

Alexandria's Blacks Find Power Eroding

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Their football uniforms and textbooks were hand-me-downs from the nearby high school for white children. Yet, for the thousands of Alexandria blacks who attended Parker-Gray High School before it was integrated in 1959, the leftovers and the school were all they had.

"We learned to endure and overcome our hardships without feeling sorry for ourselves," says Roger Anderson, class of 1943. "That in itself gave us something to hang onto. We lived in a completely different and separate world. Our school was the center of our life."

Parker-Gray, named after two 19th century Alexandria black educators, closed in the mid-1970s. Its football trophies and prom pictures were given to custodians, stowed in various city offices or just thrown out. The city plans to sell the boarded school to developers and, because it is a block from the planned Braddock Road Metro Station, the sale may bring as much as \$6 million.

Even waiting to be torn down, Parker-Gray still is a symbol of

struggle and success to blacks in Alexandria, and the school's 150-member alumni association has proposed that the Braddock Metro stop be renamed after Parker-Gray.

Hundreds of the city's blacks signed a petition supporting the change, but the City Council recently voted it down, contending that the

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Alexandria Blacks Apathetic Over Their Dwindling Power Base

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\$300,000 cost of the switch was too much and that the name Parker-Gray would confuse Metro riders.

"There has been a precedent set in naming the stops after street names," said Councilman Marlee Inman at the time.

The vote angered Parker-Gray advocates, who say they will bring the issue before the council again. It was a further indication that, despite a jump from 14 percent of the population in 1970 to 22 percent in 1980, blacks lack political muscle in the city.

"There is a lack of economic clout, number one," says Rev. John O. Peterson, head of the Alfred Street Baptist Church, the oldest black congregation in the city. Peterson,

whose ouster from the school board by the City Council this year was seen as a measure of declining black influence, says there is another, more subtle, factor undercutting black power in Alexandria.

"Because of their heritage, blacks learned the hard way that people could not be trusted — even their own kind. If a black in the community has some kind of economic clout, he will be regarded as subversive, or white-financed," he says.

"There's potential clout," says Democratic councilman Donald Casey. "But it's fragmented."

Black leaders say it is that fragmentation that led to the defeat of the Parker-Gray proposal.

"It's a whitewash, all of it," says Nelson

Greene, the city's lone black councilman. "Three hundred thousand dollars is nothing compared to what the sale of the property will take in. I think there's just a problem with naming the school after two black educators."

"You can bet," says a Parker-Gray alumnus, "there wouldn't be a problem if they wanted to name the stop after Jeff Davis." For years black groups have been unhappy that the city maintains a statute of a Confederate soldier in the middle of Washington Street.

Says Parker-Gray alumnus Anderson: "In all the years I've been here, we've seen our tax dollars spent on things like the Lyceum. Gadsby's Tavern — white history."

"When I read the newspaper of Alexan-

dria's heritage from 1790, I didn't see one mention of blacks," says James McCullough, another Parker-Gray graduate.

"If a man from Mars had read that, he wouldn't even know we existed."

The council vote dismayed alumni groups and black residents, but it did not surprise them. To many blacks, the council's decision was seen as business as usual in a city where blacks are being displaced by the forces of economic redevelopment that have made Alexandria expensive, trendy and upper middle class.

Some council members said that had more blacks turned out for hearings on the name change the outcome might have been different, an assessment that many blacks dispute.

"The black community doesn't have a lot

of confidence that numbers are going to change the council's mind," says George Lambert, director of the Northern Virginia branch of the Washington Urban League. "There's a feeling in the community that whenever it's a black issue, money is always a problem. It doesn't seem to work that way for white interests."

"The biggest problem is that most of the people downtown now are not natives — all they're thinking about is money," says one Parker-Gray graduate. "They weren't here 20, 30 years ago when the city was being shaped. Anything that connects to the black history of the city, they're not interested in keeping."

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Alexandria's Blacks Merely Endure as Their Numbers Expand

ALEXANDRIA, From B6

The black population in Alexandria has increased steadily since 1960. It now stands at about 23,000 out of a population of slightly more than 100,000. Black politicians and ministers estimate that at least 40 percent of the black community is registered to vote, but say that blacks do not always turn out in those numbers.

Stirred by the talk of federal budget cuts, Alexandria's blacks turned out in force in the recent gubernatorial election, voting overwhelmingly for Democrat Charles S. Robb and helping to oust Republican state Del. David Speck.

Alexandria Mayor Charles Beatley says that influence among the city's black community can be divided broadly into three groups: old-line middle-class black families that have been in the city for generations; church leaders and civic organizations such as the Urban League and NAACP, and black-oriented tenant organizations.

The old-line families belong to such influential black civic organizations as the 118-member Progressive Club, founded years ago by seven black men who had just gotten clerical jobs in the government. Members include the city's first black magistrate, the first black chairman of the school board, the president of the local NAACP and councilman Greene.

Club president Courtney Brooks says that the Progressives are more interested in civic works than politics. "We do charity and inner city work," says Brooks. "But we're not really politically involved."

Also influential are the ministers who lead Alexandria's black congregations.

"The ministers in this city are not as involved as they could be," says a long-time black resident and Parker-Gray alumnus. "Some of them are just too interested in their own churches."

"They don't really believe in mixing religion and politics," adds Greene.

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Officials of the Urban League and the NAACP appear at City Council meetings, but tend to keep a low profile in city political issues such as property tax reduction and condominium conversion, Councilman James Moran says.

Potential black political power also is diluted when black groups bicker among themselves. In 1979, for example, Democrat Greene and black activist Alice Morgan were the only blacks running in the city's at-large race for the City Council. Instead of supporting both candidates, the black community split into two camps. Greene won; Morgan was defeated.

The divisions also are geographic. Traditional black neighborhoods in and near Old Town slowly have been transformed into white neighborhoods, dispersing blacks throughout the city and leaving them without a geographical power base.

None of this bodes well for a memorial to the name of Parker-Gray High School.

"I'm very disappointed," says Greene. "The whole thing's in limbo right now. Once they tear down that building, the name will be gone. Blacks did not show up at council meetings and make their position known. They missed a chance. They do not use their power. I've been telling them that for 30 years; I guess they leave too much to faith."