struck the younger generation as out of touch with reality. They could sense a new day

breaking, and they were not content to accept the narrow and limited path prescribed for them.

As Harold Foster grew older, he came to understand the way that black adult attitudes toward the youth resulted from complacency and subservience to white domination. Initially, his rebellion was personal, but increasingly it became political. And just as segregation targeted the black male as a way of controlling the entire black population, Foster and his young male friends came to see their rebellion as a struggle for manhood as well as for black freedom.

At the same time, a rebellion against segregation had to be a rebellion against black authority as well. Those whom the children had seen almost as gods—their parents, their teachers, their preachers—had to be challenged, knocked down a notch or two, and seen as merely human.

Harold Foster was prepared by his whole life to lead such a struggle. His mother had made sure he did not idolize the traditional leaders of the black community even when they picked him out for special praise and grooming. She had taught him to resist the temptation to feel he was better than others simply because he could do better than others. And, appropriately enough, he had freed himself of deference to his mother. She had taught him about society, but he chose a different path of dealing with society. She had taught Harold that white people were vicious and not to antagonize them. But she had been wrong when she beat him and he believed she was wrong about how to deal with the problem of white domination.

Harold summed up his mother's attitude as "tryin' to stay on the good side of white people," and the question of the black freedom struggle as "how much of a troublemaker can some little nigger boys be before goin' to jail?"²⁷ He and his friends rebelled against adult authority not because they were influenced by "radical white college students" or because "young people always rebel." It was because adult authority had proved to be arbitrary and confining, and it was out of step with the aspirations of their generation.

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Conscious efforts to build a movement in Chapel Hill were preceded by long years of development that took place primarily on the level of personal experience rather than political action. Awareness developed only gradually. In part this was the result of increased experience that came with age. Awareness also depended, however, on whether the status quo was being questioned or challenged by people of any age. And while movements developed in all of North Carolina's larger cities, the same was not true for small towns. It is important to ask, therefore, what made Chapel Hill different. Essentially, what this came down to was the question of leadership.

²⁷ibid.

We have examined the biographies of several of the key individuals who initiated the movement in Chapel Hill. It is now necessary to examine the process by which these individuals came together and began to engage in protest.

What gave birth to this core was a particular group dynamic arising from the broader growth dynamics of a generation of black youths in Chapel Hill. What follows is an attempt to sketch the broader generational dynamics in Chapel Hill, followed by a discussion of how a friendship group of black, male teenagers evolved into a social force. It is an investigation of how rebellious ideas formed and came to action among a generation of black youths.

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Many young black children were aware of the rules of segregation long before they developed a strong sense of the injustice of those rules. Shirley Davis, for instance, who later became an activist, initially gave respect to the “white only” signs “... because I was just taught you obey your elders.”²⁸ William Cureton, one of those in the first assault on Colonial Drug, did not question the Jim Crow order when he was in fourth grade because his teachers seemed to accept it. When the teachers would venture out with their students into the larger white society, Cureton and the other children learned about the racial dynamics of Jim Crow, but they also learned to accept them:

We’d have these ah, the concerts. And we would go downtown from Northside [Elementary School], *all* the way down Church Street, holdin’ hands, side by side, two together. And the teacher would always tell us, “I don’t want anybody actin’ up. I don’t want anybody to do this. I’m gonna get you when”—and on, and on. And we were made *aware* that white people were observin’ us. And this would happen sometime in May.... So, we would go all the way down to the university, to Memorial Hall. You know how long a walk that is? But somehow, it never bothered us. It never bothered us that, “We should have some buses. The white kids don’t have to walk this far.” I don’t think that was on anybody’s mind. Then when we got there, we sat in the balcony, automatic, “In the balcony.” You know, that’s for “you folks.” And we noticed that.²⁹

Cureton felt that elementary age kids noticed, but accepted. And he felt that it was not just young kids at that time, but also most adults in Chapel Hill, who accepted the given order. He could not recall any critics of segregation who spoke out during his childhood years:

²⁸Shirley Pendergraph Davis, Interview by author, 2 March 1994, Chapel Hill, tape recording in the possession of the author.

²⁹William Cureton, Interview by author, 19 April 1991, by telephone to New York City, tape recording in the possession of the author.

I'm bringin' all this in to show you that we had our own little thing, so to speak, where kids were concerned and goin' to school. We just never saw maybe the racism in it, how racist it was. I think during that period of time everybody, sort of, so far as I know, everybody sort of felt that that's the way it was. But somewhere, somewhere in another city somewhere, you probably had the people like Thurgood Marshall... and Adam Clayton Powell saying, "Hey, this is *wrong*." Of course they were older, and of course they could see that it was wrong. But then, sometimes, if a person has deception at an early age, no matter how old they are, then, ah... and I'm also talking about the people who went into town, you know, older people, who were probably Thurgood's and those age also. I'm just thinking, everybody around there just said, you know, this is the way it is. I don't know anybody who was doing anything, any kind of radical move.

As black teenagers in Chapel Hill got older, and ventured out on their own, they became aware of segregation in new ways. Charles Foushee, a leading activist during the 1963-64 period, was puzzled when he realized in the mid-1950s at age eleven or twelve that he could not sit down in Colonial Drug:

... all this time we had been going to John's. My brother went. My oldest sister went before my brother. Everybody, you know. All blacks just, you'd get your medicine from him. You'd get everything from him. I mean, he was like a doctor. You know, you just go in and you'd tell him what's wrong, colds and everything.... But all of a sudden, I was puzzled about it. "Can we sit down?" and he said "no." I couldn't believe, you know.³⁰

Hilliard Caldwell, who graduated from Lincoln in 1956 and was one of the young adults who helped provide leadership to the movement in 1960, recalled that teenagers knew segregation was wrong in the early 1950s, but accepted it.

We talked about it among ourselves as young teenagers, the inequity, the unjust system, but we never—we didn't have the means, or the monies, or the know-how to [challenge segregation]. We always said among ourselves it was wrong. We always thought it was wrong to have two high schools. We always thought it was wrong that we had to get a hotdog on, that there was two bus stations, that there were still signs up—"black" and "white," "colored" here, "colored" there.... We had to ride in the back of the bus to go to Durham to Sears Roebucks. And, you know, being in a southern town we just assumed that was the way it was supposed to be.

³⁰Charles Foushee, Interview by Tina Harrison and Ken Hamilton, 5 June 1974, interview 11-12, transcript, Oral History Program, Manuscript Department, Duke University Library, Durham, North Carolina.

Whether it was right or not, we accepted it. We accepted it because it, the way to do was to accept it. We knew it was wrong. It hurt. It really hurt being black, and having to follow these, you know go into the colored side or drink water from the colored fountain.³¹

According to Harold Foster, teenagers had joked about segregation over the years, as in comments like, “You may be lighter skinned than me, but neither one of us can get served at the Carolina Inn.... That happened long before the sit-ins in Greensboro. So that thought was there, that there was not public accommodations.” Yet many youths, perhaps most, accepted the status quo.

But among the larger group of black youth some made a practice of challenging segregation. Although the practice does not seem to have been widespread, it happened throughout the 1950s, and not just among Harold Foster and his group of male friends from Pottersfield. Older youths and young women acted in rebellious ways during the 1950s as well. Such people, who were young adults in 1960, were prepared by their earlier experience to jump into the movement as soon as it started. In the same way, the fact that Foster and his neighborhood friends did challenge segregation from an early age prepared them to initiate the sitdown protests in 1960.

Foster recalled that throughout the 1950s he and his friends would disrespect the rules of segregation when they could get away with it:

And like I said before, these signs of “colored” and “white,” we had always sabotaged that anyway. When we didn’t think anybody was lookin’, we would drink out of the white, with the sign that says “white,” or we’d go on the white side of the bus station, slip into the bathroom, and things like that. Wherever we saw it, and got a chance to sabotage it, we did. And when we got caught the people would say, “Well, I’m going to tell your mother about it. And then [there would be] a threat of puttin’ the policeman on us, because the policemen would uphold the laws of segregation. And of course your mother would tell you why you had to obey segregated laws. So there was always this threat of turnin’ us over to authorities. But we never had it organized, or we never did it when it got notoriety.³²

The efforts of Foster and his friends were not necessarily always conscious challenges to segregation. In part, they simply sensed that they could get away with things because of the influence of the university on race relations, and they took advantage.

³¹Hilliard Caldwell, Interview by author, 26 March 1991, Chapel Hill, tape recording in the possession of the author.

³²Harold Foster interview, 1974

One of Foster's best friends, William Cureton, recalled that as early as eighth grade their interests were somewhat more far ranging than the average. When Ralph Bunche, the first black recipient of a Nobel Prize, came to speak at the university, five of the young teens accompanied by Clarence Merritt's older cousin, who had a car, attended. "We went, and we sat down. I don't remember any particular stares, or anything like that," Cureton recalled. And while this activity was not conceived as an assault on segregation, they were the only blacks from Chapel Hill there.³³

The university was segregated, but Chapel Hill has always been sort of a strange place where segregation is concerned. First of all, there's a closer knit with the community, in the black community and the university, than you would say with Durham, with the black community in Durham and Duke. I think maybe it might have to do with the size of the town. Because there were other things for people to do in Durham like the tobacco companies, there were other jobs. And also you had a very stable upper middle class, a good middle class, with the Mutual, the people who owned North Carolina Mutual, you had the people that were teaching at Central, you had the people that were professional doctors, lawyers, small percentage though they may be. There was also a black hospital. So you had that group, where in Chapel Hill you didn't have that. There were no professionals in Chapel Hill.

Cureton noted that black teenagers could go to the "Tin Can," the old university gym, on Saturdays and play basketball. Sometimes there would be interracial games. Of course, no one would go during the week. Also, Cureton's father and a friend were tennis players, and they had been using the university courts "since I was a kid." They would go early before others arrived. And blacks would occasionally go to the university library. These things were tolerated, though they were not the norm, when blacks acted as individuals or small groups, chose appropriate times, and did not make a scene.

Nobody had said "ok," but nobody said "no."... I'm trying to give you the texture of racism in Chapel Hill which wasn't that blatant.

The university had another type of influence as well. Cureton noted that young black males in Chapel Hill emulated athletes at the university.

Chapel Hill had an attitude. They thought they were as good as the people in Durham and Raleigh, much larger communities. They really did. We were actually on par, so to speak, with Pittsboro and Hillsborough, places like that.

³³Cureton interview, 1991. All subsequent quotes from William Cureton in this chapter are from this interview unless otherwise noted.

But Cureton and his friends felt they should not even associate with teenagers from the small towns, and this attitude had a great deal to do with the influence of the university:

The university had a great deal of influence. When you see the '57 basketball team winning—The uniforms that Lincoln had, they had to be just so. You know, you were copying the university in a sense. The basketball team had those long socks just like the '57 championship team. And you would see these guys on the street, you know, like Lenny Rosenbloom, Joe Quigg, Pete Brennan. These were northern white boys who you could talk to a little bit more readily.... The people in Hillsborough and Pittsboro weren't exposed to that, you follow what I'm saying?

The university gave Chapel Hill greater status than other small towns, and it also gave black youths like William Cureton exposure to a broader range of people than could be found elsewhere. There were “northern white boys who you could talk to,” and there were Africans and other international students. In Cureton's opinion, these influences gave black youths in Chapel Hill a definite attitude that was more assertive and more open-minded than what could be found in other small towns:

I remember that UNC had the ram's head in the middle of their basketball court.... Jimmy Little... painted a tiger in the middle of Lincoln's gym. Nobody else had that, but we had to have that because that was the university.

I mean, imagine somebody as small as Chapel Hill taking on these types of attitudes. That's what it was about Chapel Hill, it was all about attitude.... It made you, you weren't docile. You weren't as docile as people in Pittsboro or Hillsborough. So, you were exposed, and when you are exposed you tend to be a little more open about your thinking.

Still, Harold Foster believed that the 1954 Supreme Court decision had little impact on his thinking or that of his friends. Making a stab at maintaining separate but equal facilities, Chapel Hill had spent \$238,493 in 1950-52 to build a brand new high school for blacks. In the late 1950s, Foster believed, the young people were looking forward to going to the new Lincoln rather than Chapel Hill High. Nor was Foster particularly aware of national civil rights developments, including the Montgomery Bus Boycott. In fact, the youths took segregation as “a given,” even though they would disrespect it and disobey it when they could.

For instance, when they would slip into a UNC football game, Foster noted, it never occurred to them to sit with the white kids. The effect of Greensboro on Foster and his friends, however, was to make them realize that “segregation was a policy.”

The unconscious acceptance of the segregationist framework and rules was evident in the way the young people thought about black history as well. Harold Foster remembered learning about black history at Lincoln, and how even the effort to instill racial pride was twisted into an apology for white power by the hold that segregation held over the *minds* of black educators.

I remember the Black History Months. We were always reading about black people, but what we read about—these people were presented as heroes and role models.... Well, you know, we thought it was a real pride thing that somebody came up out of slavery and became a good reader and orator and put out a paper, say, like Frederick Douglas. And we didn't put any kind of—it wasn't viewed as, "It never should have been that way in the beginnin'."

Foster felt that his teachers did not probe the underlying reasons for historical events, as if things happened in a vacuum:

So we never questioned why we were championin' this person, except to say, "Oh, he made it in a white world," and being glad with that. We never went behind that and said that, "He never should have had to go through this anyway." We never looked at it as him bein' colonized and tryin' to take on the values of the oppressor, and things like that. So I grew up respectin' these people because other people respected them, in terms of sayin', "Well, you can do it too and in spite of the odds, you can make it in a white person's world...." So, when I read at that time, I read with the intent of finding people who had met the challenge of becoming "good Negroes," or people who had made it in this society despite the odds, but made it on white people's terms.

But as they gained greater experience in the world, Harold Foster and his friends began losing respect for the "good Negroes" of Chapel Hill who seemed intent on catering to white power and controlling black youths. As a result, they began reaching for a new identity that broke with that of the "good Negro." And part of this reaching was for a knowledge and culture of past black rebellion.

In fact, to supplement their public school education, and their thirst for a more assertive black culture, Mason, Brittian, and Foster extended their reach beyond the norm considerably. They sought out a radical white college student at UNC named Chris Munger who supplied them with books on a variety of topics, especially works by black authors.³⁴ They also developed a love for jazz, and the three of them bought a subscription to *Downbeat* magazine together.³⁵ Foster, in turn, helped Cureton develop a knowledge of jazz that eventually led

³⁴Thomas Mason interview.

³⁵ibid.

him into a career in music. Foster, in particular, went out of his way to cultivate a wide diversity of associates, including a number of whites who had various resources to offer:

My associations were not the ordinary associations at that time. I would say that my reach to different communities was greater than other people that I associated with.

Over the years, a friendship group of black high school youths formed that was based partly on neighborhood and age, but also on temperament and outlook. The group was all male and it also had a particular class character.

The youths who initiated the protest movement in Chapel Hill were not part of the black establishment. Their parents were not teachers, businessmen, or preachers, but poor laboring people. And subjectively, the young men did not identify with the establishment. Which is not to say that their families had no standing in the community or that some of the youths did not have their sights fixed on college. Charles Foushee, for instance, believed that the Foushee name was well known in the community, and that consequently he and his brothers and sisters had opportunities and experiences that other blacks might not have had. Nevertheless, college was not among these. "I did not think about even going to college," Charles remembered. Harold Foster's mother also had standing in the community as a PTA leader and an activist in church and civic affairs. However, she was a single parent raising three children in a small house that didn't belong to her and she worked at the university for minimal wages. She did not see either herself or Harold as part of the black middle class. This class awareness was revealed in advice she gave to her son in 1963. She advised him to pull back before he got killed, and she predicted that the gains of the movement would not fall to all blacks equally: "When you all break the door down, it will be Mr. McDougal's daughter who goes in because she'll have the money."³⁶ James Brittian's mother was a domestic and his father was a gas station attendant. William Cureton's father was a plasterer and his mother was a domestic. Some of the youths hoped to go to college, including Foster, Brittian, and Mason, but most of the others did not.

William Chafe argues persuasively that the most significant thing that the freshmen at North Carolina A & T did to get to the point where they decided to commit themselves to the lunch counter protest was develop a sense of solidarity—"They found each other."³⁷ In Chapel Hill, however, this process had

³⁶Haddie B. Foster, Interview by Tina Harrison, 26 August 1974, interview 98-99, tape recording, Oral History Program, Manuscript Department, Duke University Library, Durham, North Carolina.

³⁷William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 115.

taken place over a period of many years. More so than the A & T students, or black college students generally, the young people in Chapel Hill had already gone through a sorting out process.

By 1960, then, the character of the group had become relatively set. The members of the group knew who they were and had definite opinions about what set them apart.

Thomas Mason felt that there was only a very few students who were really “aware” during the late 1950s. Along with Foster and Brittian, he mentioned Cureton and his cousin, David Mason. “Despite age differences, those who stood out hung together,” he recalled. Mason and James Brittian, both fifteen in 1960, were among the youngest in the group. The rest were seventeen or eighteen, with a few, like Braxton Foushee, in their early twenties.

Harold Foster noted that the group was set apart, as well, by their level of intimacy and their historical sense of mission attached to the Pottersfield neighborhood. The group that Foster ran with was probably about a dozen, from families named Cureton, Geer, Foushee, Strowd, Purefoy, Merritt, and Alston. And while it included “allies” from other parts of town, “... there was a core there that had to be dealt with—me, Geer, and Cureton:”

There was a kind of... There was just a feelin’ there that had grown up among us because of our association. And so if Geer would say something I would have an instant understandin’ of what he meant because I knew where he was comin’ from.... Same thing with Bill Cureton. Same thing with many of ‘em. We knew each other’s minds. We’d all been through school together.... We were from what was called the Pottersfield and we had seen this as a section of town that had some kind of historical significance in the town—historical significance as far as makin’ a contribution to the activities that we were workin’ on. The baddest people, we were doing the toughest things in town, came from Pottersfield.

Not only were Foster and his friends close, they were also leaders. When they heard about Greensboro, this characteristic motivated and prepared them to act.

Cureton saw himself and the others as both more intelligent and less willing than other students at Lincoln to go by the rules of the establishment:

You had certain individuals in there that did things by the rule; in other words, they came out valedictorian, and salutatorian and all that, but they were by no means the smartest, smartest individual. They did everything by the rule. They studies, everything that was required.... They weren’t in our group.... Our group members basically, not all of them, but the most of them were the more intelligent. If all of them had applied themselves,

the people that got the awards and everything, never would have gotten them.³⁸

Thomas Mason agreed that members of the group were intellectuals "... in the sense of challenging the given norm. Critical thinkers. Good students. Read a lot. Questioned." By way of illustration, Mason noted that he had been suspended from Lincoln for two weeks because he defended use of the term "black" instead of "Negro." Later, he got in trouble for showing interest in the Cuban Revolution. He reasoned that, given the United States government's historically poor treatment of blacks, "If the government was so opposed to the Cuban Revolution, there might be something to it." The schools taught Marx "as the devil," according to Mason, and generally tried to "teach the norm." When he and James were invited to attend a conference at UNC with students from the Soviet Union and Canada, the white Superintendent tried to prevent them from going.

Most fundamentally, they were rebellious. It had started at an early age around issues of parental control, and in the cases of Foster and others, at least, this personal rebelliousness had carried over into opposition to segregation and accommodationist views among black leaders and parents. These youths had been attracted to each other because of their similar attitudes and backgrounds, as well as because they lived in the same neighborhood and attended the same school. By the time the sixties arrived, they were ready, and they were not alone.

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Several black women, including Mary Mason, her sister Gloria, and Vivian Foushee were part of the young adult activist core that joined Harold Foster and his friends following the initial sitdown protest at Colonial Drug. Along with young adult males, including Hilliard Caldwell and Braxton Foushee, these women took over an important share of the organizing in 1960. But it appears that no female Lincoln students took a leading role during the first high tide of the Chapel Hill movement, though large numbers participated.

The fact that young black women did not step forward first in 1960, and did not lead, does not necessarily mean that young men were any more aware or concerned about segregation than young women. As we have seen, in the Mason family, the older sisters challenged segregation in various ways long before 1960. And certainly, a comment by Lincoln student Lonita Terrel in the *Chapel Hill Weekly* of February 15, 1960 reflected a clear view in favor of

³⁸William Cureton, Interview by Kenneth Hamilton, 25 August 1974, tape recording and transcript, Oral History Program, Manuscript Department, Duke University Library, Durham, North Carolina.

sitdown protests: “If there isn’t integration soon I think we should take steps similar to those taken by the students at A & T and in Durham.”³⁹

It takes more than the thought, however, to bring the thought to action. Just as the four A & T students in Greensboro were able to act because they found each other, developed trust, and challenged each other, the young men from Pottersfield were able to act because they “knew each other’s minds.” Indeed, it may be that gender roles encouraged the formation of male groups more than female groups. In any case, traditional gender roles allowed the young men to feel the responsibility to lead, the confidence to initiate aggressive and possibly dangerous action, and the need to protect women rather than involve women.

Nevertheless, Lincoln women participated in the movement following the first sitdown protest at Colonial Drug. And young women generally took an increasingly assertive role as the movement unfolded in 1963-64. One particular group of friends played a leading role. These young women had been friends before the movement, and like the young men from Pottersfield, they were not from the more influential black families. For this reason, in part, they were prepared to throw themselves into battle. “One of the most spirited” of these young women, according to Harold Foster, was Stella Farrar. Stella was four years younger than Harold. They were, in some ways perhaps, kindred spirits, and they had a close personal relationship that broke off before the movement.

There were also young black women in the community who were not in high school who became movement activists. Marie Roberson was one of these women, and like James Brittian, her involvement in the Chapel Hill movement transformed her into a lifelong Chapel Hill community activist.

Although these women did not play a prominent role in the movement building process of 1960, their stories are part of the origins of the movement as well. In particular, their stories help illuminate why there was such a strong female presence in the movement throughout its history.

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When Hurricane Hazel came through Chapel Hill in 1957, Stella Farrar had to take a taxi home from Northside Elementary School because she lived “out in the country.” Estes Drive, in those days, was a dead-end dirt road coming off Airport Road. Stella’s grandfather, James Blacknell, had owned a good deal of land in the area. He was a farmer, raising sweet potatoes, watermelons, and cotton.⁴⁰

³⁹J.A.C. Dunn, “The Negro Speaks On Integration, Part III,” *Chapel Hill Weekly*, 15 February 1960, 1.

⁴⁰Stella Farrar, Interview by author, 7 March 1994, Chapel Hill, tape recording in the possession of the author.

Mr. Blacknell divided his land among four children, including Stella's mother. Toy and Della Farrar lived on Estes Drive with their nine children and many relatives for neighbors. Stella's father was a cement finisher who worked for the university. Her mother was a domestic.

My mom was a domestic worker and my father was a cement finisher.... She worked for Charley "Choo Choo" Justice's mom. And they used to live right up here.... And I remember, they had a dog (chuckle).... His name was Danny, and that dog, he hated black people. He would not run after anybody but black people, [but] I was too quick for him.

Stella felt that her mother had "a good relationship" with her employer. Even though Mrs. Justice apparently had a racist dog, she nevertheless thought to send gifts of food and used clothing home to Stella and her brothers and sister:

She would always be givin' my mom clothes, you know, and food, and stuff. Course, you know, she probably wasn't makin' that much. But she would just give her little extras, like hand me down clothes and extra food that she had in the house. My mom would bring that home for us.

Mrs. Farrar didn't talk to Stella about her work or about white people. "You see, back then," Stella recalled, "white people, that was their food." Nevertheless, like James Brittan, Stella Farrar could not help but notice the drudgery of her mother's life and the toll it took on the family. Just as Cornelia Spencer Love's old coat did not help Ed Caldwell Jr.'s mother that much, old clothes and leftovers did not shorten the hours Mrs. Farrar had to work to make ends meet.

Some time in elementary school Stella developed a different dream for herself. She did not want to be a domestic worker or take in laundry:

I didn't want to do that. I didn't want to do that. Because, I mean, you know, I would see my mom ironing somebody else's clothes, and we had to iron our own clothes, washing somebody else's clothes, and we had to wash our own clothes, because sometime she be too tired to do it... especially little stuff that she had to put starch in and have it real stiff collars... ironing handkerchiefs, little dainty items.... After she finished doing theirs then there wasn't any time for her to do ours, so we had to do it ourselves.

After school, many of the children would congregate at Nick's Grill before going on to the Community Center later in the day. Stella's dream was born there.

I wanted to be a model, a fashion model.... It was this lady up there who was on this neon light advertising Miller beer, and she was so pretty, and people used to always tell me I looked just like her.

Like many other young black people in the 1950s, Stella Farrar hoped for a future that was not so confined as the world of her parents. But there were many pitfalls for young black women coming of age in Chapel Hill, nor would a black child have the same resources as a white child to help her up:

I wanted to be a model, a fashion model. But then after I had a child I kinda, just forgot all about that.... I hated it, because I didn't want any children, I didn't want any children at that time. I just--... and then my mom and my dad were angry with me because I got pregnant. And then I had to go through that. It was awful, I hated it.

Stella had her child in ninth grade. She had to stay out of school until Dierdra was born, but her mother stopped working to help her with the baby, and she was able to go back to school and graduate in 1964. Nor was this unusual.

Listen, there was no birth control. We didn't know anything about birth control. And your parents didn't talk to you about, you know, about what could happen to you if you had sex, because that was something that was not discussed. So, you know, you go out and you experience it, and then this happens to you. So what do you do? You have to have the child because you don't know anything about abortions and stuff. Little white girls that went to Chapel Hill High School, they knew about things like that, see, because [their parents] could send them away, have their abortion and come back. Next week they back in school.

Just as Mary Mason had felt racism deeply for the first time when she got turned down for a summer job, Stella Farrar felt the unfairness resulting from segregation as she ventured out in the world. She thought about the difference in the choices available to her and to white girls, and she increasingly noticed other signs of her inferiority in the eyes of whites.

See, I knew that it was something wrong because why do we have water fountains, one say "colored," one say "white;" bathroom, "colored," "white;" theater downtown, we can't go there. We got a black theater in Carrboro--Midway Theater, fifteen cents to go to the movies.

Although Stella did not spend much time in other black neighborhoods because she lived out in the country, her family did attend First Baptist Church. At that time it was located on West Franklin Street where Yates Motor Company now stands, across from Colonial Drug.

Stella's mother would always give the kids enough money to get lifesavers or something. And if they had more money, they could go to the Dairy Bar and get ice cream.

Sometimes we'd have enough to get ice cream, but... we couldn't ever sit down in there to eat it. Couldn't sit down in Big John's either, 'cause he had a little eatery in there, little lunch counter. So we couldn't sit down in there and eat. We would always have to buy our stuff and leave... [and] I resented it. Yes. Yes. Because I'm sayin, "I'm spending my money here. Why am I not allowed to sit down and enjoy what I purchase here?"

Stella believed that when lunch counter protests broke out in Greensboro in 1960, the young people in Chapel Hill took the lead because "it was time for a change." She also felt that most of the older black people, like her parents, were complacent. Some would say, "I ain't goin' no jail." Speaking of her parents' attitude toward segregation, Stella recalled:

They had gotten so used to it, you know, until it just didn't really matter to them. As long as they were happy with getting a salary and having a job, it just didn't matter.

But Stella and many of her friends did not share such views. They picketed and sat down at Big John's many times for their rights. And they endured his punishment to keep their dreams alive:

We had a walkout at school. And they said that we're gonna go downtown and we're gonna sit-in. We went to Big John's, it was Colonial Drug Store but it was always called Big John's. And I remember that when we got in there, he and his wife both were there, and I remember they pulled out these cattle prods. And told us if we didn't get out they were gonna do this to us, and they stuck it to our skin and shocked us, and stuff. 'Bout thirty five of us on the inside, and we went straight to the lunch counter, and then... we locked ourselves, arms and stuff, together. And we just sat there until the police came.... [The cattle prod] hurt. It stung. But we didn't move. We didn't move. We sat there and we endured that pain, because it was determination, and, "My god, why should we be treated like this? We're human beings too."

Stella felt that men took the lead back in 1960, not because the male leadership was better than the female leadership, but because "back then the men were more outgoing than the young ladies were":

You know how sometimes females will kind of shy away from doing something? ... But I was never afraid to go on a sit-in, never.

As the movement unfolded, Stella saw her friend Colleen Burnette burned by ammonia thrown in her face at Brady's Restaurant, and she saw other demonstrators get urinated on by Mrs. Watts at the Watts Grill. Nevertheless, she and a small group of female friends kept on volunteering for even the most dangerous protests.

Stella and her friends—Charliese Cotton, Shirley Pendergraph, Phyllis Timberlake, and Emma Davis—had developed “a close little bond” before the civil rights movement. It appears that, like the group of young men around Foster, Geer, and Cureton, Stella and her friends were not limited by restraints of respectability or fear.

We were always the ones that weren't afraid to be arrested. Like, some people would, they would pull back and say, “Well, I'll go to this place, but I'm not gonna go to this place.” But, like I said, we were always there. “We gon sit-in at this place? Ok. Let's go.” That's the only difference. But, like some, you had one little group that was kind of reserved. They would only go at certain times and when you were goin' to certain places. But any time that we could go, we would go.

This activist core of young women differed from the activist core of young men in many ways. Their group was not rebellious against authority, generally. Nor did Stella consider them especially intellectual or more aware than others. “We weren't no smart-alecks, but we weren't dummies either—somewhere around the C, D area. We weren't the little smart kids in high-school.” But like the male group, the young women provided spark and backbone for the movement. And as they became veterans they took on the role of orienting and training new recruits. And it was because of their character that they were able to play this role:

I guess we were the “wild bunch”—not rebellious as far as, you know, against white people, or anything like that. No. No. We believed in the church and we always attended church. We always attended church, 'cause that was the backbone of your growing up. You had to go to church. But, I guess, that little group, it just kinda stood out from the rest of 'em, because we were always ready, you know.

*

Marie Roberson was born on Whitaker Street in Carrboro on New Year's Eve, 1940. She grew up during her early years in Tin Top, a small black community between Chapel Hill and Carrboro by the railroad tracks, over behind the car wash. Marie's mother was Mary Jane Roberson from Chapel Hill, and her father was Thomas Farrington. There were nine children and Marie was the

fourth. Her father was not around much. He was in the army and did not live with the family.⁴¹

Marie's mother lived with her mother for several years and then moved away, leaving Marie with her grandmother. After a few years Marie was sent to Detroit to live with her mother's brother, and this is where she started school. After two years she went to live with her mother in Washington, D.C.

The family returned to North Carolina in 1952, after Marie's grandmother died, and moved into her house on Lloyd Street in Carrboro. It was here that Marie's racial awakening took place.

The black communities in Carrboro and Chapel Hill were a far cry from the urban environments of Detroit and Washington, D.C. Marie recalled that she enjoyed growing up here in the 1950s.

[The black community] was basically like dirt streets, log cabins, railroad houses.... But it was fun, you know. It had its good part and bad part, but I enjoyed it.

One of the biggest differences Marie noticed was white people. There had been none in D.C. She was not even thinking about race relations until she encountered segregation in Chapel Hill and Carrboro.

When we moved back here to Chapel Hill my mind was not on, like, I really paid little attention to race relationships. And I guess because where we lived in D.C. there were blacks, and, there weren't any whites, but there were Puerto Ricans, stuff like this. We all seemed to get along together, and when we moved back here it really never dawned to me 'till we went to stores and you had a black waitin' room and a white waitin' room. And if you wanted somethin' out of a cafe you had to go round to the back, if it was a white cafe. And it really dawned on me, "Why was this here?" Because it wasn't what we faced in D.C. We didn't have prejudice problems.

When Marie was asked if there were any particular racial incidents from that period that were important for her she responded:

I think all of 'em were important. When you go somewhere, especially when you travel, and black people had to sit in the back of the bus, that sort of bothered me. Because I felt like... why not just sit anywhere you want to sit. Then there was signs, like if you use the bus station, and there was a jukebox joint there, but they had a black side and a white side at the Chapel Hill bus station. And I remember picketin' that bus station.

⁴¹Marie Roberson, Interview by author, 5 February 1994, Chapel Hill, tape recording in the possession of the author.

And I remember [the manager of the Bus Station Grill] old man Leo—still runnin’ a cafe here—he said before he integrated he would shut it down. And he did.

Nevertheless, there was one particular incident that made a great impression on Marie. In 1956 Marie came down with rheumatic fever, but because of a debt owed the new hospital in Chapel Hill she could not see a doctor.

I remember goin’ to the hospital and my first encounter was a white waiting room and a black waiting room. I remember them... signs. I remember, I had rheumatic fever. And I remember, my mamma not able to pay fifty cents, or a dollar, to get me to the clinic. And I remember they had a “stop” thing on it. It was old man Brown. His father owned, E. A. Brown owned a furniture company right next to the police station.

Mr. Brown, whose father owned the furniture store, was an administrator at North Carolina Memorial Hospital. It was his practice, according to Marie, to put a “stop” on people who owed money on their bills. This resulted in many black people being unable to use the hospital.

I remember my mother taking us to another doctor in Carrboro when we got sick, because he would do it on credit. It was Dr. Hooker. Dr. Hooker, I never will forget it. He was real fat. And he would look at us. I don’t know how well he wanted to touch us, but he would look at us and give us medicine or give us a prescription for medicine when we couldn’t get to the hospital.⁴²

So in the first few years after Marie Roberson returned to her home in Chapel Hill, she became painfully aware of the “signs” of her inferiority in the eyes of white people. Like other African Americans who grew up in the 1950s, Marie could remember her childhood in Chapel Hill as being both fun and full of sorrow. And she knew very well the feelings expressed by Pauli Murray in *Proud Shoes* when she spoke of what it felt like to be a black child growing up in Durham—“The tide of color beat upon me ceaselessly, relentlessly.” To Marie, years later, such feelings brought back thoughts of a condition for which she knew only one word:

⁴²After the Civil Rights Movement, Marie, Birdine Edwards, Mildred Riggsbee, Suphronia Cheeks, and several other women joined with Mildred Ringwalt of the Inter-Faith Council, Dee Gamble, white Chapel Hill minister Rev. Robert Seymour, and black Durham activist Howard Fuller to organize a local chapter of the Welfare Rights Organization. They chose health care and housing as their first targets for corrective action. And among their many other accomplishments, they succeeded in forcing the hospital to stop the practice of putting “stops” on people. It is also interesting to note that E. A. Brown was the landlord from whom John Carswell rented space for his drugstore.

And so, it's rough. I guess everybody, all blacks felt the same way. I don't have good memories [voice breaks] of it. When I think about my childhood in Chapel Hill I really think about sad, it really brings me back to the days of the eighteen hundreds when blacks were slaves. Because that's really all they were, you know, really slaves. You could only do so much as they let you do, and they didn't let you do that much. You could only say what they wanted you to say and get by with it. You say anything else you probably in a lot of trouble. So, you know, to me it was just, it was slavery.

When Marie came back from Washington, D.C, the fear that all blacks knew deep down as a result of segregation began to penetrate her innocence. These were the "bitter hours" when Marie discovered she was "black and poor and small," when a knowledge dawned on her about the viciousness of which white people were capable. It stole her carefree days, the days of feeling completely safe that are the birthright of every child.

It was from the older people that Marie heard the stories that terrified her:

When we moved back here, the first time I ever heard of Ku Klux Klan was when I came back here at age twelve.... My stepgrandfather would talk about the Klan, and I'd ask him who they were and what they meant, and he told me what they were, but I never really seen a hood. And that was frightening because I remember us going to an all black movie, on Saturday night seeing a late movie, and running all the way home, ... afraid we might run into the Klans, or whatever.

The stories Marie heard were not about some mythical past or events that had occurred in Mississippi or other far off places. They were about people with names in Chapel Hill.

[The older people told stories about] how there were lynchings, how they lynched black people. One story of it was that a man used to work at the movie, name was Rob Snipes, used to work at the Hollywood Theater, and how they castrated him. And I guess that was before I got back here to North Carolina.

And these were stories that to me as a kid would frighten you. You always believed what your elders told you. We knew that they were more wiser than we were, and a lot of things they'd tell you, "You can't go this way," you know. "Don't step on that. That's Mr. so-and-so's property."

Just as fear stole Marie's peace of mind, poverty stole her time for friends and play and hurried her to adulthood. When she was thirteen, Marie went to work at the Pines Restaurant after school.

I remember being about thirteen years old workin' at The Pines Restaurant from four to twelve at night peelin' potatoes so that we could have extra money comin' to our household.... We were makin' about a dollar, or maybe seventy five cents an hour at The Pines Restaurant.... A lot of people worked down there. They were underage people. Some of them were school age. Most of them were school age children. I was thirteen, ah, I guess [the others] were fifteen, sixteen years old, some more probably eleven, twelve. He had maybe one or two [grownups] in there cookin'. And I remember goin' in there peelin' a hundred pounds of potatoes. He'd bring a whole hundred pound bag of white potatoes, and peel those, help wash pots at closin' time and that was it.

Mr. Merritt would pick up the kids at four after school and drop them off uptown on Franklin Street after midnight. "He'd put you out up there and you'd walk on," Marie recalled.

Marie's first child, Gwen, was born in 1955 when Marie was fourteen. Like most other black women she knew, both her age and older, she raised her child without a father in the household, with the assistance of neighbors and relatives. Getting pregnant put an end to her school days forever. When her mother moved to New York the same year, Marie stayed with the next door neighbor. At sixteen she was out on her own.

Despite the fear and hardship that were part of Marie's coming of age in Chapel Hill, she was not a person who was willing to set aside all her dreams. And as Marie's understanding of racial prejudice grew, so did her determination to fight it.

Marie sensed the fear older people revealed in their stories and their warnings, but she developed an attitude of resistance rather than submission. Like Elizabeth Cotton, Marie was bothered, in particular, by the deference older black people showed whites.

It really bothered me, I guess it always bothered me to hear old people call young white people "sir." That's something that just irritated me, and I never—I know why now, but to me, long time ago, it would irritate me.

Marie also knew from close personal experience that these traditions, embodying the racial etiquette of the South, were not mere words. They represented the larger patterns of power and submission that characterized the labor relations, political participation, and social dynamics of the period. They both reflected the status quo and enforced the status quo, for to fail to participate in these cultural forms was to make oneself a target, whether one was black or white:

My stepgrandfather, I remember him real good. He worked for a man called Bill Hardy, used to own the store that Cliff Meat Market's in.

To me, he would work from sunup to sundown, and he would bring home something like ten dollars a week, some rotten fish on Saturday, and some old dried up fruit. And this was his pay.

And it burnt me up that he sit up there and chopped that, worked at that wood yard. Because he was not able to read and write he didn't make nothin'. [Mr. Hardy] felt like he didn't need to pay him but that little ten dollars a week.

I guess he was scared, 'cause I used to ask him, "Why don't you make him give you your money?" And he would just smile, "That's just the way it is."

And I remember him having a heart attack and getting sick. And he stayed with us then. Stayed with me, because I had an apartment then. And I'd take him to the hospital. And I remember them sendin' him to Duke, and they were sayin' his heart's real bad. And I remember putting diapers on him, you know, 'till he got well. And he went back out to Hardy's wood yard. And, bless God, the man's still workin', choppin' wood at his wood yard, cuttin' his grass and all this kind of stuff. And he had to be somewhere along about eighty years old.

And I remember [Mr. Hardy] buildin' a little tar shack out of some wood, corrugated.... Because by that time he had started gettin' his, long time ago they called it "old age assistance." And he would never see his check. He worked at Hardy's wood yard and got his old age assistance, and he would never see a dime of that money. [Hardy] didn't give it to him.

... And after he built that little tarry shack, one room shack for him to live in, we used to go out there. [Mr. Hardy] didn't like us to come out there to see him, but we would wait 'till night come, and we'd go the back way in Carrboro, and go see him. And wasn't any electricity in the shack. There was a wood stove and a bed... and that was all he had in it. And he died in there. One morning I started out there, and I think that's New Year's Day, forgot what year it was, and I started out to see about him. 'Cause I had thought about him all that night before, and I was going, and I met this guy and he said, "You know, old man Henry died, don't you." I said, "No, I didn't." And he died. And as of today Bill Hardy, wherever his shoes [?] is, I hope his soul's restin'. We still owe for his funeral.... He worked that man for nothing. That was slavery.

All of these experiences gave Marie plenty of reason to fight segregation, although she had no thought that Jim Crow could be overturned until the demonstrations started. Even then, she only became involved gradually:

With my first daughter, I remember Rev. Manley coming to me and asking me did I want her to go to a white school, which was Carrboro School. At that time there was segregated schools in Chapel Hill. Being

afraid for her, I said “no,” because I was afraid of what might happen to her. So, later on I got to thinkin’ that, it shouldn’t be a choice of, it should be a choice of whether my daughter wanted to go to that school. And she should have the freedom to be able to go to the school she wanted to. And I seen a need then to struggle, not just the people there, but it was my struggle also. So I began to picket and even went to jail for things that I thought should be our choice.... And this was the beginning of the struggle.