

CIVIL RIGHTS IN ALEXANDRIA

Jones v. The School Board of Alexandria



PHOTO/GETTY IMAGES

Above: Kathryn Turner enters a car after her first day at William Ramsay Elementary the day after Alexandria schools integrated. **Right:** An article written by Edward Peeks lists the children who integrated city schools and the parents who accompanied them. It was published in the Afro-American on Feb. 21, 1959.

The day two sisters proved T.C. Williams wrong

This is the third installment in an ongoing series about civil rights in Alexandria.

Former superintendent opposed desegregation lawsuit 60 years ago

BY JIM MCELHATTON

Sixty years ago next week, the namesake of Alexandria's only public high school – former superintendent Thomas

Chambliss “T.C.” Williams – appeared in a federal courtroom to defend the policies that preserved segregation in the city’s public schools.

Unreported at the time, the schools chief, in his initial denial of the students’ application

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9 enter 3 Va. schools

BY EDWARD PECK

Alexandria did not get a single Tuesday in the Virginia Segregation column as more children entered these public schools formerly set aside for whites.

“Everything went exactly as planned,” said Police Chief Edward A. Mason, who has 40 officers on duty at the schools as a precaution against trouble.

Raymond W. Sanger, assistant school superintendent, said there were no incidents or calls from white people.

Student bodies suspended will allow to appeal Hester for cooperation in all three schools, he said.

ALEXANDRIA joined Arlington and Norfolk in periodic integration, starting with a “smelter” Little Rock.

The nine children were accompanied by their parents to William High School on Seminary Rd. near Shirley Park Elementary in West Alexandria, and Public Elementary downtown on Second St.

James E. Loman, 8, and his sister, Margaret, 6, entered Public at 10:30 a.m. on Wednesday at 1001 N. Fairfax St. They were accompanied by their mother, Mrs. Hazel Colman, and grandmother, Mrs. Ella Loman.

Police turned back the grandmother at the entrance of the school grounds in keeping with a decision to allow only pupils and their parents to enter.

Speakers at all three schools consisted mainly of newsmen and photographers who were kept by police guards in defined limits.

NO REPORTER or photographer was allowed to enter a building with persons who carried cameras, except for the admission of the children.

The Ramsey went Kathryn Turner, 11, her sister and brother, Brenda, 7, and George, 6, accompanied by her mother, Mrs. Sarah Turner, 21 Lincoln St.

Also Jessie Mae Jones, 8, with her parents, Mr. and Mrs. J. Jones, 210 Seminary Ave.

The fifth child in the group was Sarah England, also 8, 200 Lincoln St.

HER OLDER sister and brother, Frank, 14, and James, 12, entered Francis at 10:30 a.m. toward the other end of town.

They were accompanied by their mother, Mrs. Sarah M. Hester, 1001 N. Fairfax St. The father, Jack Hester, was on his construction job at Washington Avenue.

Mr. Jones is a taxi driver for the Army. Mrs. Turner runs a beauty supply business in Washington.

“EVERYTHING went well,” Mr. Turner said after the activities concluded in Ramsey. “It was just another school day.”

He expressed the sentiment of other parents who like the children took the history-making day in stride.

“I got to go to work now,” Mr. Turner said, driving from his job to his business in the Klaxton.

Reporters and cameramen gathered around the homes before and after the children left for school.

THE NINE were among 16 who applied for transfers. They were admitted under a 1954 court order issued by Federal District Judge Albert V. Bryan.

The Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals turned down a plea by the Alexandria school board for delay of integration until next September.

The board decided against appealing the case to the Supreme Court and went ahead to integrate.

ATTORNEYS FOR the plaintiffs were Frank D. Reeves, James M. Nabes 2nd, and Charles L. Tucker of Alexandria.

The 60 policemen used in Alexandria were some of the 100 who were ordered to the school by the Supreme Court and went ahead to integrate.

Those named last enrollment in the air in Alexandria there have had been in Arlington.

The parents elsewhere moved a child to live at the Old Dominion. “In a few years, we’ll all be one happy family.”



PHOTO/SHELLEY CASTLE PHOTOGRAPHY

PUPPY BOWL XV

Introducing Pirate, Alexandria's own Puppy Bowl XV competitor.

Don't be fooled by those big brown eyes, though – this Animal Welfare League of Alexandria alum plays ruff.

Read the full story on page 10.

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School Board

Amended high school capacity plan gets unanimous approval.

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Husband-and-wife duo Ellie and Drew Holcomb bring “The You and Me Tour” to the Birchmere.

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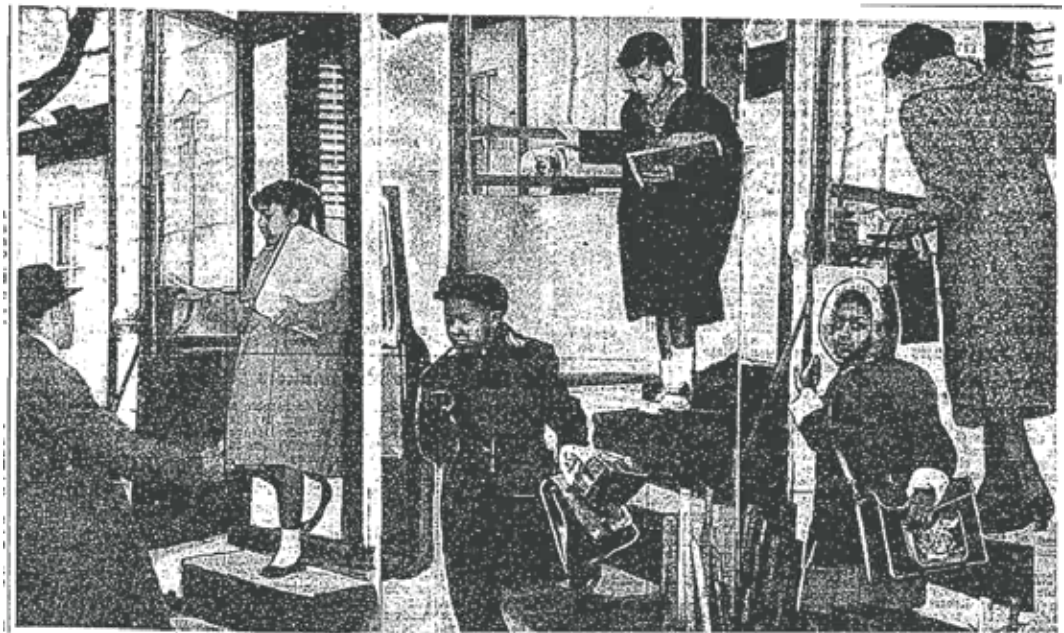
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HISTORY'S CHILDREN — Four of the children ordered admitted by the courts to a previously all-white elementary school are shown leaving for school on the first day of Alexandria desegregation. From

left to right, Georg Turner assists his daughter, Kathryn; Gerald Turner runs ahead of Sally Ragland at top of stairs and Sandra Turner precedes her mother, Mrs. Edith Turner, closing the door. The three

Turner youngsters and Sally were driven to William Ramsey Elementary School by Mr. Turner. (AFRO Photos by Maurice Sorrell)

COURTESY/AFRO-AMERICAN

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to attend all-white schools, deemed the prospect of black and white students sitting in class together “a very questionable situation.” Williams later refused to say under oath whether he personally agreed with segregation one way or another.

Ultimately, a federal judge denied the school system’s bid to reject the applications of nine out of 14 black students seeking to attend white schools during the 1958-59 school year. On the day of that decision, Feb. 10, 1959 – more than four years after the Supreme Court’s “Brown v. Board of Education” ruling – racial barriers in Alexandria public schools quietly fell. There were no riots. There were no massive demonstrations. Except for reporters and police, few citizens bothered to show up when school opened that day.

On one hand, the lawsuit that integrated Alexandria schools, “Jones v. the School Board of Alexandria,” reflects a sad chapter in the city’s civil rights history. After all, court records and



COURTESY PHOTO

Kathryn Turner.

transcripts in the case at the National Archives reveal troubling testimony by Williams and legal arguments steeped in a time of segregation.

But the case files, including report cards and handwritten teacher notes about the students who would literally change the face of education in Alexandria, also provide, perhaps, a much more important and enduring lesson. It is about the resilience of children to change history.

“Going into that school and being able to raise your hand in class and have your homework right gave me the feeling I was OK,” Kathryn

Turner, one of the first nine black students to integrate city public schools, said.

Walking alongside Turner on the misty February morning, past police barricades, was her younger sister, second grader Sandra Turner (now Bond) and brother Gerald Turner, who was in first grade. Bond still remembers the police dogs, angry white parents and shouting reporters. More than anything, though, she recalls a deep sense of isolation in her new school.

“I think I was focused on making sure I had on my favorite coat and being apprehensive,” Bond said. “Just hoping we wouldn’t be in any jeopardy that day.”

The Turners were not alone. Other families – Lomax, Hundley, Ragland, Taylor, Jones – were also part of the lawsuit. (When Williams learned Blois Hundley, an African American school cook, had children in the lawsuit, he fired her, offering her job back only after intense backlash. She declined.)

In court papers, the le-



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gal arguments put forth by the school district to justify blocking the Turner children and others from transferring to white schools are hard to follow, at least two generations removed.

The school arguments were sometimes completely unrelated to grades. In short, though, Williams and the school board argued that these black students, along with the schools they sought to attend, simply were not ready.

One sign of how much things have changed since then is Alexandria's new superintendent, Dr. Gregory Hutchings, Ed.D., who is an African American T.C. Williams graduate. Hutchings oversees a school district that would be unrecognizable to Williams today, with students from 114 different countries and a myriad of racial and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Hutchings said in a statement that ACPS should not shy away from "uncomfort-

CRITERIA IN DETERMINATION OF ELIGIBILITY UNDER THE PUPIL ASSIGNMENT PLAN OF THE ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA CITY SCHOOL BOARD

1. Relation of residence location of the pupil with reference to schools, or school, applied for.
2. State of enrollment conditions in the schools concerned in any case, or cases, under discussion.
3. Academic achievement and mental capacity as these factors enter into conclusions on requests for entry or transfer.
4. Factors involving the health and/or well-being of the applicant which may have a bearing on the request from him.
5. Any factors which might affect the mental or emotional stability of the applicant so much as to become pertinent in placement determinations.
6. Is the applicant a bonafide resident of the city and actually entitled to attend school here.

DOCUMENT/JONES V. SCHOOL BOARD CASE FILES, NATIONAL ARCHIVES
Academics were only one small piece of the overall, highly subjective criteria Alexandria's school board relied upon to reject transfer applications of black students seeking to attend white schools in the late 1950s.

able conversations" about equity in schools, then or now.

"Even though our city and nation have made some significant progress in regards to race relations, there is no doubt in my mind that we still have a long way to go to ensure equity in our public schools," Hutchings said in the statement, noting that equity is not just about race but resources, funding, academic opportunities and other issues.

As for the Turners, they went on to excel in school.

Kathryn Turner, who eventually earned a degree in chemistry from Howard University, has had a long and successful career. She is the chief executive officer of a large technology company, Standard Technology, Inc., and she's served on the boards of publicly traded

companies as well as local charitable organizations.

Bond spent part of her professional career covering desegregation in Boston as a photojournalist.

The sisters' memories of that momentous day 60 years ago are as different as they are vivid.

Segregated Alexandria

In the late 1950s, the Turner family lived in the Lincolnia section of Alexandria, which back then was mostly rural farmland before the development and construction of Landmark Mall pushed farmers away a few years later.

Edith and George Turner met while George was stationed at Camp Lee during his time in the service.

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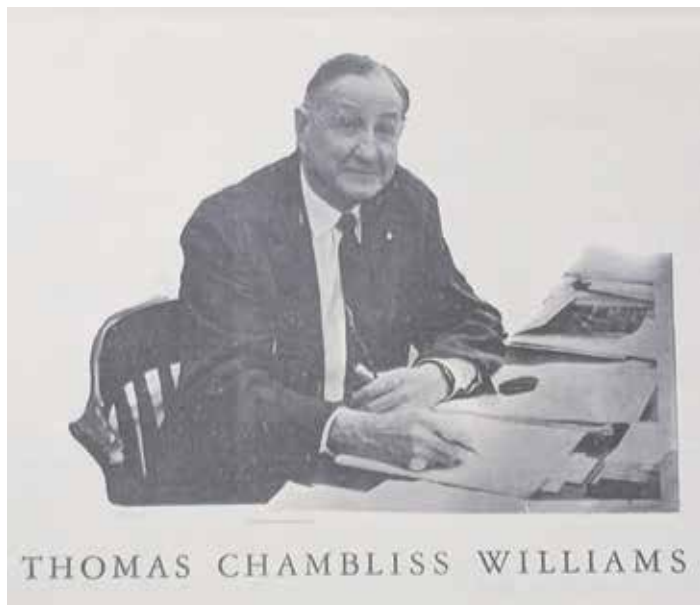
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THOMAS CHAMBLISS WILLIAMS

PHOTO/ALEXANDRIA PUBLIC LIBRARY LOCAL HISTORY/SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
Portrait of T.C. Williams for the high school dedication ceremony program in 1965.

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George Turner never graduated from high school. His wife earned a master's degree. They had three children. The family attended Mount Pleasant Baptist Church in Franconia run by Edith Turner's cousin Milton Sheppard. Sheppard and the Turners were active in the local NAACP.

Neither Bond nor Kathryn Turner remember ever being asked if they wanted to go to a whites-only school.

"In my family, we were told to do it," Turner said. "This is what we're going to do. And you'll be fine."

Not just any student was asked to be part of the NAACP lawsuit that aimed to force Alexandria to integrate. The civil rights attorneys, who were filing cases across Virginia, vetted prospective plaintiffs vigorously to make sure students did well in school, according to Brian Daugherty, whose book "Keep On Keeping On" documents desegregation in Virginia. This way, school officials could not reject students' applications on the basis of academics.

"They were not willing to settle and just be silent," Bond said of her parents.

For her part, Turner said her mother was never one to be "intimidated or contained" when it came to her children. As a child, Turner said she suffered from hay fever. She recalled walking into an allergist's office once with her mother.

A nurse stopped them at the door. She tried to turn them away.

"The doctor doesn't see colored people," Turner recalled the nurse telling her mother. "My mother said, 'Let me talk to the doctor.'"

Turner is not certain about the details of the conversation her mother had with the allergist. But one thing was certain.

"He ended up taking us on as patients," she said.

Months before the NAACP sued the city school board and Williams, the Turners and other families wrote letters to Williams asking that their children be allowed to attend whites-only schools at the start of the 1958-59 school year.

The applications languished. Ultimately, the applications were rejected

on the basis of highly subjective criteria and, in some cases, portrayals of students that Williams' administration supplied to the school board that were misleading at best.

One of the black students seeking to transfer to a white school was reported absent for 82 days, but actually only missed 15 days of class for the year, according to transcripts.

Another student was rejected, in part, on the basis of a handful of negative teacher report card comments, when not one of the many more glowing comments about the same student were forwarded to the board.

Still other students were rejected because of supposed overcrowding concerns at the whites-only schools. But records show that after the black students were rejected, white students continued to transfer into the same schools. Attendance continued to climb.

Alexandria was hardly alone. Across the Commonwealth, school districts in the late 1950s refused to integrate under the state's "massive resistance" policy.

For the Turners, school administrators had no basis to argue with their academic performance. The Turners were excellent students. Instead, their applications were rejected on the basis of very different criteria.

The official one-page decision rejecting Kathryn Turner's application to attend the Charles Ramsay school noted that, if admitted, she would be "the only pupil of her race so enrolled."

"This, in Alexandria, will be a novel and unusual situation. Such a situation will constitute a disruption of established social and psychological relationships between

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pupils in our schools as they (the schools) have previously operated,” the rejection said.

The schools went on to argue that if Turner transferred to Ramsay, the “situation will be an unnatural one, which, as such, cannot contribute to normal and natural progress either for this girl or for the other pupils in the grade, who will find themselves in an artificial situation also.”

In court, NAACP attorney Frank Reeves pressed Williams to defend the rationale. Under cross-examination, the superintendent acknowledged academics played no part in rejecting Turner’s application to transfer. She was, he admitted, a very good student.

Feb. 10, 1959

Among the news coverage of the day Alexandria schools integrated, there is a wire services photo of Turner entering a car after her first day at William Ramsay. In the photo, white classmates watch her. Some are smiling, others laughing. A few appear to be pointing.

Turner is smiling, too, but it is hard to tell from her outstretched palm and her expression whether she is waving back at the children, or perhaps telling them to stand back.

Shown this image nearly 60 years later, Turner is asked what she thought back then, what these children were doing. Were they waving? Were they happy? Were they jeering and teasing?

Turner said she is not sure. She doesn’t remember anyone in the photo. But while many of the first wave of African American students to attend white schools in Virginia were subjected to harsh treatment, Turner does not recall having such a difficult time compared to others, including members of her own family.

“I think our parents certainly reflected on the fact that we all stand on the shoulders of our ancestors from slavery to now. We have a responsibility and almost an obligation to keep striving to ensure that civil rights don’t get rolled back.”

– Sandra Bond,
one of the first African-American students to
attend William Ramsay Elementary School

Turner attended Ramsay for one year, then eventually went to Hammond, which was then a high school. When she glanced at her yearbook not long ago, everything written from former classmates seemed to be positive.

“I don’t have a negative impression,” she said.

Turner said she does remember other, non-school related inequalities of the era. For instance, there was only one movie theater and swimming pool she could go to in Alexandria.

“There were a lot of things about Alexandria ... white only,” she said.

But she said her mother instilled in the Turner children the sense that they were just as good as anyone else. Education was a hard-won commodity. Once you got a good education, Edith and George Turner told their children, nobody could ever take it away. No matter what.

“I would go back and say it was really my mother,” Kathryn Turner said. “She really did feel that race shouldn’t define you or limit you.”

A different perspective

For Bond, things in her new school were harder and more complicated.

She remembers her second grade teacher doing little to welcome her. Bond walked into the classroom and immediately thought nobody at all looked like her or her family.

“It was an isolating expe-

rience,” she said. “I didn’t feel a part of the class. You were in it, but not of it.”

Bond was protective of her brother. They tried to eat together at lunch. They sat on the school bus together, when other kids would tease them. But even at age eight, Sandra Bond said she knew the expectations of her went beyond her grades.

“It was more a feeling you have to endure this,” she said. “You have to persevere. You can’t fail.”

As a second grader, she said she had no idea who T.C. Williams was, let alone the fact that the superintendent was testifying about her and her siblings. At the same time, though, she said she knew there were groups who opposed and resisted school desegregation.

Bond said, while her father didn’t live to see Barack Obama become America’s first black president, her mother did. She said her mother did not talk much about Alexandria, and she probably did not think she played an outsized role in the city’s history. Still, she added, her parents likely felt proud the family had helped make a difference.

“I think our parents certainly reflected on the fact that we all stand on the shoulders of our ancestors from slavery to now,” Bond said. “We have a responsibility and almost an obligation to keep striving to ensure that civil rights don’t get rolled back.”

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