

Ellis, Claiborne Paul "C.P." ^[1]

Ellis, Claiborne Paul "C.P."

by Zachary Clary, 2022

See also: [Atwater, Ann George](#) ^[2]

January 8, 1927- November 3, 2005

Claiborne Paul "C.P." Ellis was a segregationist and [Ku Klux Klan \(KKK\)](#) ^[3] leader turned civil rights activist and [labor union](#) ^[4] leader. Ellis served as the co-chair of the 1971 Durham charrette on school integration, during which he resigned from his position as Exalted Grand Cyclops of the KKK in [Durham](#) ^[5], North Carolina.

Ellis was born on January 8, 1927 in Durham, North Carolina to Paul Clayborn Ellis (1896-1946) and Maude Annie Olive Ellis (1899-1991). As Ellis recounted in his later years, his father worked hard but was unable to overcome poverty. Paul Ellis was a millworker and an active member of the KKK who struggled with alcoholism. During childhood, C. P. was often embarrassed that his father could not afford new clothing for his children and did not dress well himself. Regardless, C. P. was very close to his father, with whom he attended ball games and went fishing.

C. P. Ellis withdrew from school after the eighth grade to financially support his family. At the age of eighteen, he married Mary E. Dixon (1929-1999) on October 29, 1945 in [Randolph County](#) ^[6]. In the early years of his marriage, Ellis worked as a gas station attendant and for a time worked a bread route. After leaving the bread route, Ellis obtained a \$4,000 loan from the bank to purchase a small service station. Despite owning the station, however, Ellis still struggled to escape poverty and provide for his family. As he recalls, he was uncertain if he would be able to make rent on his home each week and was unable to fill the family home's 256-gallon oil drum for heating. Each night, he would add five gallons of oil – just enough to keep the house warm – and then do the same the following night. C. P. and Mary Ellis had four children. One of their children was blind, non-verbal, and had an intellectual disability which led to additional financial hardship for Ellis. Ellis stated that his economic hardships paired with his upbringing drove him to blame Black people for his suffering.

After being invited to a Klan meeting by men at the gas station where he worked, Ellis accepted an invitation to join a local chapter of the Ku Klux Klan, and he quickly became an active member of the organization. Over time, he rose through the organization's ranks, eventually becoming the president (Exalted Cyclops) of his local chapter. The Ku Klux Klan, as Ellis remembers, provided an avenue through which he could direct his anger and resentment. More than that, though, the Klan allowed Ellis to "have a part in something." Through the Klan, Ellis became more involved in local politics, serving as state organizer for the National Rights Party and putting together a youth group for the KKK. Under Ellis's leadership, the KKK became more engaged in Durham public life and political activity, largely in response to Black political action and the [Civil Rights Movement](#) ^[7].

Ellis's racial sensibilities largely mirrored those of the Durham city council, which was composed primarily of wealthy or middle-class white citizens. Therefore, Ellis regularly strategized with the city council to sustain the discriminatory status quo. However, he became disillusioned with the white political establishment when a member of the city council crossed the street to avoid meeting him. Because of this public slight, Ellis began to consider that the city's white political leadership pitted low-income white and Black people against one another as part of their effort to maintain control.

In 1971, the North Carolina chapter of the American Federation of Labor, Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), using funding provided by the federal government's Emergency School Assistance Program, sent community organizer Bill Riddick to Durham to negotiate the desegregation of Durham City schools, as ordered by the courts. In particular, the Supreme Court ruled in [Alexander v. Holmes County Board of Education](#) ^[8] (1969) that all school districts must comply at once with school desegregation. Furthermore, the Supreme Court's decision in [Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education](#) ^[9] (1971) granted federal courts broad discretion to desegregate school systems, up to and including mandated busing. To resolve the question of school desegregation in Durham, Riddick organized a charette, in which all voices in the community were invited to come together to discuss the issue. Riddick selected [Ann Atwater](#) ^[2], a prominent civil rights leader in the community, and C. P. Ellis to co-chair the charette. Ellis and Atwater knew – and greatly disliked – one another before the charette. Ellis was working as a janitor at [Duke University](#) ^[10] and the university's president and former North Carolina governor, [Terry Sanford](#) ^[11], gave Ellis ten days off with pay to participate in the charette. Although he initially refused to join the charette and work with Atwater, Ellis eventually agreed to participate to ensure that the segregationist perspective would be heard.

During the charette, Ellis seemed to soften. When gospel music was performed at the charette, Ellis could be seen stomping his feet to the music. Through his interactions with Atwater, Ellis began to recognize the similarities between the experiences of all poor people in Durham, both Black and white. Ellis realized that integration would alleviate the suffering of the white poor more than segregation. In a charged moment at the end of the charette, Ellis held up his Ku Klux Klan membership card and addressed the audience, saying "if schools are going to be better by me tearing up this card, I shall

do so.” In that moment, Ellis renounced his membership to the KKK. By the end of the charette, C. P. Ellis, the once ardent segregationist, and Ann Atwater, a Black activist, had become friends.

Although Ellis had come to support integration and formed an unlikely friendship, none of the charette’s recommendations regarding school integration were accepted by the Durham school board. Nonetheless, Ellis was determined to see change in Durham’s school system, and he ran for a position on the school board. Given his actions during the charette and his former membership in the Klan, however, he struggled to solicit enough support from either the Black or white community in the city. In the end, C. P. Ellis, who spent only \$85 on his campaign, lost the election by around 2,000 votes to a person who spent thousands of dollars on their campaign.

Following his bold stance in support of integration, Ellis’s former connections in the KKK threatened his life and otherwise refused to communicate with him for over thirty years. Regardless, Ellis continued to advocate on behalf of racial equality and continued to assist Atwater in the fight to integrate Durham schools. Beyond that, Ellis and Atwater regularly appeared together at public events to discuss their experiences during the charette and provide a model for racial reconciliation, both in Durham and in other communities. Ellis and Atwater remained friends for the remainder of his life.

After the charette, Ellis returned to his janitorial job at Duke and, eventually, returned to school, earning a high school diploma through a program called Past Employment Progress (PEP). In his later years, he was a union organizer, serving as the business manager of the International Union of Operating Engineers^[12] (IUOE) in Durham. C. P. Ellis died from Alzheimer’s Disease on November 3, 2005. Ann Atwater delivered the eulogy at his funeral.

The Durham charette and Ellis and Atwater’s unexpected friendship have been depicted in numerous cultural productions, including Osha Gray Davidson’s 1996 book *The Best of Enemies* and Diane Bloom’s 2002 documentary *An Unlikely Friendship*. In 2011, Mark St. Germain brought the story to the stage in the play *The Best of Enemies*, and in 2019, Robin Bissel’s film also titled *The Best of Enemies* brought the story to the screen. In the film, Ellis was portrayed by award-winning actor Sam Rockwell. On November 2, 2019, C. P. Ellis and Ann Atwater were posthumously selected as Main Honorees in the History & Education category by the Sesquicentennial Honors Commission at the Durham 150^[13] closing ceremony.

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