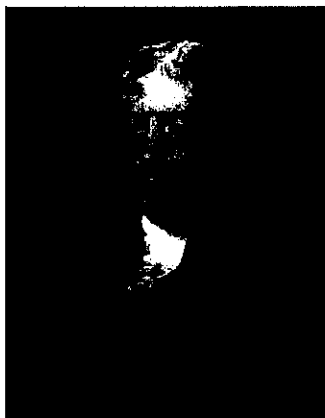




The Sounds of Silence

In 1966 Simon & Garfunkel had a number one song, President Lyndon B. Johnson created the US Department of Transportation, and US Senator Harry F. Byrd Sr. (D-VA) died at his Berryville home. The Byrd machine passed politically from father to son, Johnson appointed the first black US Cabinet member, and US Senator Willis Robertson (D-VA) lost Presidential favor. Virginia's failure to comply with the US



Charles Hamilton Houston, left, and Thomas Jefferson

Supreme Court's 1954 Brown decision, Byrd Sr.'s co-authorship of the 1956 Southern Manifesto left many civil rights issues unresolved. The 1966 Civil Rights bill struggled to survive.

Noted historian Nick Kotz: "The first roadblock was the House Rules Committee, where chairman Howard Worth Smith, an ardent segregationist from (Alexandria) Virginia kept bills bottled up. Smith, who ruled northern Virginia as his personal duchy within the political empire of Senator Harry Byrd, refused to call committee meetings whenever his dictatorial power was threatened. When 'Judge' Smith, as he was called, wanted to block a bill, he simply retired to his farm outside Washington." Democrat Smith began his

Congressional career in 1930.

In Alexandria in 1966 the subject was integration of the all-white Thomas Jefferson School. The Rosemont neighborhood protested, especially the facility. The building, Rosemont activists argued, was substandard.

"Ms. Barbara White, speaking for the Rosemont Civic Association," told The Alexandria Gazette "that she had made an inspection of the Jefferson School and 'it made me ill. It is not what we want our children to attend."

Councilman Charles Beatley complicated the problem by offering the nearby Parker-Gray High School, "lately abandoned as a Negro school and in far better shape," as a building alternative. The blunder cost City Council "\$875,000 in school renovation and expansion." Today school administrators describe the renamed Jefferson-Houston School building as a 1970 pod.

Jefferson-Houston School has long been the Alexandria City Public Schools' misbegotten stepchild. Once integrated, now re-segregated the School has repeatedly failed Advanced Yearly Progress. Whose child, which children are being left

behind? Former Alexandria resident, the NAACP's Samuel W. Tucker once filed a lawsuit on behalf of Jefferson-Houston Elementary School.

ACPS Superintendent Morton Sherman likes drama. His solution: raze the pod, expand the grades, and build anew. Like The Field of Dreams build it and they, the whites will come. If only Rosemont had come and stayed. Instead they bailed; now, with the 1999 redistricting, and before. Who are the Dreamers and at what price is public education? The price tag on the newly proposed Jefferson-Houston School building is \$39 million.

After the Civil War a defeated Virginia rejoined the Union. Education traditions held strong. Alexandria

schools, segregated since 1870, did not desegregate until 1959; five years after the US Supreme Court decided Brown v. Board of Education.

Virginia massively resisted Brown. In 1956 Senator Byrd teamed with South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond to write the Southern Manifesto, the Declaration of Constitutional Principles. "We regard the decision of the Supreme Court in the school cases as a clear abuse of judicial power. It climaxes a trend in the Federal Judiciary undertaking to legislate...to encroach upon the reserved rights of the States and the people." In Virginia schools closed rather than integrate.

In 1966 Gov. Mills Godwin convened a statewide education conference. He threw "a blinding searchlight on one of Virginia's sorest spots, education." We have "nowhere to go but up" The Alexandria Gazette concluded.

"[The fact] is inescapable," the 1966 editorial explained. "Our education trails the nation - 38th place among the 50 states in almost every aspect. This must seem incomprehensible to the outsider since we are near the top of the heap in the matter of per capita income." Not until Samuel Tucker's 1968 Green v. School Board of New Kent County, Va.—the US Supreme Court's "extension of" Brown—did Virginia School Districts implement full desegregation.

"Racial balance in the [Alexandria] elementary schools is a fundamental issue," A. Melvin Miller then-ARHA Chairman told The Washington Post in 1972, "but it seems the [school] board wants to submerge it. It is not a question of discussing busing, it is a question of getting this board to a point that it will honestly confront the issue of racial balance." Miller was one of three independent Mayoral candidates in 1976.

In 1972 The Department of Health, Education and Welfare asked Alexandria school officials to notify it "promptly" of their plans to "eliminate the last vestiges

of the dual school system" at the elementary level. Samuel Tucker's law partner, Richmond's Vice Mayor Henry L. Marsh III told *The Washington Post* Alexandria's problem was "the failure to deal with predominantly black elementary schools and what he said was a silence on

program quality." "School administrators in Northern Virginia have heard the charges before—that integrated schools have failed to meet the needs of many black students," *The Washington Post* reported in 1979. "But what perplexes school officials most is how to ensure that public schools

provide equal education. School statistics in Fairfax County, Arlington and Alexandria show that black students are less likely than white students to go on to college, to be enrolled in advanced placement courses, and to score passing grades on state-required mini-competency tests."

"In Arlington, where blacks generally scored 10 to 15 points lower than white students, school officials kicked off a home skills program designed to promote parent involvement," *The Washington Post* article continued. "In Alexandria, school administrators say the problem is not one of black and white, but rich and poor. Alexandria schools have extensive remedial programs. The advent of minimum competency testing has brought with it a fear that in 1981—when competency tests become a prerequisite for graduation—a significant number of blacks may be leaving the 12th grade without high school diplomas." Last month—32 years later—*Washington Post* reporter Kevin Sieff again referenced "the gifted gap."

Educationally has anything in Alexandria changed since 1979? In 2011 the Virginia Department of Education, using SOL standards, fully accredited 17 of 19 Alexandria City Public Schools. The exceptions: T.C. Williams High School and Jefferson-Houston School. Jefferson-Houston received accredited

with warning status in the categories of English, history and science. Only Charles Barrett Elementary School passed AYP, the federal No Child Left Behind. For the second consecutive year the Commonwealth of Virginia did not make AYP.

"Alexandria's 15 elementary schools have racial ratios from a low of 1.9% Negro at the 825-pupil Charles Barrett School to a high of 94.7% Negro at the 925-pupil Jefferson-Houston School," *The Washington Post* reported in 1972. While the statistics are no longer wholly comparable, the trend line K-5 leaves Jefferson-Houston wannabes unimpressed. No later than 2005 Jefferson-Houston parents were voting with their feet.

Racial balance, program quality, or new school construction? The conclusions are yours. I wish only that Alexandria's School Board show greater courage, more leadership than witnessed heretofore. Board members can begin by listening carefully to the Jefferson-Houston residential community. Theirs will not be The Sound of Silence.



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