Civil Rights Movement- Part 5: Forced School Desegregation and the Rise of the Black Power Movement [1]

Civil Rights Movement

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Part 1: Introduction [3]; Part 2: Roots of Civil Rights Activism in North Carolina [4]; Part 3: Brown v. Board of Education and White Resistance to School Desegregation [5]; Part 4: Integration Efforts in the Workplace, Sit-Ins, and Other Nonviolent Protests [6]; Part 5: Forced School Desegregation and the Rise of the Black Power Movement; Part 6 Continued Civil Rights Battles in the State [7].

Part 5: Forced School Desegregation and the Rise of the Black Power Movement

Marchers from Hyde County and elsewhere around the state enter Raleigh on 14 Feb. 1969 to protest Hyde County's school desegregation plan. Courtesy of North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Raleigh. The Raleigh News and Observer files.

In 1967 new antiterror laws made it a felony in North Carolina to burn crosses or wear masks for the purpose of intimidation or to burn occupied buildings. The law also allowed the governor to offer rewards of up to $10,000 for information leading to the arrest and conviction of felons. With prodding by President Johnson [8], the Civil Rights Act of 1964 [9] was broadened in 1968 to include, in addition to African Americans, American Indians, Hispanics, Puerto Ricans, and Asian Americans. North Carolina followed the federal lead, although reluctantly in a number of cases. The General Assembly [10] created a Commission of Indian Affairs [11] to deal "fairly and effectively" with a broad range of Indian concerns and in 1971 passed an equal opportunity law applying to all units of state and local government. It was the first such law in a southern state.

Little meaningful integration had occurred in the state's public school systems by the late 1960s. Gains in education for African Americans in North Carolina were very slow in coming and encountered a great deal of opposition at both the community and state level and from both official school district policies and private actions, such as organized intimidation campaigns led by the KKK [12] and other groups. Only as result of pressure from the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, bolstered by a 1966 federal court decision declaring the Pearsall Plan [13] unconstitutional, did mandatory desegregation begin to arrive in North Carolina counties. Even then, in counties where schools were desegregated, the

formerly black schools were commonly shut down and the black teachers fired. This one-way integration essentially erased the historic and cultural heritage of the black schools and their leaders, ensuring that black students would be taught by whites only. When blacks in Hyde County [14] learned that the local school board had endorsed such a desegregation plan, they boycotted the public schools for the entire 1968-69 academic year. Only in 1969, under pressure from the federal government and the courts, did the state enter negotiations with the leaders of the boycott. Ultimately, black families won a victory by ensuring that the traditionally black schools in the district would remain open and black teachers would keep their jobs.

While major victories were won in the late 1960s, the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 was a tragedy that proved pivotal in the overall direction of the national civil rights movement, which had begun to experience divisive tensions even before King's death. Robert F. Williams, advocate of armed self-defense, became a prominent voice in the 1960s in the national debate over nonviolence and armed resistance as strategies for obtaining civil rights. Williams, in self-exile in Cuba, broadcast his ideas for armed self-defense and black liberation in a radio show called *Radio Free Dixie* [15], which could be received throughout the South. Williams's ideas influenced a new generation of civil rights activists and organizations such as the Black Panthers [16], a militant black nationalist group that rose to prominence in the late 1960s. King's assassination helped galvanize this shift in the national civil rights movement, which by the 1970s began to give way to the Black Power movement. Black Power organizations found fertile ground in North Carolina, with Black Panther Party affiliates forming in several of the state's cities and remaining active through the mid-1970s.

Keep reading >> Part 6:Continued Civil Rights Battles in the State [7]

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