

# Authentic Intellectual Work on School Desegregation: The Digital History of Massive Resistance in Norfolk, Virginia

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This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the integration of Norfolk Public Schools. On February 2, 1959, the “Norfolk 17” integrated the formerly all-white public middle and high schools in Norfolk, Virginia. Less known than their counterparts in Little Rock, Arkansas, the stories of the Norfolk 17 underscore the struggle schools faced after the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. A new digital library, *School Desegregation in Norfolk, Virginia*, chronicles the Norfolk school crisis ([www.lib.odu.edu/special/schooldesegregation/](http://www.lib.odu.edu/special/schooldesegregation/)). This collection provides access to authentic digital history resources and multiple perspectives about the history of integration.

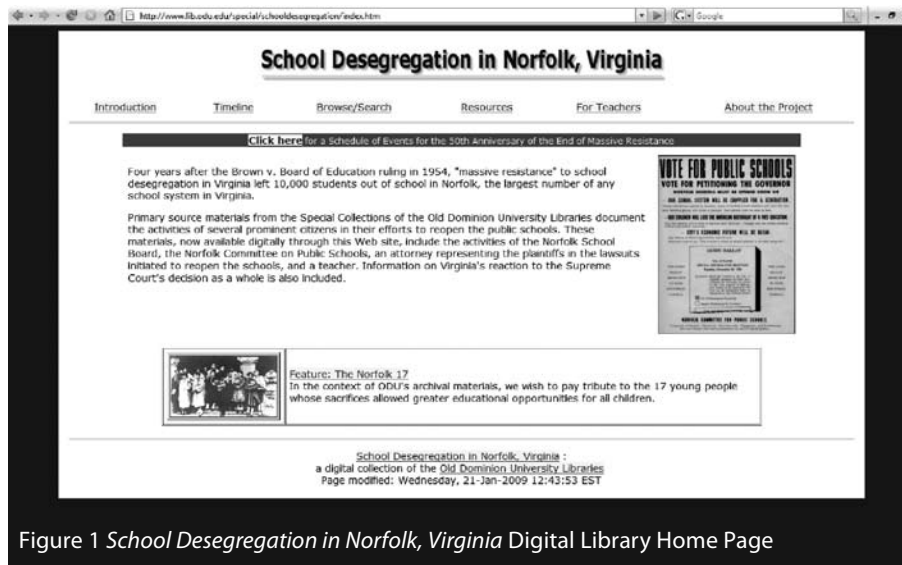


Figure 1 *School Desegregation in Norfolk, Virginia* Digital Library Home Page

In this article, I provide an overview of the digitized resources that make up the collection and teaching suggestions for integrating them in the classroom using the criteria for authentic intellectual work. According to Scheurman and Newmann, “Authentic intellectual achievement consists of more than the ability to do well on an academic test. It involves the applica-

tion of knowledge (facts, concepts, theories, and insights) to questions and issues within a particular domain.”<sup>1</sup> Authentic intellectual work frames student learning around significant historical issues and discipline-based learning. The three criteria of authentic intellectual work—construction of new knowledge, disciplined inquiry, and value beyond

school—operate in concert. Construction of deep knowledge occurs as students engage in disciplined inquiry; disciplined inquiry derives from historical questions relevant beyond the world of school.

## Historical Background

In *Brown* the Supreme Court ruled that racially segregated schools violated the Fourteenth Amendment. In *Brown II*, (1955), the Court ordered that desegregation occur “with all deliberate speed” and delegated federal district courts responsible for overseeing integration. In Virginia, white leaders rejected the Court’s decision and devised a policy of “massive resistance” to actively oppose the integration of public spaces, especially schools.<sup>2</sup> In 1958, Governor Almond and the Virginia General Assembly passed a series of legislative acts to circumvent *Brown*. Their policies ultimately resulted in the closing of the six white middle and high schools in Norfolk on September 27, 1958. The school closings lasted for more than four months and displaced nearly 10,000 white students. When the schools were re-opened through court injunction in 1959, only 17 African American students were allowed to enroll. Although the media portrayed the integration of these schools as non-violent, the Norfolk 17 experienced emotional and physical abuse.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the remainder of the school year they suf-

ferred almost constant intimidation and name-calling. They were ostracized by their peers, mistreated by their teachers, and physically attacked.

As Bolick notes, digital libraries have essentially “democratized historical research” by providing access at a distance to “all histories.”<sup>4</sup> The *School Desegregation* digital library and other digitized resources chronicling the Norfolk 17 and massive resistance in Virginia provide new perspectives on the varied and complex history of desegregation.<sup>5</sup> Traditionally, most textbooks focus solely on the integration of schools in Little Rock. While the Little Rock Nine symbolize African American courage in the face of white resistance to federally mandated integration, it was only one of many episodes in the struggle for equality in educational opportunities across the country. By supplementing traditional textbook accounts with digitized primary and secondary sources, teachers can engage their students in the three criteria of authentic intellectual work.

### **Digital Libraries and the Construction of Knowledge**

Using the *School Desegregation* digital library, students can construct historical knowledge of the period of integration as they explore, read, and analyze the digitized primary sources. As teachers prompt them to analyze evidence of the dramatic legal and social struggles that occurred in Norfolk, students do more than reproduce historical interpretations provided by textbook readings or teacher lectures. Through their analysis, students learn about the context of this history and develop a comparative case to the events that occurred in Little Rock and other parts of the South.

Students will learn that Norfolk differed from other southern cities due to its unique population and location on the Atlantic Ocean. In the 1950s and 60s, Norfolk’s cosmopolitan port drew people from around the world. It boasted a long history of naval power and a thriving shipping industry. The U.S. Navy base, one of the largest in the world, drew

families from across the United States—families whose children then attended local schools. Most naval facilities were integrated before *Brown*, and many families stationed at the base came from states without *de jure* segregation.

Like other Southern communities, local government officials, including the mayor and the Norfolk school board, openly resisted public school integration after the *Brown* decisions. Challenging the constitutionality of these actions, on May 10, 1956, the Norfolk chapter of the NAACP filed a lawsuit. Pursuant to *Brown II*, the sitting federal district court judge, Walter E. Hoffman, declared on January 11, 1957, that the Norfolk school board had to integrate by September 1957. Again, in June 1958, Hoffman ordered the Norfolk school board to review applications for transfer to white schools by African American students promptly and without attention to race. In August 1958, the school board rejected all 151 applications. After continued pressure from Hoffman, the school board finally agreed to admit 17 of the 151 black applicants to white middle and high schools. In order to block these 17 students (the Norfolk 17) from integrating the white schools, Governor Almond closed them in September 1958.

The people of Norfolk were stunned to see their public schools closed. They scrambled to find alternatives for white students, establishing tutoring sessions and enrolling students in private schools. The closing of schools rallied citizens on both sides of the issue. The Tidewater Foundation, the segregationist organization connected to the Defenders of State Sovereignty, protested integration on the grounds that it violated states rights, would lead to interracial marriage, and was a communist plot.<sup>6</sup> The Committee for Public Schools, a group of parents and business people, worked to “keep Norfolk schools open and to prevent possible violence if and when schools open desegregated.”<sup>7</sup>

Primary sources chronicling these varied perspectives are included in the *School Desegregation* digital library.

Compared to a textbook reading, this collection provides more detail about the experiences of the Norfolk 17 and the work of associated civic groups. Student understandings of the events and the unique context of the time and place can become more nuanced as they engage in disciplined inquiry with the digital library.

### **Digital Libraries and Disciplined Inquiry**

It takes more than mere exposure to the collection for students to construct a deep understanding of the history of integration in Norfolk. Historical investigation or “doing history” occurs when students analyze primary sources by putting them into historic context, inferring their significance, and comparing across sources. To really understand the experiences of the Norfolk 17, students must drill down into the digital library to uncover key pieces of historical evidence. As they engage in inquiry using the primary sources that make up the collection, students confront the significance of *Brown*

According to Landman,

Brown has rightly been identified as a watershed event in our constitutional history, setting the stage for the civil rights movement that transformed the landscape of American society and politics. The legacy of the decision and the issues it raised continue to reverberate in our society today.<sup>8</sup>

While few scholars contest *Brown*’s impact on American society, some note its inability to dramatically advance education for African American children.<sup>9</sup>

For clues about the deep prejudices that limited *Brown*’s impact, students can dig deeper into the collection to investigate the rhetoric of white activists, especially those of so-called moderate whites. This investigation could begin with newspaper editorials written by the editor of *The Virginian Pilot*, Lenoir Chambers. Chambers was one

of four Southern journalists who consistently supported the *Brown* decision; in 1960, he won the Pulitzer Prize for his editorials against massive resistance.<sup>10</sup> Students should also note what is missing in the collection regarding Chambers's record on integration. There is no evidence that he supported integration for reasons other than its legal basis; nor is there any evidence to suggest Chambers was active beyond his editorials in support of civil rights. According to Synnott, "Chambers's lack of social activism and acceptance of racial separatism showed how innate segregation was in Southern culture."<sup>11</sup>

Students will be more successful tackling these ambiguous historical issues if teachers overtly and methodically support their disciplined inquiry. Teachers can provide support by guiding students with a combination of "conceptual structures and tools with which to organize and manipulate factual knowledge."<sup>12</sup> These structures and tools can take the form of "soft" or "hard" scaffolds. Soft scaffolds are "dynamic and situational"—such as oral questioning and prompting. Hard scaffolds are "static supports" that provide pre-planned frameworks for the access and analysis of primary sources.<sup>13</sup> The *School Desegregation* digital library includes several hard scaffolds for students and teachers. The collection's "Introduction" and "Timeline" pages provide an overview of the history of school desegregation in the city of Norfolk, Virginia.

### The Value of Digital Libraries Beyond School

As students work with the *School Desegregation* digital library, the content they learn and the questions they explore connect classroom-based learning to issues relevant to the world beyond school. The history of school integration teaches civic processes, including the interpretation of federal and state legislation through court cases and legal arguments. Using the events in Norfolk as an exemplar, students grapple with the outcomes of national and state legislation

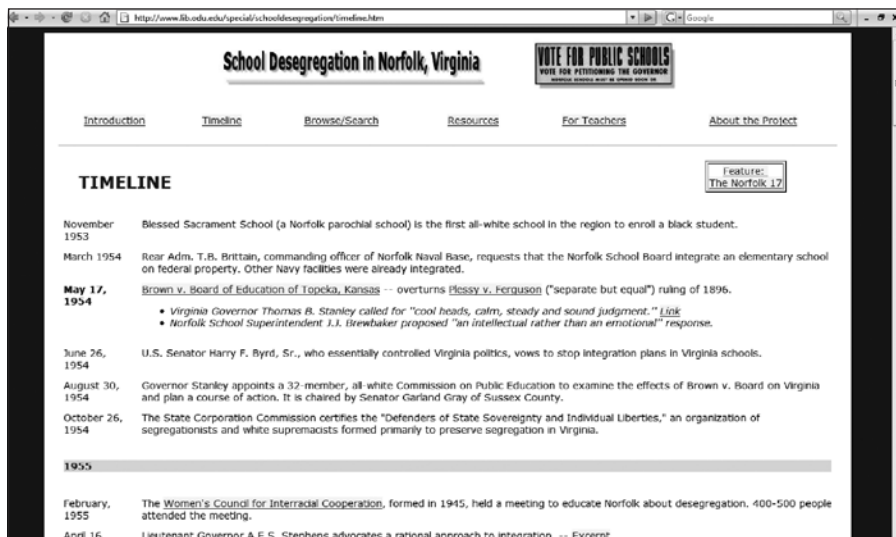


Figure 2. Timeline

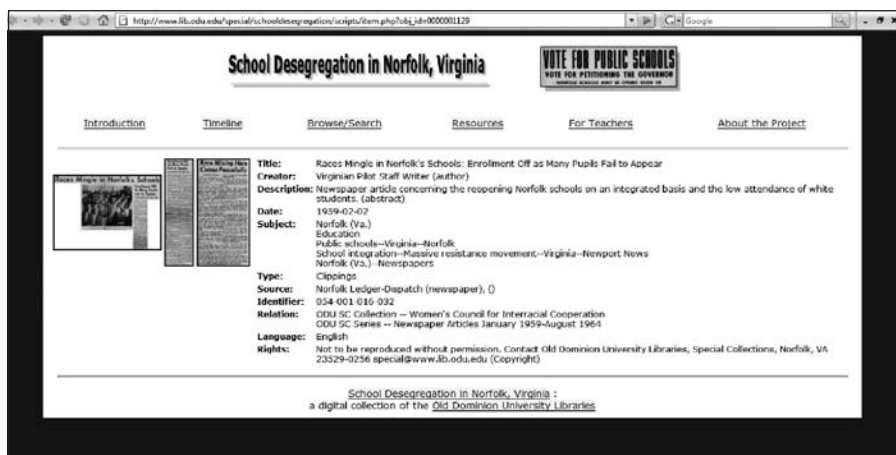


Figure 3. Louis Cousins Record.

and the court decisions that eventually led to integration. This history provides models of civic activism, including the work done by the Norfolk chapter of the NAACP, the Women's Council for Interracial Cooperation, and the Norfolk Committee on Public Schools. Through the study of the decisions made by elected officials and the responses of local activists, students gain a better understanding of the political past and the power of individual civic action.

Within the context of civic action, students are challenged to understand the motivation of the members of the Norfolk 17. Much like events across the South, including in Little Rock, only a minority of black students in Norfolk "assumed the often considerable psychological and physical risks of attending

newly integrated public schools."<sup>14</sup> The Norfolk 17 students ranged in age from 12 to 17 when they entered all-white schools. Primary sources in the digital library provide a poignant reminder that the members of the Norfolk 17 faced similar pressures as adolescents do today, but in a uniquely hostile environment. A photograph from *The Virginian Pilot* captures the isolation these students experienced. Under the headline "Races Mingle in Norfolk's Schools," Louis Cousins is pictured sitting in the auditorium at Maury High School. The seats surrounding him are completely empty and it appears as though the white students have chosen seats far behind him, keeping their distance.

These 17 students essentially left their childhoods behind and became pioneers

of the cause.<sup>15</sup> They received extensive tutoring and psychological preparation for their ordeal. Yet nothing could prepare them for the harsh treatment they received. The composure and bravery that Cousins and the other students demonstrated continues to inspire awe. Through disciplined inquiry of primary sources from the time period, students can begin to understand the factors that led the students and their community supporters to take the risks that they did in order to push for school integration.

Arguably among the most compelling resources within the *School Desegregation* digital library are the oral histories of female activists involved in the struggle for integration. Students can listen to the oral histories and follow along with the transcripts. For instance, Vivian Carter Mason, a Norfolk resident and graduate of the University of Chicago, tutored the Norfolk 17 in the basement of the Bute Street First Baptist Church. She recalls her work in a recorded interview,

We said, quite openly and frankly, that [they] can't go to school and be behind these other students. They must be not only equal, but they must surpass them in subject matter. They were told that if they have to give up such things as recreation and playing to study, they must, to come out on top.<sup>16</sup>

She describes the African American community's organized and committed support for the Norfolk 17. Her story also highlights the intense antagonism the 17 students encountered in their quest to attend the better, white schools in their neighborhoods.

The recorded interviews of two white women from Norfolk, Edith White and Ruth James, point to the important role of women's organizations and the value they placed on public education.<sup>17</sup> Edith White was the force behind her husband, Forrest White's work as the leader of the Norfolk Committee for Public Schools. As a member of the Women's Interracial

Council she "had the opportunity to be really good friends with some of the more prominent black women in the community and saw what we were missing by having two such very separate communities."<sup>18</sup> Although she and her husband received death threats and were ostracized by some members of the community for their work, she persevered with her civic work. She recalled,

I think working together is important, and we began to realize that the only way our children would change was if they were in class with other children of other races and worked with them and shared with them.

Ruth James also experienced a great deal of persecution for her family's role in school integration. She and her husband sued on their daughter's behalf for the reopening of the schools. Like Edith White, Ruth was active in local civic groups. She also was deeply influenced by her father's Quaker background,

I had the other side that I've been telling you about from my father—that a square deal ought to be given to everybody. It was only right and fair that we would go through with supporting the Supreme Court decision and doing what the law said—because the black children were human beings too.<sup>19</sup>

These oral histories from women involved in the school crisis in Norfolk demonstrate the complexity of race relations in Norfolk and in the South during this time period. Some historians suggest that white proponents of the reopening of schools in Norfolk felt more compelled by their interest in public education than their support of integration and equal rights for African American students. By allowing students the opportunity to work with the digital history resources included in this collection, they can investigate for themselves

the extent to which Southerners were willing to give up racial privilege.

Through an exploration of the Norfolk 17's stories, our students encounter case studies in civics and activism as well as lessons about prejudice and discrimination. Acting as contemporary witnesses to this history, by reading the oral histories, reading the editorial arguments, and sorting through the legal decisions, students gain a better understanding of the struggle for civil liberties. Thanks to new digitized resources, such as those included in the *School Desegregation* digital library, students now have access to multiple perspectives about past events. By integrating these resources, teachers can empower students to engage in authentic intellectual work while grappling with historic ambiguity. Ultimately, the new *School Desegregation* digital library chronicles the legal and social struggle for integration while drawing attention to the young, African American students who bore the burden of furthering the movement. 📖

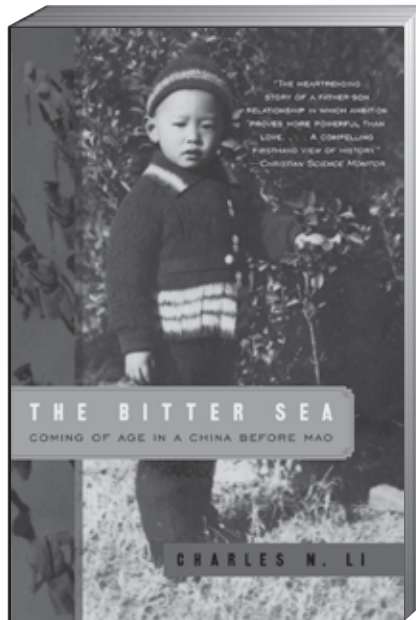
#### Notes

1. Geoffrey Scheurman and Fred M. Newmann, "Authentic Intellectual Work in Social Studies: Putting Performance before Pedagogy," *Social Education* 62, no. 1 (January/February 1998): 23-25.
2. The term "massive resistance" became historical shorthand for Southern resistance to the civil rights movement in general and has been attributed to Senator Henry Byrd, see George Lewis, *Massive Resistance: The White Response to the Civil Rights Movement*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 4.
3. Antonio T. Bly, "The Thunder during the Storm: School Desegregation in Norfolk, Virginia, 1957-1959: A Local History," *The Journal of Negro Education* 67, no. 2 (Spring 1998), 106-114.
4. Cheryl Mason Bolick, "Digital Archives: Democratizing the Doing of History," *International Journal of Social Education* 21, no. 1 (2006): 122-134.
5. See also Jeffrey Littlejohn, "The Brown Decision in Norfolk, Virginia" (Norfolk, Va., no date), [www.littlejohnexplorers.com/jeff/brown/norfolk17.htm](http://www.littlejohnexplorers.com/jeff/brown/norfolk17.htm); Virginia Center for Digital History, "Television News of the Civil Rights Era 1950-1970" (Charlottesville, Va.: VCDH, 2005), [www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/civilrightstv/](http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/civilrightstv/).
6. Alexander Leidholdt, *Standing Before the Shouting Mob: Lenoir Chambers and Virginia's Massive Resistance to Public-school Integration* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997).

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7. "Norfolk Committee for Public Schools Outline of Organization and Work Done by the Committee, 1959," from *School Desegregation in Norfolk, Virginia*, Old Dominion University, 2008, libstaff.lib.odu.edu/projects/n17/item.php?obj\_id=00000007.
8. James Landman, "An End and a Beginning: The Fiftieth Anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*," *Social Education* 68, no. 1 (January/February 2004): 17-25, 17.
9. Clayborne Carson, "Two Cheers for *Brown v. Board of Education*," *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 1 (June 2004), 28.
10. Leidholdt.
11. Marica Synnott, "Review of Standing Before the Shouting Mob: Lenoir Chambers and Virginia's Massive Resistance to Public-School Integration," *The Journal of Southern History* 64 no. 4 (November 1998), 780.
12. Rosalyn Ashby, Peter J. Lee, and Dennis Shemilt, "Putting Principles into Practice: Teaching and Planning," in *How Students Learn: History, Mathematics, and Science in the Classroom*, eds. M. Susan Donovan and John Bransford (Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press, 2005), 79-178.
13. John W. Saye and Thomas Brush, "Scaffolding Critical Reasoning about History and Social Issues in Multimedia-Supported Learning Environments," *Educational Technology Research and Development* 50, no. 3 (2002): 81, 82.
14. Carson, 28.
15. Leidholdt, 96.
16. "Interview I with Vivian Carter Mason, March 29, 1978," www.lib.odu.edu/special/oralhistory/womenhistory/vcmason1.html; and "Interview II with Vivian Carter Mason, October 19, 1978," www.lib.odu.edu/special/oralhistory/womenhistory/vcmason2.html.
17. See also Jane Reif, *Crisis in Norfolk*. (Richmond, Va.: Virginia Council on Human Relations, 1960).
18. "Oral History Interview with Edith White, November 6, 1982," *School Desegregation in Norfolk, Virginia*, Old Dominion University, 2008, www.lib.odu.edu/special/oralhistory/womenhistory/ewtranscript.html.
19. "Oral History Interview with Ruth James, November 5, 1982," *School Desegregation in Norfolk, Virginia*, Old Dominion University, 2008, www.lib.odu.edu/special/oralhistory/womenhistory/rjamestranscript.html.

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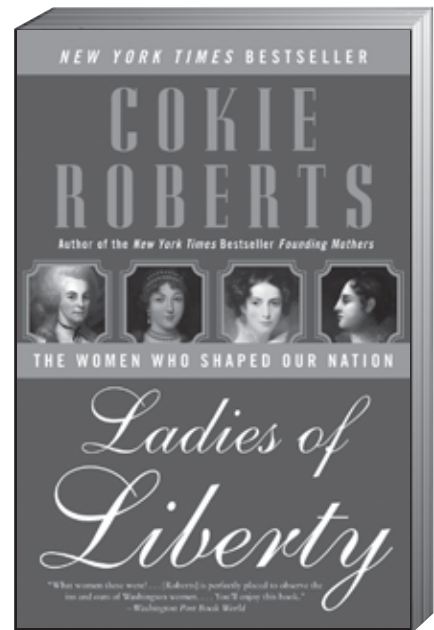
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